

Remembering the Homeland: Sierra Leone Refugees in Urban Gambia

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Introduction

Political strife each year forces millions of Africans to flee across national borders to settle temporarily or permanently in environments in which they have few cultural connections, uncertain legal rights, limited control over their lives, poor economic prospects, and significant risks to health and survival (Malkki, 1995). While refugees the world over experience similar problems, beleaguered aid agencies tend to see all refugees in the same light. In fact, different refugee populations have very distinct collective identities. They do not tell the same story. The story I tell below is one that certainly has similarities to other refugee histories, but is also unique in its focus on how refugees think about their lives in urban Gambia given their social constraints. We will see how Sierra Leoneans make decisions about remaining in The Gambia and why some of their activities remind them of home.

The Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002) left thousands dead and an estimated two million (about one-third of the Sierra Leonean population) displaced. Many of the war's victims were children. Half of the 10,000 Sierra Leoneans killed by 1997, and an estimated 90 percent of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel soldiers, were children (Sommers, 1997:2). The largest Sierra Leonean refugee population outside the country's borders (450,000) was centered in Guinea. In September 2000, RUF rebels crossed the Guinean border, and forced many refugees to flee and join refugee

communities in The Gambia. In 2003, about 15,000 Sierra Leoneans were living in urban Gambia, less than 200 of them in the formal Koudoum refugee camp. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that almost half of these refugees were less than 17 years old and that the vast majority were living in the Gambian towns of Serekunda and Bakau rather than in refugee camps.

Sierra Leonean Refugees in The Gambia

Many survivors of the atrocities are alone (either orphaned or “lost” to their families) and have had to seek new alliances and identities outside their cultural milieu. Cultural assimilation into new social structures is particularly important to Sierra Leonean refugees in urban Gambia given these two peoples’ shared history under British colonial rule (Fyfe, 1962; Wright, 1997). During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Britain sent educated Sierra Leoneans from Freetown, Sierra Leone, to Banjul, The Gambia, to work as office clerks, colonial administrators, and school teachers. Those who remained and formed families in the community are known today as the Gambian Aku population. In light of the historic Sierra Leonean migration from Freetown to Banjul, it is not surprising that roughly 80 percent of Gambian-based Sierra Leonean refugees come from Freetown (UNHCR, 2000). They are, by and large, urbanized people who identify as self-settled Sierra Leoneans and not as refugees; some are Krio while others have social and kinship ties with the Aku Gambians (Harrell-Bond, Howard and Skinner, 1978).

The urban refugee experience for these people is characterized by phases of uncertainty, fear of arrest, the urgency of fight or flight, and a constant search for asylum,

resettlement, or repatriation (Gilad, 1990). In refugee literature, the reconstruction of cultural identity generally focuses on overcoming a sense of marginalization through ritual practices (Edwards, 1986) or empowerment (Malkki, 1995a). Similarly, psychological studies show that people suffering from political and ecological stress tend to respond by increasing their ritual behavior (d'Aquili, 1999; d'Aquili and Laughlin, 1979; Firth, 1959; Wallace, 1970). In Africa, there is ample anthropological evidence of this process in the wake of colonialism (Stoller, 1995; Comaroff, 1985; Cohen, 1981; Body, 1989; Lan, 1985; Taussig, 1987).

This article relates to a large body of anthropological literature about refugees' memory of homeland and their profound sense of loss and difficulties adjusting, a condition Eisenbruch terms "cultural bereavement" (2000, 2001). Eisenbruch writes about the therapeutic function of ritual healers among refugee Cambodian children in Australia and in the United States. In a similar way, West African urban Hunting societies¹, respond to Sierra Leoneans' feelings of inadequacy, loss, confusion, and frustration through ritualistic practices that give them a sense of belonging and significance. While urban Hunting societies are not the only form of social support in

¹ I use the Krio term *Hunting* to mean the cultural form borrowed from the Yoruba people in neighboring Nigeria by Sierra Leoneans as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. The society of urban Hunters has, in effect, existed since the beginning of the 19th century among the Krio, descendents of the liberated slaves who established themselves around the peninsula villages of Freetown, and later brought the society to The Gambia during British colonialism. Their activities combine entertainment, masquerades, politics, hunting, and ancestral and spiritual worship of Ogun (the Hunting deity of iron and war). If I refer to traditional hunting societies, I will use the Mende word *Kamajors*. *Hunting* adopted its Krio name in the early 1800s from *Odelay*, translated from Yoruba as lay societies of *Odeh* (literally animal or fish catcher). Henceforth, when referring to these societies or their members, I will use capital letters to distinguish from the general categories of hunting and hunters.

