

In Exile but Not at Peace: An Ethnography among Rwandan Army Deserters in South Africa

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Abstract : This paper examines the military and post-military experiences of soldiers who deserted from the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and tried to make a living in South Africa. Because they are deserters, they try to hide their military identity, yet it is simultaneously somewhat coercively ascribed to them by the Rwandan state and can put them in potential danger. The paper attends to the constructions, experiences, practices, and subjective understanding of the deserters' being in exile to examine how, under circumstances of perceived threat, these men navigate real or perceived state-sponsored surveillance and threat in non-military settings in South Africa where they have become potential political and disciplinary targets. To make sense of the deserters' experiences in these circumstances, the paper stitches together a number of useful theoretical concepts, including Bourdieu's (1992) theory of practice and Vigh's (2009; 2018) concept of social navigation because no single approach can coherently analyze the specificity of this study. Conventional post-military literature privileges an understanding of army desertion as a malignancy and somewhat problematic. Little is known about the military and post-military experiences of deserters who believe that army desertion is in fact a building block towards achieving subjective peace, even in the context of exile. The paper argues that the presence of Rwandan state agents in South Africa strips the context of the exile of its capacity to provide the deserters with peace, safety, and security. This paper recenters army desertion in analyses of militarism, soldiering, and transition in African contexts and complicates commonsense understandings of army desertion which assume that it is entirely problematic. This paper is drawn from an ethnography conducted among 30 junior-rank Rwandan army deserters exiled in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The researcher employed life histories, in-depth interviews, and deep hangouts to collect data.

Keywords : army deserter, military, identity, exile, peacebuilding, South Africa

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