



# Military identities among Rwandan army deserters in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the military identity of soldiers who deserted from the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and try 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 deserters to examine how, under circumstances of perceived threat, these identities are (re)constituted in non-military settings in South Africa where the men have become potential political and disciplinary targets. Conventional post military literature privileges an understanding of the transition of soldiers into civilian life as somewhat unilineal. Little is known about the fluidity or rigidity of identities among army deserters who are labelled 'dissidents' and are being 'hunted' by their government. We argue that the uncertainty and fear of being discovered and harmed produces fluid and multiple identities in Rwandan army deserters. At the same time, the ex-soldiers retain military dispositions which enable them to navigate real or perceived state sponsored surveillance and threat in exile. We assert that military identity conjures up a complex state of being in exile due to the uncertainties tied to such an identity. We employed life histories, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and deep hang-outs to collect data.

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## Introduction

In light of limited contemporary ethnographic research on Rwandan army deserters living as involuntary expatriates, we investigated and here, unpack the post military experiences of these men, who rejected military service in the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF), fled and now contend with subtle yet lethal conflict which is brought to them by Rwandan state agents and hired informers who have been seeded in the civilian contexts of South Africa to 'hunt' down army deserters. The circumstances of army deserters are different from those of other groups of former soldiers who, for example were retired, discharged or made redundant. We argue that assuming a straightforward transition from military to civilian life is problematic in itself. Army deserters cannot easily fall back

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into their past civilian lives, instead they live as people who are ‘on the run’ (Goffman 2009) that is, being hyper-vigilant as they ‘look out for hidden danger before danger reveals itself to them in detrimental ways’ (Vigh 2018:492). We show that the ideas that soldiers can generally return to civilian life once they leave the military (Locke 2013; Hinojosa 2010; Woodward, Winter, and Jenkins 2011) do not sufficiently capture the experiences of ‘dissident’ deserters whose lives are governed by rumours and the fear of imminent harm. We demonstrate that the reality for Rwandan army deserters in South Africa is that they navigate precarious military identities: these are constantly unmade and remade depending on the level of threat in the various spaces these ex-soldiers find themselves. While armies generally do not condone army desertion (Fantina 2006) the degree of intolerance of army desertion by the Rwandan state begs attention to how the post conflict state and its army came into being.

The Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF) became a regular national army through a process described as a ‘guerilla-military’ integration (Baaz and Verweijen 2013; Redher 2008) after the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA), a military wing of the RPF conquered the *genocidaires* and ended the genocide which claimed the lives of 800 000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu (Prunier 2006; Reyntjens 2011). Through the efforts of the RDF, Rwanda has over the years, moved from being perceived as an ‘epicentre of conflict’ (Goodfellow and Smith 2013) to being a politically stable and peaceful country (Beswick 2014; Redher 2015). The Rwandan army has also established for itself, a Pan Africanist image of a highly trained, effective and disciplined military in Africa (Reder 2015). It seems apparent that the RDF’s involvement in the country’s politics since 1994 is driven by the army’s political agenda to rule Rwanda through its Commander in Chief, President Paul Kagame (Purdekova et al. 2018) instead of being a ‘moderator’ or ‘guardian’ (Perlmutter 1969; Nordlinger 1977) of the state.

Drawing from its political agenda highlighted above and from the aspirations of its political leader to maintain his hold on political power (Wrong 2021), the RDF now has a track record of fomenting political instability in the Great Lakes region through its support for rebels (Baaz and Verweijen 2013; Prunier 2008; Reyntjens 2011) while inside Rwanda, it has been accused of enforcing the Rwandan Patriotic Front’s military ethos throughout Rwandan society (Hintjens 2008). The RDF is also blamed for making Rwanda a straitjacketed and nervous military state (Jones and Murray 2018; Turner 2013, Purdekova et al 2018; Hintjens 2008; Lovegren 2015; Purdekova 2015; Thompson 2011) which privileges securitization as an effective government strategy. Rwanda’s ‘nervous condition’, Shindo (2012) argues, is reflected in the country’s national security discourse which is founded on a ‘genocide ideology’ framework, i.e. the suppression of ideas that can lead to genocide (Eltringham and Van Hoyweghen 2000). In post-conflict Rwanda, the ‘genocide ideology framework’ is a set of rules meant to suppress ideas, speech or behaviours that foster any forms of division, hatred, conflict and violence (Eltringham and Hoyweghen 2000; Amnesty International 2017; Shindo 2012). According to Beloff (2021), since the end of the second Congo war in 2002, Rwanda’s attention to security has significantly shifted from believing in the necessity to promote state survival from outside threats to combating ontological insecurities (see Giddens 1991; Innes 2016). Army desertion has been made to fit within the genocide ideology framework because deserters are perceived as a potential threat to the military (Beloff 2021, 188). This is illuminated in President Kagame’s utterances that ‘ex-soldiers are

amongst the thousands of guilty persons who remain free abroad' (Uvin 2001, 182), this position was to be emphasized during a rally, in response to the assassination of Patrick Karegeya; President Kagame reportedly stated that 'we will continue to arrest suspects and when needed, kill in broad daylight those threatening to destabilize the country' (Himbara 2019). For Shindo (2012, 1692), the genocide ideology framework is a 'narrative which makes the 1994 genocide the sole producer of politically correct categories of identification and guidelines for behaviour'. According to Eltringham and Hoyweghen (2000), the 'genocide ideology' is a deliberately ambiguous framework which is not concretely defined in terms of some of the international treaties that Rwanda is a signatory to (see also Shindo 2012, 1692). The indistinct definition of the genocide ideology has, over the years, enabled the state to (mis)interpret dissent or dissatisfaction with the government's policies and practices as 'divisionism' that is, acts of division that could generate conflict among the population (Human Rights Watch 2008).