The Gambia, they connect Sierra Leoneans to one another and to their homeland in emotionally meaningful and symbolic ways.

Although refugees have been continuously studied by the international aid community and rituals tend to attract academic scholars, my research bridges these domains by linking urban Hunting societies to the broader processes of entrustment by examining refugees' ritual participation in urban Hunting societies. My research also focuses on an under-represented refugee population of urban versus camp refugees. Unless or until refugees are incorporated as members into their host state (or returned to their state of origin), they remain in a perpetual state of liminality or 'betwixt and between' (Malkki, 1990). Thus, I examine how these refugees assimilate into Gambian society and cope with their marginal status there.

This article also connects to the main themes in my doctoral dissertation on how trust has evolved in the era following the 11-year civil war among Sierra Leoneans who are marked by long-term endemic fragmentation, violence, and high levels of mistrust, by examining the development of trust through urban Hunting societies, also known as voluntary secret societies. I showed some ways trust is formed, and broken, through narratives about the institutionalized support of NGOs in Guinea. Building on these narratives, this article explores how Sierra Leonean refugees build trust in The Gambia through friendship associations formed in urban Hunting societies. The comparison between modes of trust building among refugees (kin, contract, friendship associations) will lead the reader, I hope, to a better understanding of how trust evolves and develops among Sierra Leoneans post-conflict.

First I offer some details of forced migration gathered from questionnaires administered to Sierra Leonean refugees to provide a fuller description of refugees' lives and welfare and to compare them to my own observations of their experiences in the field.² Next I describe how these refugees have built trust through their involvement in urban Hunting societies and how they share some beliefs similar to indigenous notions of entrustment in The Gambia.

My questionnaire covered a broad range of demographic questions relating to refugees' background, experiences during forced migration, level of stress, and range of activities (employment, entertainment, etc.) in urban Gambia in 2003. I returned to the field again with continued participant observation during 2004-2006. My two Sierra Leonean research assistants in The Gambia distributed and collected 100 questionnaires using a snowball technique; 88 questionnaires were completed and returned for analysis (26 completed by females and 62 by males). I left it to the discretion of my male assistants to choose roughly equal male and female participants, but they found that men had more free time to fill out the questionnaires than women, and that there was a gender discrepancy in literacy, which partially explains the gender discrepancy. The majority of respondents fell into the category of "youth," meaning approximately age 13 to early 30s. While the sample size of this questionnaire may be too small to be a viable statistical sample, it reflects my observations in the field.³ The questionnaire aims to highlight particular issues regarding refugee migration while ignoring others. I use its findings

² The research for this questionnaire was made possible thanks to funding from The Mellon-MIT Program on Refugees and NGOs.

³ There are tests that can make "significance" out of numbers as small as 25 or less, e.g., the Fisher's exact test, sometimes called Fisher's Exact Probability Test.

mainly as a framework for discussing salient themes and providing context to Sierra Leonean refugee lives, rather than as an ethnographically representative or authoritative statement.

Based on the data from the 88 completed questionnaires, roughly 38 percent of Sierra Leonean refugees who fled their country during the war did so with at least one family member, 33 percent migrated alone (without friends or family), and 26 percent made the journey with one or more friends. Out of these, only 9 percent joined family members already living in The Gambia. So despite having historic connections to the Aku Gambians, few refugees joined friends or family from The Gambia, or even other family members who had already made the journey. This coincides with my observations. The majority of Sierra Leonean refugees came to The Gambia in 1997 during the heaviest fighting in Freetown, and the second largest wave came much earlier at the start of the war. One-third of the refugees responding to the questionnaire reported fleeing by themselves because of circumstances that occurred just before or during their flight that caused separation from, and/or the abduction of, their family members. In other words, 33 percent had to make this dangerous escape alone and find shelter in a foreign land without the support of their families.

