

Displacement Culture or just Murkiness in the Aftermath of Conflict in Burundi?

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In Bujumbura, Burundi, I met a young man who in 2005 was imprisoned and tortured by the then freshly elected party in power. After six months he was released. The following years he was openly skeptical about this party, and actively sought allegiance to other political groups. During the election campaign of 2010 however, he started pursuing membership of the party, mobilizing people to vote for them, and, eventually, started working for the parties intelligence service. His friends and kin were surprised with his evident shift in allegiance, and at times ridiculed him for it. Another youth with whom I was in contact in the same period, told me about how he had shifted allegiances to advance his career in music. Everybody did it, he told me, his father had recently done so as well. This is only one of the sorts of situations I encountered in my fieldwork where expected cultural maps that were widely held to define friend and foe and normality and abnormality, did in fact not bear. Friends and kin of the young man expected him to act otherwise. At the same time, the youth musician shows that shifting parties to advance career opportunities is not necessarily infrequent. The question I will raise in this paper is how to understand such previously held impossible 'shifts' in the maps for allies and normality? I explore the applicability of the concept displacement culture.

Displacement culture is not yet a very well defined or often applied concept. It seems to refer to cultural scripts, rules, or frameworks that are formed (enforced) as a consequence of enduring crisis, and that constitute breaks with earlier socio-political orderings of a society (away from older certitudes). These new 'rules' might still be perceived as abnormal, but have come to form part of the everyday. Hence, displacement culture refers to the new orderings produced by enduring crisis. Yet, is this how we should understand these 'surprising' shifts? Should we not rather see the shifts as part of the often murky and unintelligible contexts of enduring conflict? Indeed, not as an aberration made possible because of the disordering of crisis, but as part of that disorder and crisis itself?