Given that army desertion is framed as both a military and political offence in Rwanda, it is almost impossible for a deserter to lead a quiet post military life in Rwanda. Therefore, most army deserters flee to other countries such as South Africa where, in their estimation, it would be difficult for the RDF to find them. Yet of late, South Africa has proven to be an unsafe destination for the army deserters because of heightened surveillance by Rwandan state agents who have been seeded to 'hunt' them down wherever they are 'hiding' (Himbara 2019). Previously, Rwandan ex-soldiers and 'dissidents' have been physically attacked, injured or murdered in South Africa by alleged Rwandan state agents as is evidenced by the assassination of General Patrick Karegeya in a hotel in Johannesburg (Smith 2015; York and Rever 2014, Wrong 2021) as well as the four assassination attempts on a former Intelligence Chief, General Faustin Kayumba Nyamwasa, also in Johannesburg (Smith 2015; Wrong 2019) and the murder of Camir Nkurunziza in Cape Town, a former bodyguard of President Kagame's who had become one of his fierce critics (Du Plessis 2019). Despite the South African government's stern stance against such aggression, attacks have increased significantly over the past few years and former junior soldiers are being targeted (York 2017) because they are thought to be working with the RPF's political opponents in addition to that, the violent subcultures of South Africa provide perpetrators of Rwandan state sponsored violence much needed camouflage to hide behind (Fabricius and Wrong 2021). According to Fabricius (2021) similar murders have also been reported in Mozambique.

The antipathy between the RPF and the RDF and exiled army deserters, Prunier (2008) argues, originates largely from the fact that the RPF itself politically organized in exile in Uganda between 1987 and 1989 when Tutsi refugees who had fled to Uganda during the Hutu revolution of 1959 were being persecuted in Uganda for entangling themselves in intra-Ugandan politics as well as participating in rebel activities. The refugees were also resented by Ugandan citizens for 'acquiring more power and wealth than "real" Ugandans' (Kupermann 2003:4) and for overstaying their welcome (Kamukama 1993). The RPA had to go back with force because former President Habyarimana had formally banned Tutsi refugees from returning to Rwanda in 1986. Therefore, with the help of its armed wing consisting of 1000 men who had themselves deserted enmasse from the Ugandan army, invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990. It is this fear that an insurrection might repeat itself that informs the RPF's and RDF's uncomfortability with its highly trained men living in exile because they could easily

become a useful resource in the hands of Rwanda's enemies. So to better understand the multiplicity of military identities among army deserters in this study, we explored the ways in which military *habitus* and the condition of exile work together to create hypervigilant men who are ready to navigate Rwandan state surveillance that could potentially confine, injure or erase them, from this new 'battlefront' per se. *Habitus* entails socially constructed system of dispositions by which social agents perceive, think, appreciate, judge and act in the social world (Bourdieu 1990). For Scott (1985:79), "Bourdiesian dispositions mean enduring orientations, skills, and forms of 'know how' that people pick up by being socialized into particular cultures. In this study, military *habitus* entails the enduring orientations, skills and forms of 'know how' that were ingrained in the erstwhile soldiers during military training and subsequent service in the RDF.

### **Making sense of rumours, surveillance and social navigation in the context of exile**

Having been labelled dissidents and enemies of the Rwandan state, for deserting the RDF, army deserters in our study all believed strongly that their names were on the hit list. Although most of them had not seen the list, they all seemed to enact and act upon their identities and their being in exile in relation to the list because they said they were reliably informed about it. Rumours were a crucial communication channel for deserters given that the very act of deserting the army removed these men from official lines of communication with their now 'hunters', yet they needed to know about and also stay ahead of the 'hunter's' plans. It seems apparent that by giving credence to rumours the men in our study understood rumours and gossip to be discourses which have inherent truth value (White 2000; Stewart and Strathern 2004; Fontein 2009; Israel 2009). This framing of rumours was important because it allows us to understand the materiality of the hit list that is, what the hit list does as well as to illuminate the ways in which the *omnipresence* of the Rwandan state's surveillance techniques and discourses (Foucault 1977) exercise a hold on the politico-economic and physical comportment of the exiled army deserters. Acting on the information drawn from rumours, the army deserters devised innovative ways of navigating the dangers associated with their being on a 'hit list' - even in exile. This corroborates with Greenhill and Oppenheim's (2017) conceptualization of rumours as an impetus for behaviour. Drawing on *undefined* toolkits *habitus*, capital and field, we illuminate the innovative stratagems deployed by deserters in the course of navigating Rwandan state surveillance. We refer to innovativeness in this case because it is possible that hysteresis might occur during in the process of deploying the military *habitus* in foreign fields that are different from the ones in which the *habitus* was developed. Hysteresis according to Bourdieu (1990) entails a mismatch between the objective conditions of life and schemes of perception, appreciation judgement and action that are embodied by the social agent's body and mind. Therefore, much of the innovative ways of outmaneuvering state agents in this paper are products of the enduring military skills (Higate 2000; Woodward 2000) that the deserters adapt to fit their circumstances in exile. Most importantly, our analysis of empirical data draws to a great extent on Vigh's (2009) concept of 'social navigation' which entails *scanning* the environment; or harnessing the deserters' *perceptivity* towards establishing hidden agendas and being *hypervigilant* in

securing the surrounding environments (Vigh 2009, 2018) as well as when moving across spaces and around norms that govern socio-political life. As an analytical tool, social navigation enables the reading of the materiality of embodied practices that were ingrained in army deserters during military training and service. The theory allows us to illuminate militaristic power dynamics through an examination of the antagonistic strategies deployed by the state (through its state agents) on the one hand and army deserters on the other, who bear similar expertise in terms of dispensing and evading violence. More importantly, social navigation helps in explaining the interaction between insecurity and social action (Vigh 2009, 2010, 2011, 2015, 2018). Given that the state agents and informers who have been seeded to weed out army deserters are not known and their strategies are also hidden from deserters, we construe them as ‘existing potentialities’ (Agamben 1995; Bleeden 2010) because they are ‘socially invisible yet present’ (Vigh 2011:93). According to Vigh, potentialities consist of a shadow world of actors and factors that may be out of sight or beyond people’s immediate senses, yet they act towards that world in anticipation. Situating social navigation in chronically uncertain settings such as the ones in which this study was conducted is strategic because it illuminates the complexity of military to post military transition in ways that provoke new ways of thinking about military identities and the afterlife of military service.