Refugee is a vague term with various meanings and uses. According to the UNHCR, a refugee is anybody fleeing his or her homeland for fear of his or her life and security (persecution, religious or political). Ironically, the majority of refugees do not qualify for refugee status because, according to a close reading of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and Protocol, they can provide no tangible proof that they are fleeing

persecution in their native land (Human Rights Watch, 1998:15). In The Gambia, less than half of all Sierra Leonean refugees qualified for official UN refugee status in 2003. However, in this paper I consider as refugees any Sierra Leoneans who fled to The Gambia due to fear of death or personal injury or for better opportunities than those available in refugee camps in Guinea or back in Sierra Leone. The majority of these men and women, adolescents, and youth chose migration out of necessity and as a means to stay alive.

On the back of the questionnaire, I left space for respondents to write about their personal stories of migration. These turned out to be some of the most powerful narratives of the refugee experience. In an essay about her forced migration, Fatima explains her journey at the age of 14:

We left Guinea by bus for The Gambia. The bus was not good looking, but roughed up. I wasn't sure it would make it. During the voyage we passed the bush and I was scared. I kept thinking that people were hiding in the bushes and that they would kill us. It made me to think about Freetown all over again. On the way the bus broke down in the middle of nowhere and it was raining heavily and it was night, so everyone was scared because we were thinking of the worst. After hours of working on the bus by the driver and the apprentice, the van finally started and everyone was so happy.

The connection of flight to the bush and forest is a dominant theme throughout Sierra Leoneans tales of wartime. Refugees hid and slept in the forest trying to keep away from the main roads and villages where attacks were likely and unpredictable. At the same time, people feared civilians in the forest because they could not tell the rebels apart from the civilians. Although it was necessary to flee the rebels as they advanced — as they

pillaged villages, set them on fire, and abducted children — it was equally dangerous to travel by road because of frequent rebel ambushes.

Around this same time (1999) in my Peace Corps village in Siby, Mali, Sierra Leonean rebel attacks began on the main road from my village to Bamako. Public transport vehicles (*bashe* in Bamana) were pulled over by armed men who robbed passengers. This occurred on the main Conakry-Bamako “highway,” an unpaved dirt road surrounded by mango grooves, farmland, and forest. Malians had to use alternative routes to the capital — narrow bush paths through sandy patches — good for motorcycles, bikes, and foot traffic. At the end of my service, I had to transport my luggage piece by piece through bush paths as ambushes were becoming more frequent. It was also around this time that the first Sierra Leonean family — a mother and her two teenage sons — were hosted by villagers in Siby. Alice, the mother, told me how she lost her husband, her cook, and one child in fighting. On a return visit to Siby in the summer of 2002, Alice was still living in the village, had learned Bamana, and was selling milk next to the Fulbe women in the market. She had worked as a nurse in Freetown before the war but she told me that the doctor at the Siby Dispansaire (health clinic) did not need her services, even when she volunteered to work for free. She thought he was intimidated by her outside knowledge and her cosmopolitan ways. I had to agree. Compared to the farmers and herders in the multi-ethnic yet majority-Bamana village, her city background may have scared or alienated some people. I remember an intense discussion at the tailor’s shop in 1999 about her teenage son’s use of kohl (black eyeliner). It was considered strange, vain, and totally inappropriate for men to wear such

makeup. In the village, kohl was reserved for beautification of newborn babies at naming ceremonies and for women (and not every day). His city dress and habits struck the Malian villagers as out of place and slightly threatening. By 2002 both of her sons moved to Bamako on their way to Dakar to look for other opportunities.

In another narrative, Assitou, age 16, remembered her travel to The Gambia from Guinea:

On January 16th my family and I made the journey to The Gambia through Guinea. We took about three weeks on the road and we went through many difficulties. At one checkpoint the vehicle stopped and we were attacked by some men that we don't know. They took all our belongings and beat us up to the point of death — only God saved us. My arm was broken and my younger sister was taken away. My mum and dad were seriously in danger because they cannot walk anymore — their legs were swollen. We have to take another week on the road. We were then rescued by men and women that can speak French. It was very difficult for us to understand their language.

It is noteworthy that Sierra Leonean refugees traveling through francophone Guinea and Mali had considerable trouble communicating unless they had shared ethnic backgrounds, such as a speaker of a Mande language or Fula (pl.) Fulbe. This increased their sense of unease. During the journey, Assitou's younger sister was abducted by rebels and she watched other passengers being beaten and attacked. The Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) abduction of children for sex slaves, rebels, or simple porters and laborers led to the first war crimes tribunal conviction for the abduction and drugging of child soldiers.⁴

⁴ In many cases the majority ethnic groups (the Mende and Temne) could not communicate because Sierra Leonean Krio is an English, rather than French-based Creole, so the lingua franca was of no help.