### **Rwandan army deserters’ transition to post military life**

We have highlighted earlier on that when soldiers desert the army and (in the case of Rwandan army deserters) take flight to self-imposed exile, they cannot seamlessly fall back into their past civilian lives, instead they live as fugitives that is, being hyper-vigilant; looking and listening out for hidden danger before danger reveals itself to them in detrimental ways (Vigh 2018:492) because the Rwandan state has a problematic presence in South Africa which is mediated by the state agents that it has deployed to hunt down real or perceived enemies of the state but more specifically army deserters. Rather than a transition to civilian life, what we see in this case is the migration and continuation, if not exacerbation of the conflict that the deserters thought they had fled from; a complicated transposition of ‘low-intensity combat’ from the military barracks in Rwanda to the townships of South Africa, if we may. This situation renders problematic, Western understandings of transitions that happen after soldiers leave the military for the civilian world. In Western literature, when soldiers leave the military, they can easily revert to civilian life and such transition follows a lineal and clearly set out path. This is probably because militaries in the West have programmes designed to prepare their personnel for post-army life (Ibid). As such, claims that military to civilian transitions are lineal (Locke 2013; Hinojosa 2010; Woodward and Neil Jenkins 2011) do not sufficiently capture the experiences of ‘dissident’ deserters whose lives are governed by rumours and the fear of imminent harm.

Although there is an extensive literature on the transition of soldiers from military to civilian life (Jolly 1996, Woodward 2016; Bergman, Burdett, and Greenberg 2014; Burkhart and Hogan 2015; Grimell 2015) and on military identities (Griffith 2009; Kümmel et al. 2009; Higate et al. 2021; Woodward, Winter, and Jenkins 2011 Gibson and Condor 2009) the focus has been on soldiers who remain in or return to their home countries after serving the military. These

studies have mainly been informed by Western conceptualizations of soldiers' transition to civilian life where such moves are usually unilinear because the military is not so much embedded in everyday national politics compared to Africa (Mbembe 2003). Studies on army desertion are generally few but exceptions include the extensive work of Maringira (Maringira 2017a, 2017b; Maringira and Carrasco 2015; Maringira, Gibson, and Richters 2015) concerning deserters from Zimbabwe, Koehler et al (2016) and Albrect and Koehler's (2020) papers on desertion during the civil war in Syria, Richards' (2018) in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Agostini's (2007) on British soldiers who deserted during the seven year war in America.

Koehler et al (2016), as well as Agostini (2007), stress the riskiness and potential costs of desertion: defectors are often constantly on the move to avoid being apprehended and simultaneously try to hide their military identities. In the case of the RDF, Brock (2016) report that 'the consequences of desertion can be grave'. At best, it can lead to incarceration (Canada Immigration and Refugee Board 2017). Himbara (2019) argues that the Kagame led national government of Rwanda strongly dislikes army deserters because they are deemed to pose an existential threat to the state. Our work departs from the highlighted works on ex-soldiers in that it not only recenters African contexts in analyses of militarism by offering ethnographic accounts and critical reflections on the ways in which Rwandan army deserters navigate perceived Rwandan state surveillance and their very real experiences of violence which seems politically motivated, it also complicates our understandings of how army deserters navigate habituated and embodied modes of being which were inculcated in the military.

However, given the centrality of the Rwandan military in national politics and the associated political sensitivities and the guardedness of army escapees regarding desertion, the narratives of army deserters have been silenced by the official narratives which malign these former combatants (Himbara 2019; Ncube 2017). Given that such deserters actively engage in concealing their past military lives and identities, their experiences have been shrouded in broader Rwandan refugee and humanitarian discourses (Tshimba 2018; Turner 2013; Kavuro 2019). By investigating and analysing the post-military identities and lives of Rwandan army deserters living as exiles in South Africa, this paper aims to fill a gap in the literature.

To do so, the paper draws on a study with former soldiers who deserted from the RDF and try to survive in self-imposed exile in South Africa as people who are 'on the run' (Goffman 2009). Here, they obfuscate and hide their acquired military identities and endeavour to 'pass' as civilians (Goffman 1963; Higate et al. 2021) by reconstructing and performing a multiplicity of alternative identities as camouflage. Yet, they are faced with a dilemma. They are haunted by, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000) write, a 'sometimes coercive force of external identifications': in this case the 'fixed' identities ascribed to them by the RDF and state of Rwanda: as military, as deserters and political 'other'. Military identity is arguably relatively resilient, and in the case of deserters, spoilt (Goffman 1963). To survive in South Africa deserters actively 'work' to construct new and convincing identities as self-protection, in the process they both 'enact and act upon their identities' (ibid:12).

## Research methodology

This paper draws on doctoral research with 30 Rwandan army deserters in Cape Town and Johannesburg over a period of 18 months. Participants were recruited through a snowball method. Three of the participants have official refugee status in South Africa, three have Section 24 asylum permits<sup>1</sup> and 24 are undocumented. The sensitivity of the study demanded different and flexible field techniques and multiple research sites. Following Nordstrom's (1994) approach of 'ethnography of a warzone', the research is not situated in a particular locale but follows participants across sites in a 'moving ethnography'. The army deserters in the study do not live together or in a particular place as a collective. Because of being frequently on the run they do not really ground their 'selves' – their lives, and their livelihoods in a single place.

Using 'deep hangouts' (Geertz 1998), an ethnographic research method where the researcher immerses themselves in the socio-cultural environments of a group of participants for extended periods of time, on an informal level, the researcher was involved visits to cemeteries, the deserters' abodes, places where they were trying to work, memorial spaces where their colleagues had been murdered, funerals, weddings and *braai* parties (barbecues). Repeated social engagements with participants made observation of their hidden lives possible. Life histories were also gathered, repeated in-depth interviews, and formal and informal group discussions done. For the purposes of analysis all data was coded, organized in themes, categories developed and collated in relation to identified patterns and meaning.

## Military identity beyond the army

We have highlighted earlier on that military identity does not only involve representations, but also practices and embodiment (Grassiani 2018; Woodward, Winter, and Jenkins 2011) and that moving from the military to civilian life is complex (Grimell 2015; Hockey 2013; Jolly 1996; Walker 2013). The process 'forces the military identity narrative to change in order to address both who and where the former soldiers are' (Grimell 2015, 135), including a reconfiguration of identity in an effort to connect a past in the military to a presence in civilian life. Grassiani (2018), for example, found that security professionals in Israel stress their experience in the military, but also do discursive 'identity work' to enable them to identify with the skill set and military capital of the army, while differentiating themselves from it as well.

In Africa, it seems difficult for ex-soldiers, let alone army deserters, to differentiate themselves from the military because of the interconnectedness of the military to political and socio-economic facets of life. In what follows, we give a synopsis of cases substantiating this claim. In trying to understand the military to civilian transition among Namibian liberation war veterans, Metsola (2006) found that reintegrating Namibian ex-combatants in independent Namibia was problematic because Namibia's reintegration policies are exclusive and aimed at strengthening the bond between the former liberation movement South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and the government for purposes of retaining political power, while marginalizing those ex-combatants who fought against SWAPO. In South Africa Bandeira (2009) has focused on addressing the needs of ex-combatants because they fall within the category of vulnerable members of society given that the reintegration program in

South Africa has not been a success (Everatt and Jennings 2006). Reintegrating ex-soldiers into civilian communities seems to be a problem in Africa, because most African militaries remain do not have institutional mechanisms to facilitate the smooth reintegration. Because of the strong political ties between militaries in Africa and ruling political parties, former soldiers are either retained as a reserve of the repressive state apparatus to be unleashed on civilians when the need arises, or they are discarded with no pensions to sustain post-army lives. Gear (2002) has paid attention to the haste with which ex-combatants are implicated in acts of violence while Dzinesa (2008) set out to investigate the role of ex-combatants in violence in transition societies. [undefined](#) strongly argue that soldiers can become victims of the regimes that they purportedly supported. His analysis of such vulnerability has been confined to the military barracks and within the borders of Zimbabwe. There are striking similarities between the case of Zimbabwe and Rwanda in relation to the dangers of being labelled as an 'other' be it politically or ethnically. In both cases the consequences of such identification have been grave for both former soldiers and civilians believed to be linked to ex-soldiers.

### **The military identity of army deserters**

Attempts to understand why soldiers desert the army are only a few, for example Agostini (2007), Lyall (2016) and Koehler et al. (2016). The latter author's article on army deserters focuses on the processes which enabled disgruntled soldiers to translate their dissatisfaction with the military to forsake the army. As indicated above, desertion can be dangerous and Koehler reveals the ways in which the Syrian military thwart flight from within the ranks of the defence forces by attacking army deserters' immediate families and friends. Nonetheless, the search for army deserters rarely went beyond Syrian borders.

Maringira and Carrasco's, 2015, 2016; Maringira 2017a & Maringira 2017b) work on army deserters living as exiles in South Africa celebrates these former soldiers for retaining their military identities and dispositions and for drawing on the social and cultural capital of such identities to carve out economic niches in South Africa's aggressive informal sector. This is possible because Zimbabwean army deserters are not regarded as a political or military threat to the ruling ZANU PF government, or that the latter is simply not able to co-ordinate and execute their prosecution in South Africa. The post military fears of Zimbabwe deserters were not as deeply political as those of Rwandan army deserters discussed in this article.

In contrast, many of the deserters in our study are constantly navigating identities as they try to extricate themselves from the confining structure of the military and their past identification as members of the RDF. According to Iscarlot, a participant: 'in the eyes of the RPF government, exiled soldiers are a primary enemy which needs to be met with spying and ruthless violence'. In this regard, it is necessary to return to the literature on identity again and in particular Brubaker and Cooper's (2000, 1) contention that the emphasis on fluidity draws attention away from the 'hard' dynamics of politics surrounding identity, how identities can be congealed through the sometimes oppressive power of external identification. In this way, military identity is constructed as and, for the targets of such construction, becomes the 'terrible singularity' of army deserter and therefore traitor and dissident. This was emphasized by Mawa, a study participant:



In the eyes of the Rwandan state, we are army deserters. They call us deserters plus more. Traitors, dissidents, enemies of the state, cowards, rebels, people who are planning to topple the government and threats to national security; you name it. Every day I hear the President and his lieutenants call us many different things. (Mawa: Field notes, 12 August 2019, Johannesburg)

To situate the above, it is necessary to give some background on the history of Rwanda to throw more light on the particularities of army desertion, how it is perceived and represented nationally and nested within a military identity.