Another Sierra Leonean, Tejan, recalls how he arrived six years ago in The Gambia with his family at the age of 10:

On my journey to The Gambia I was traveling in a vehicle with my relatives [and] we met a strike on the way. People were destroying buildings, shops, boutiques, mobile kiosks, [they were] beating drivers, burning places, killing people and stealing goods. So they decided to postpone our journey till everything was ready. And when they gave us the go-ahead, we were in the vehicle when we had an accident. Some were dead, and some were hurt. But luckily my family and I were a little safe and our things were all okay. So this is what happened on my journey. It was very terrible. I can't even explain it again. I have forgotten some.

It is unclear if Tejan is referring to an ambush or the general confusion and mayhem that resulted after rebels attacked the town. He was only 10 years old at the time, so part of his confusion may be due to his age. However, despite the claim that people suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) suffer memory loss, many victims of violence and war recall atrocities in surprisingly vivid detail. For example, many Holocaust survivors still remember events in stunning detail from 50 years ago.

In my questionnaire, I asked about the cause(s) of the war in an open-ended question, so that respondents could write anything they wanted in the lines below. 67 percent replied that the war was caused because of “greed” or “selfishness;” 18 percent blamed it on “politics”, and 15 percent said they did not know the cause. While it seems easy to dismiss these comments as overly simplistic, uninformed, or naive, I argue that the responses actually correspond very closely with the historic causes of the war. Scholars themselves dispute the origins of war and whether there were any true ideological roots for a revolutionary movement (see Paul Richards, 1996). In the end we find that these assessments, even by young refugees, reflect a deep understanding of the

absurdity, senselessness, and complexity of violence. They blame “politics” as a blanket for a corrupt and illegitimate government that was too weak or disorganized to protect or save the country from more than a decade of rebel warfare.

The guerilla warfare was confusing enough to civilians on the ground, but the added confusion started when rebels began declaring that they would chop off “only the right hands of civilians so that next time they will remember who they are voting for.” The rebels’ declaration that they were fighting for political justice once again underscores the absurdity of their claim and “the banality of violence” in the words of Hannah Arendt. I believe that by claiming “not to know the cause of the war,” my informants were also making a statement about the social and economic inequalities in the world.

They also understood all too well that were it not for the enormous value of diamonds buried under their country, the “greedy” and “selfish” rebels, and other opportunists (such as the Sierra Leonean soldiers, ECOMOG peace keepers, and Kamajors, who later joined the fighting) would have had little reason to kill and mutilate civilians. Sierra Leoneans told me over and over again, “We are one of the richest countries in the world. We have the world’s highest quality diamonds, lumber, bauxite, and other natural resources, and we are the *least* developed nation in the world!”⁵

The inhumanity and inequality were not lost on my informants. As a result, my sense of guilt was at times unbearable. The case of the angry women cursing me for my whiteness on the *poda poda* (public transportation in Krio) was not an isolated case.

Sierra Leoneans knew about the American CIA’s involvement in sending Charles Taylor

⁵ The UNDP index ranks Sierra Leone last on the world’s development index. This statistic was widely known and talked about by Sierra Leoneans.

to assassinate Liberian President Samuel Doe. They correctly reasoned something like this: If Charles Taylor had not been released from a New Jersey prison and armed by the Americans to attack Monrovia, Liberia, then they would not be in their dire situation. When I told them what I was doing in their country, Sierra Leoneans sometimes referred to the connection they saw between the United States, Charles Taylor, and the civil war in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Their attitude was, “How nice you get to come study the war you created, when we cannot even leave this country.” Many wanted to go abroad to university to examine social problems in Africa but were unable to obtain the funding or visas.⁶ The range of inequalities was far reaching and impacted the lives of every Sierra Leonean whether or not they were refugees.