### The harshness of an army deserter identity

According to Fantina (2006) army desertion is the most grievous offence that a soldier can commit and warrants long jail sentences or, in some cases, death. Reyntjens (2011, 1) wrote, 'Rwanda is an army with a state, rather than a state with an army' and the literature indicates that in Rwanda, army desertion is not a singular military offence, but also a political crime which falls within the ambit of the national government's 'genocide ideology' (Eltringham and Van Hoyweghen 2000) and therefore warrants severe punishment. President Paul Kagame reportedly said: 'ex-soldiers are some of the dissidents who are living freely abroad . . . but we will catch them and kill them, it is only a matter of time' (Himbara 2019:1). Tshimba (2018:3) intimates that the Rwanda state is continuously in a high state of paranoia and pursues 'even perceived slights' (Tshimba 2015:3). Rwandan state surveillance in South Africa is particularly high because the Rwanda National Congress (RNC), the RPF's fiercest opposition party, is based in Johannesburg. According to our study participants the Rwandan state constructs all army deserters as 'dissidents' even though they did not participate in expatriate opposition politics and had not been involved in rebel activities which could warrant such categorization from their government. Rather, study participants viewed themselves as people who left the RDF because the concerns they had raised while they were serving in RDF were not addressed. Instead, soldiers were victimized for speaking against abuses in the military (see also Amnesty International 2006, 2017; Broch 2016).

According to Mbare, a study participant:

In my opinion, the soldiers here in South Africa are simply seeking refuge here, they may be deserters but they definitely are not interested in overthrowing the government. The president is misinformed by those who whisper in his ear, those who want him to shift his attention from their bad ways and pay undue attention to people who really are not interested in the politics of Rwanda, for now. Many times we have seen and heard the government calling us dissidents, traitors, enemies but who cares? Everyone has a way of identifying everybody (Field notes, 12 August 2019, Johannesburg)

Although Mbare spoke dismissively about the way in which army deserters were labelled with tainted identities (Gofman 1997), he cared very much about the potential negative effects of such constructions as it impacted on his own safety. As a result he, like other deserters, were constantly on the lookout for potential danger. To illuminate the reality of the threat RDF deserters experience in South Africa, the paper now turns to Ncube's truncated fieldnotes concerning one of the study participants:

Today was a nerve-wracking experience for me . . . I walked into Major Ghost's flat and saw most of his belongings scattered on the floor and blood splatters on the walls and window. . . 'Help me, help me', Ghost whimpered weakly as he lay in a pool of blood with his hands on his chest. He was bleeding profusely: it looked like he had been stabbed . . . There was blood everywhere. He had been stabbed in the chest and had several long, deep, discoloured contusions on his torso. His navel had been ripped open and was bleeding. 'What happened, what happened?' I asked in shock. He groaned then, struggling to speak, he said: " . . . I opened the door . . . three men stormed in and one of them beat me hard on the head with a knobkerrie and pushed me to the ground. They beat me with clenched fists and they kicked me . . . one pepper-sprayed me. . . They lashed me . . . They wanted me to tell them where Iscariot and Stix are living . . . One . . . stabbed me in the chest several times with a screwdriver while the other stuffed a lit cigarette in my nose . . . then said 'today you are going to die on their behalf' . . . Two of the guys spoke Kinyarwanda and the other one did not speak at all . . . 'No hospital. . . they will finish me off in the hospital, I do not want to go there' . . . the doctor advised Ghost to make a police report, but he refused, saying 'it is pointless because the police will do nothing about it' . . . Ghost contacted Longman and said 'Langa, will you come back home early today? They attacked me this afternoon . . . I fear that the attackers might come back and finish me off after these guys leave . . . I am sure they are somewhere close by monitoring every move here' . . . When Longman arrived . . . he said, 'so they now know where we live, we must move'. (Fieldnotes; 16 August 2019)

Ghost, Longman, Iscariot and Stix, referred to above, were all convinced that the attack was made by Rwandan state agents. Such violent incidents aimed at deserters were often encountered during fieldwork. Many study participants, including Iscariot and Stix above, had scars from and experiences of violent encounters. Both Ghost and Longman 'disappeared' for a while after the aforementioned attack. They abandoned the place where they had been staying, convinced that they were being 'hunted' by the RDF and agents of the Rwanda government, who as Ghost believed, were 'somewhere close by monitoring every move'. During 18 months spent with men like Ghost, their practices to try to make ends meet, manoeuvres to be 'invisible', to be vigilant and to assist each other against the background of the apparent precarity of their everyday lives, filled with fear, suspicion, rumours and sudden violence became apparent. The men were constantly alert and on the lookout for any signs of danger, seemed highly mobile in potentially turbulent environments, yet were always trying to find opportunities to survive as undocumented migrants and were full of camaraderie towards those they trusted.

As indicated above by Mbare, the RDF and by extension the state, apparently perceive military identity as somewhat intractably attributed to its soldiers. Yet for the deserters these identities have become spoilt, because they have tried to shed and negate it (Gofman 1963). The identity of deserter, enemy and traitor is nested within a military identity and highly situational. What initially drew the study participants together in South Africa was a military identity, they had all been in the RDF. Yet their subsequent desertion and flight not only tainted this identity, but also necessitated the construction, performance and doing of a range of other identities. Whilst these are mostly open and fluid there are moments, for example when they are together and feel safe, that they perform a military identity: their bodily dispositions suddenly become those of soldiers, they even call each other by their former ranks. The contradictory identity of having been a part of the military, having been trained and habituated into and operating within the

army creates a form of inter-group cohesion for the men. Because they are also deserters they share such identification, while trying to simultaneously hide it from others.

Despite acknowledging that they were afraid of their ‘hunters’, the study participants did not passively accept what could otherwise be thought of as their fate. They were actively engaged in evading their ‘hunters’. Because the need to hide often arose, they usually carried a few necessities in their backpacks and could leave everything else. This nomadism so to speak, also explains why most of them did not have many items of household furniture in their homes. Sometimes these army deserters found shelter in the open (Weizman and Harel 2004). This was a form of camouflage, or a performance to disguise a deserter as vagrant or as any other street dweller apparent in a variety of spaces in Johannesburg and Cape Town. As two of them explained: ‘I hide in plain sight’ (Sirakari) or ‘I lived on the streets to stay safe’ (Iscariot).

### Camouflaged in ‘homelessness’

Although all study participants above stressed their agency in relation to homelessness, it does not mean that this issue, or even the choice to do so, is unproblematic. Higate (2001), for example, found that the harrowing effect of military experiences often contributed towards homelessness among soldiers who had left the British armed services. Higate (2001) argues that traumatic military encounters made it difficult for veterans to easily coexist with civilians. As a result, homeless veterans chose to live on the streets with fellow ex-soldiers. In an earlier study, Adler (1975) found that ex-soldiers became homeless when they perceived non-military settings such as civilian homes and work environments as disorderly and therefore uninhabitable.

While these studies point to some of the difficulties associated with post-military life the above analyses do not capture the necessity for Rwandan deserters to also hide their military identities by shifting into homelessness and vagrancy. The aim is to un-make military identity as a public marker; by hiding, resisting, staying safe and ‘passing’ (Gofman 1963; Higate et al. 2021): in this case as homeless people. Yet it was not merely pretence either. Living on the streets is very much embodied, difficult, physically and mentally exhausting. For the study participants, it is also performative.

To make sense of such identity performances, the work of Turner (1986) is useful. He emphasizes not only the agency of subjects, such as deserters, to actively un-make or make their identities and social worlds, but equally the dynamic processual aspects of doing so. While the Rwandan state endeavours to socially construct deserters’ identities as simultaneously military and dissident in rather fixed ways, the performances of homelessness were more open, contingent and ‘susceptible to unrehearsed actions’ (Askew 2002, 15). When rumours or news about a so-called ‘hunting tide’ became known, study participants who felt particularly vulnerable would suddenly ‘disappear’ like Ghost and Longman above for days or even weeks.

Afterwards, once they could be contacted again, Mbare, one of the participants, told how he had slipped into destitute-hood and to all intents lived in crowded bus terminuses. Another, Brick, said he had lived and slept among homeless drug addicts often in marginal spaces reeking of urine. Kwita reported erecting and living in makeshift shelters until the ‘tide receded’. One participant, Iscariot, believed to be one of the most ‘hunted’ deserters, - and his colleagues attested to this - said;

I lived on the streets. I disguised myself as *gusara* (mentally ill man) . . . I wore greasy and very dirty sacks and a very old afro wig which covered the large scar on my head. I secured the wig on with a chain (dog leash) and lock. I wore no underwear and I deliberately let my private parts dangle through the unzipped trousers which also had holes at the back and my buttocks showed. I would urinate in my pants to spruce up the mad-man apparel by reeking of urine. I also drank a lot of alcohol and I smoked a lot of weed as these two stimulated my mind while evading state surveillance on the streets . . . I often patrolled in the CBD, including the surrounding areas and sometimes went to city outskirts to stalk the ‘hunters’. During that time, I was not only on the run but also at ‘work’. (Personal interview, 19 October 2019, Johannesburg)

Iscariot’s comrades said he was ‘unrecognizable’ when he was camouflaged in such a way. Under the guise of ‘homelessness’ or ‘mental illness’, Iscariot gathered intelligence to enable him, and other deserters who felt threatened, to identify their ‘hunters’. He ascertained, for example, the places frequented by them. By keeping an eye on them, he also ascertained their routines as well as who they were working with. Here, Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000 reminder that ‘identity’ is not just a category of analysis, but also one of practice, is helpful. It is in moments such as these that the military habitus of a deserter like Iscariot was very useful capital insofar as it enabled him to not only endure rough living (Higate 2001, 333), but also to stay in camouflage and observe without calling attention to himself.

Grimell (2015) emphasizes the importance of self-reorganization in post-military life which entailed accepting new identities or statuses when adapting to new life circumstances. For Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport (2003), post-military identification was an ongoing process of negotiation between ex-soldiers and their civilian counterparts. Writing about migrant identities, Innes (2016) added spatial and temporal dimensions to the identity ‘negotiations’ that exiles contended with in transnational contexts. It is these ideas that had the most influence during our exploration of the complexity of Rwandan army deserters’ military identities in South Africa: as both constructed but also deeply sedimented and habitually practised. For the RDF, the identities of deserters were fixed: as military men, albeit deserter/dissidents. The study participants tried to hide such an identity, while simultaneously drawing on the embodied skills gained through having been trained and having worked in the armed forces, for example the military dispositions (Maringira 2014) used to evade surveillance. Rwandan army deserters could shift into other identities while covertly relying on some of the ingrained practices of the military to avoid surveillance and being caught.

Most of the people who participated in this study attested to having lived on the streets at some point: not because of failing to reintegrate into civilian society per se but because of the necessity to avoid, dodge and escape from Rwandan state security agents and their associates. The homes of study participants, or any kind of enclosed shelter for that matter, could become ‘deathtraps’ and ‘death scapes’. As highlighted earlier on, deserters, as demonstrated by Mbara, Ghost, Longman, Brick, and Kwita above, often abandoned their dwelling places when they were attacked, were being followed or when they became suspicious that they might have been discovered. Drawing from Bourdieu, the capacity to endure the rough life of homelessness that these army deserters exhibited while navigating state surveillance can be understood as a ‘product of history’ (Bourdieu 1990). This further showed the durability and transposability of military practices in that the ex-soldiers immediately inscribed it in the present in order to address the potentiality of capture or elimination.