One certainty about the war is that it was not caused by any one thing, but was a consequence of the hostilities stemming from long-term, historic inequalities that weakened the nation’s overall social fabric. Here, I am referring to the 400 years of kidnappings and slave trade in the region, colonial economic interests and Western involvement in diamond mining and the region’s other natural resources, and centuries of British dominance during and following the colonial era, during which traditional West African laws and political and social structures were replaced with British ones. One way then of interpreting my informants’ answer that they “do not know the cause of the war” is that they are telling me that there is no simple, easy answer and that maybe the question is too simple. Another way of interpreting their response is that they were

⁶ My Krio teacher in Freetown and I worked on a personal statement for his application to the master’s program in International Relations at Brandeis University. He was accepted with a partial scholarship but was unable to go when he could not find the remaining \$15,000 for tuition.

deliberately disregarding my question. Since the causes stem in fact from historic and endemic inequalities, how could they be expected to summarize this in a single line in a questionnaire?⁷

Of the 88 respondents to the questionnaire in 2003, 29 percent were unemployed (not working for pay, not students) and 26 percent were full-time students. Of the 45 percent who were working, about 16 percent worked in the arts (tie and dye fabrics, theater performance, batik production, tourist dance troupes, and crafts), 15 percent were teachers in Gambian schools, 10 percent ran small entrepreneurial businesses (petty trade, electrician, tailoring), and 3 percent did manual labor (construction, brick making). This small sample population also fits with what I saw when living with Mohammed, the Sierra Leonean imam who ran his own tie and dye company. Mohammed hired several apprentices and worked with other Sierra Leoneans who sold him the textiles, and others who managed the tailoring. Many refugees I knew were entrepreneurs who worked in the arts and crafts trades and did reasonably well selling their goods to hotels and boutiques that catered to the tourist industry. Another refugee performance troupe, The Freetong Players, danced and played music at the five-star hotels for unsuspecting tourists who probably thought they were Gambians. It seemed that Sierra Leoneans took the lead in the tourist entertainment business, and I am not sure why, but this was probably the second largest form of the refugees' informal-economy employment, after

⁷ James Scott's (1985) argument about stalling as a weapon of the weak might have been employed by my informants when they claimed not to know the cause of the war. The example of this question also highlights some of the problems associated with questionnaires and why anthropologists have traditionally been reluctant to use them as reliable and accurate sources of information in the field.

trade. As far as the formal economy is concerned, many Sierra Leoneans taught in primary and secondary schools, the most common form of employment. One of the toughest challenges to Sierra Leoneans living and working in The Gambia was the issue of legal residency.

Distrust and Fear among Refugees

According to my questionnaire, the greatest difficulty that refugees reported was the procurement of the residence permit and alien card. In January 2003, The Gambia passed a new law requiring all Sierra Leoneans and other refugees/non-Gambians to purchase identification cards for 1500 dalasi (about \$53). In April that same year, the Gambian police started random house raids looking for refugees without identification cards. The refugees faced a 125 dalasi (\$5) fee for not having proper identification and possible arrest and/or 48-hour confinement in a local jail. Sierra Leoneans were aware of these new policies and watched as friends and relatives were forced to pay fines and bribes to police to avoid temporary imprisonment. The permits are extremely expensive given the cost of living in The Gambia and with the salary of casual labor at about \$1 per diem, it would take 53 days, without bribes, to earn the price of a permit. At this rate, it is nearly impossible for Sierra Leoneans to renew them every year.

The level of abuse from Gambian officials and police, however, was nothing like the harassment experienced by Sierra Leoneans in Guinea, just south of The Gambia. Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in refugee camps in Guinea had to obtain a temporary day pass to travel outside the camp for any reason. Their movements were

restricted because Guineans did not want refugees in the cities or towns even for day excursions to do business or make calls. Often while on a day trip to town, they were stopped by police at checkpoints along the way and victimized or harassed until they bribed the police to let them pass. Guineans resented the 450,000 refugees in their country and some abused their power as authority figures in the police and government to take advantage of them. I heard rumors about people being beaten up and detained at checkpoints until they paid fines and/or bribes. In comparison, Sierra Leoneans said The Gambia was easier to move around in, that they could do so without too much fear of harassment and abuse, and that being imprisoned for an infraction, real or trumped up, was a minor (though real) threat. Once during my stay, the Sierra Leonean refugee host father with whom I lived, Mohammed, was detained in the local jail overnight because he did not have a resident permit. He was released the next day and said he was treated fairly.