There always comes a time when it is quite dangerous to live in a house. Your chances of being killed in homes are very high, you know. We also go to the streets as a way of protecting our families and friends. (Herd: Personal interview, 21 December 2019, Johannesburg)

Drawing on KoKhavi's (2004) argument that military operations in urban spaces are better understood when conventional architectural ideas and uses of certain spaces have been deconstructed, it can be argued that the streets provided a better camouflage for the ex-soldiers in situations where conventional homes failed to provide safety. While the streets of South Africa are generally understood as dangerous spaces (Gibson and Maringira 2019), the former soldiers interpreted these spaces in unique and strategic ways which allowed them to not only evade surveillance and violence but allowed them to engage in counter surveillance activities from the vantage point of the streets. Hiding in the open shows how study participants understood the significance of engaging state surveillance at an ideological level through the strategic re-articulation of architectural uses of certain spaces in the cities with the aim of camouflaging themselves. In such instances, the army deserters relied on what Woodward (2000) called 'field-crafting'. This is a survival skill in which soldiers are expected to understand their surroundings and fit in with relative ease almost instantaneously. Accordingly, homelessness was one of the tactics used by participants to navigate state surveillance. Findings in this study thus broaden the understanding of homelessness among former soldiers by providing a political dimension to such analysis. When it happens, homelessness among Rwandan army deserters living in self-imposed exile in South Africa can be understood as also being a politically motivated move.

### **Nested identities: Deserter-Ras**

The uncertainty that RDF deserters experienced in Cape Town and Johannesburg, was underpinned by the fixed, ascribed identity of 'belonging' to a military, whilst having simultaneously having 'betrayed' or denied it. For most of them South Africa is 'the end of the line' (Mbare), yet they do not look like South Africans, speak with an accent, fear discovery and persecution and are 'other'. They had all initially fled to countries in the Great Lakes region but soon felt unsafe because the RDF is active and influential there (Otafire 2021). In South Africa, most of the deserters are undocumented, unemployed, marginalized and struggle to survive. They are also mistrustful of other Rwandans: whom they fear might expose them as army deserters.

Hogg (2007) asserts that when people experience identity-related uncertainty, they increasingly adopt 'nested-identities'. This is done to ensure the complementarity of identities where the limits of one identity is complemented by the strengths of another identity. According to Abrahams and A (2010) self-enhancement and self-uncertainty generally motivated social identification. Some of the army deserters embedded themselves in Somaliness, Ethiopianess and Rastaness because these identities seemed to be safer than Rwandaness in South Africa (Ncube 2017). Elder Spencer, affectionately known as Elder, was one such person who, despite being a Rwandan national, self-identified as an Ethiopian and Rastafari. He said he chose this identity because 'phenotypically', he closely resembled Ethiopians. We are aware of the dangers of such 'biocultural'

(Matsinhe 2011, 297) categorization of individuals particularly as it relates to somatic violence in cases such as the Rwandan genocide and xenophobia in South Africa. We make reference to it because that was Elders' explanation for nesting his Rwandan army deserter identity in Ethiopianness and Rastafariness. Secondly, these identities allowed him to live in relative peace and safety, at least until the watchful eye of Rwandan state surveillance detected him after three years of living a quiet life in Johannesburg.

Elder Spencer is a lanky, middle aged man with a long greying beard, always had a tam or rasta cap on his head, he always wore brown hand-made sandals. He had a small but vibrant business under a tree where he sold leather bags, batiks, Rastafari necklaces and small wooden *nyahbinghi* drums. He always played loud reggae music as if he was in competition with the Gqom music played in the club across the street. Who would have thought that this man was an army deserter from Rwanda? During our conversations, the soft-spoken Elder constantly pulled long puffs off his cannabis, squinting his red eyes when he blew the smoke slowly out of his mouth, sometimes he would choke on the smoke a little and cough deliberately. He said he loved the tranquillity that he found in this identity as 'no one really bothers you'. Even though Elder sold his wares on the streets, he was in constant touch with his 'comrades' as he too did information gathering for Rwandan ex-soldiers.

While most Rwandan army deserters shifted identities out of the need to deal with the uncertainty that accompanied their army deserter identity and did not really enjoy being chameleons so to speak, Elder said he loved being both army deserter and Rasta because the two identities laced his post military life with an interesting contrast and a protective ambiguity. While the former identity is dangerous, he found safety in the latter identity. Given the fact that most Rwandan army deserters had maintained the clean-shaven military look, it was quite unusual to find an army deserter with dreadlocks and a beard as long as Elder's, unless it was a wig (as used by Iscariot). Elder laughed out loud when asked where he got the idea of embedding himself in a Rasta identity. His response was simple yet thought provoking;

Unlike in Rwanda where I really had to go into hiding in the forest for a long time when I left the army, here we hide them in the open, like so. Simply change your outlook and appearance, it will take them years to sniff you out I tell you. But if you are going to hold on to what they knew [about you], then you are guaranteed of being pounced on when you least expect it. (Interview with Elder, 19 December 2019, Johannesburg)

Elder reiterated the fact that performing a Rastafari identity (a group who are generally known to be non-violent people) was a 'my camouflage', yet did not mean that he was 'not prepared to be violent towards hostile security agents. I just needed to lead a peaceful life, but I am quite dangerous. I trained for combat'. Even as he was hiding his military identity and experienced it as spoilt, he could nevertheless draw on his military habitus (Higate 2000, Lande 2007; Maringira, Gibson, and Richters 2015) for self defence.

Scanning the environment, being sensorially 'switched-on' (Hockey 2009, 2013), was central to the survival of study participants in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Like most of his army deserter colleagues, Elder had mastered the art of carefully scrutinizing his surroundings for potentially dangerous people, hazardous objects, threats and hiding-places (see also Vigh 2015). One Friday evening, while Elder was winding up his business

for the day, a clean shaven and formally dressed tall and thin man walked into Friday's barbershop. Friday was a young Nigerian man who owned the barbershop opposite Elder's 'tree-stall' where he hung his previously mentioned wares for sale. Elder was immediately on the alert when he saw this 'clean-looking' man. He followed him into Friday's barbershop because he recognized him as 'Neza': from a photograph sent to him on a closed Whatsapp group consisting only of deserters. They post pictures of suspected state agents, news about suspicious movements, warnings etc to each other. Elder explained, 'this gentleman's Rwandese kind of clean further sold him out'. The notion of 'selling out' here was embedded in political discourses of betraying a cause to which one should actually pay allegiance. According to Elder, Neza, the suspected Rwandan state security informant, was dressed 'in properly ironed formal clothes, he wore a charcoal grey trousers, a light blue shirt, navy blue jacket, a red tie and well-polished boots'. Elder added that this man's attire was unsuitable for the extremely hot weather in Johannesburg on the day in question, yet 'he had to look smart, as if he was entering the CBD [Central Business District] in Kigali'. Elder represented this Rwandan 'informers' 'clean' look as contrast to the 'clandestine and heinous work that these clean men do' in South Africa. When Neza walked into Friday's barbershop, he ignored Elder and requested a haircut. Elder remained suspicious, Neza seemed to be in unfamiliar territory and his head and face were clean shaven. Elder, assisted by Lungi and Hailie (both Rastafari), started to move bags to the back of the barbershop for overnight storage. He overheard Neza speaking on his cell phone in Kinyarwanda. Neza said that he thought he had found one of the people on the 'list' but was not so sure because the suspected man 'is a Rasta'. Neza went on to describe what Elder's appearance. According to Elder, Neza started to give verbal directions to where he was making the call from. Alarmed, Elder rushed over, grabbed Neza's cell phone and threw it to the ground. He stamped on it with his feet until it broke. Shocked, agitated and suspicious, Friday and Lungi grabbed hold of Neza. At the behest of, and assisted by Elder, they blindfolded Neza and tied him to a chair. Elder 'emptied a can of pepper spray in his face' and left Neza at the back of the shop for a few minutes. After Elder had finished packing his stuff away in the back of the shop he, with the assistance of Lungi and Friday, 'packed the spy into the boot' of his car. Elder drove about 100 kilometres away, hauled Neza out of the boot and left him stranded there. Defending his attack on Neza, Elder said;

When we beat up these straying state security agents, we do it to defend the honour of army deserters who have been forced to be nomads and reduced to graves here in SA. You see, we're in a dog-eat-dog situation my sister. Attacking is the best form of defence sometimes. (Personal Interview, 19 December 2019, Johannesburg)

Reflecting on Elder's sudden shift into a military disposition we were reminded of Woodward and Jenkins' (2011) argument that the formation of military identities involve many acts and is transformative, as well as Cooper et al.'s (2018) reasoning that military identities can act both for and on an individual. At the same time Elder, like other study participants, had to survive in local settings and 'blend in' with local people. They generally had cordial relations with people whom they lived and worked with. Building and maintaining good relations with locals enabled them to 'hide and camouflage' effectively, to gain information, surveil potential threats and find reinforcements or a backup team when

a situation turned nasty. What was also interesting about this incident was that Rastafari are generally perceived as being peaceful and non-violent people: yet both Lungi and Hailie immediately responded to an apparent threat to Elder. They assumed he had been targeted because he was a Rastafari and was seen by Neza as an easy target.

Lungi and Hailie apparently never suspected that Elder had not only been in the army but was a deserter. Since he had fled from the RDF, moved from Rwanda to Uganda and ultimately South Africa, he had performed multiple identities. In Johannesburg Elder's 'Ethiopian Ras' identity provided him with some flexibility in terms of behaviour and was arguably nested within and necessitated by his military and deserter identities. While the former was contingent and malleable, the latter were ascribed and 'fixed' as such by the Rwandan state and the RDF, albeit concealed. At the same time Elder's military habitus was quite enduring.

## Conclusion

The deserters from the RDF constructed, performed and 'did' a multiplicity of identities not only as disguise, but also to blend in and build a life in South Africa where they wanted to pass as civilians. Even so, they surreptitiously drew on a number of skills they learned in the army, for example of surveillance, alertness, camouflage, self defence and attack. Army deserter was a precarious identity which required a high degree of innovation and concealment. As discussed in the paper, Rwandan army deserters in this study drew on a repertoire of civilian identities to do so. Even though concealing their military deserter identity did not guarantee their safety, knowing that they could get some refuge in other identities gave the ex-soldiers a sense of temporal security.

This paper also argued that identities can be nested, are very situational and even expedient. At the same time, for the study participants, military identity was particular, rooted in their having been part of a particular army in a specific country with an extraordinary recent history. This military identity nevertheless seemed to be 'hard', enduring, and threatening. The latter related both to ascription and habitus. For the RDF a deserter 'belonged' to and fell within the disciplinary auspices of the military. This identity could not be simply erased, although it could be denied and rejected. To become an army deserter resulted in a spoilt and stigmatized identity. From the perspective of the RDF and the Rwandan state, the stigma was located in the desertion or defection, which was also understood as a form of political dissent. For deserters, stigma was located within the particular military identity itself as a political tool of a repressive state. According to them they did not desert, they were forced to abscond and to negate this identity. In South Africa, military deserter proved to be a precarious identity which necessitated hiding, shifting and nesting within identities which, at times, seemed to be completely dislocated from, yet informed by, each other as the best way to stay alive in exile. The art of identity shifting practised by study participants presented a complex understanding of military identities because they constantly oscillated between fixed military identities and several other identities in response to danger in different times and spaces.



## Note

1. This is an official recognition of an asylum seeker as a refugee, is valid for two year and can be renewed.

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