The head of the immigration department at the police headquarters in Banjul explained that The Gambian government introduced these work/resident permit laws following the end of war in Sierra Leone as a form of incentive and soft pressure to encourage Sierra Leoneans to “seriously consider voluntary repatriation.” Returning to Sierra Leone has proven to be a difficult decision for many refugee youth. Some have been in The Gambia for a decade and have made their lives there, and they have had trouble conceptualizing “going home” or the steps necessary to start anew. Based on my questionnaire, financial constraints were the second most frequent response for difficulty reported in The Gambia, after the resident permits and alien cards. The third was

loneliness and excessive worries.⁸ This fits with the data from the region concerning repatriation. The numbers also seem to indicate a reluctance, or an ambivalence at best, about returning home.

The UNHCR Statistical and Demographic Information and Target Population Report (June, 2003) indicates only a total of 7,536 registered beneficiaries or registered refugees. This figure includes all refugees in The Gambia: Sierra Leoneans, Senegalese (from the Casamance), Liberians, and Others.⁹ This means that of the total refugee population, including an estimated 15,000 Sierra Leoneans alone, only 7,536 refugees registered with the UNHCR. Out of the registered refugees, the vast majority were adults (18–59 years), but the majority of Sierra Leoneans were between 5 and 17 years of age and therefore were not registering.

The UNHCR made repeated announcements on the radio and in the press reminding Sierra Leonean refugees that registration for voluntary repatriation would continue until June 30, 2004, and that all refugees who did not take advantage of this opportunity to be helped to return back home would have to make their own return arrangements in the future. The outline of the resettlement program was as follows:

- Sierra Leonean Refugees receiving assistance from UNHCR are informed that all forms of material assistance, in the camp in Basse and in the Banjul urban

⁸ I had help translating and interpreting my questionnaire from Sierra Leoneans before and after going in to the field with it. They taught me about culturally appropriate terms and concepts. For example, in one question I asked informants if they suffered from “excessive nightmares.” My research team wanted to know why I wanted to do dream analysis since I wasn’t a marabout. I explained that nightmares in my country indicate worry or anxiety about something; so they then told me to just ask about excessive worry if that is what I wanted to know about! They were concerned that people would explain their dreams and nightmares to me, and I would then be responsible for interpreting them, a training skill involving Koranic traditional and Islamic mysticism studies and/or other special skills which they correctly pointed out I did not have.

⁹ Others could also include refugees from the Guinea-Bissau civil war.

area and elsewhere, except administrative and legal assistance, will cease by June 2004.

- Sierra Leonean Refugees remaining in The Gambia will no longer be entitled to receive any form of food or non-food assistance. Equally, they will no longer be entitled to medical, or income-generating assistance.
- Education assistance at the primary & secondary school level will also cease at the end of the current school year.
- For individuals enrolled in vocational and other courses which are due to finish a reasonable time from the time assistance would have formally ceased, assistance may exceptionally be provided to allow the individual to complete the course. UNHCR will decide on such cases on an individual basis. (UNHCR, 2004).

The repatriation package offered included a return ticket home by plane with 40 kg. of baggage, free transportation to the host village or town in Sierra Leone, and rice and oil rations for six months during the transition.¹⁰ From the 300 Sierra Leonean refugees who registered for resettlement by June 30, 2004, only 60 resettled.

The obvious question is, why did so few Sierra Leoneans choose to register with the UNHCR to repatriate to Sierra Leone, and why, out of a population of 15,000, did only 60 actually resettle? A variety of reasons can explain why Sierra Leoneans chose not to repatriate, supported by the opinions in my small questionnaire.

The idea of holding out for tomorrow, taking the “wait and see” approach, reflects the prevailing attitude of this young refugee population. Loneliness, coupled with the burden and trauma of their migration out of Sierra Leone, left many refugees feeling

¹⁰ Some complained to me that after more than 10 years away, why were they allowed to only bring 40 kg. home? Others wondered if their villages still existed. And others pointed out that this really wasn't much of an incentive. UN voluntary repatriation was not interpreted as exactly “voluntary” either since refugees were being asked to leave and squeezed out of town through soft pressure with the resident permit laws.

ambivalent about their futures. When asked about their decisions either to remain in The Gambia or to return to Sierra Leone, 27 percent responded that they did not want to remain nor did they want to return to Sierra Leone. This could represent a long-standing hope to receive refugee asylum in Europe or North America. During the war, The Gambia earned a favorable reputation as a successful place of transit out of Africa. Guinea earned a reputation as a dangerous and hostile host community, but one that was brimming with NGO services and humanitarian aid because of the more than 450,000 refugees living in camps there. The hope for asylum also reflects the continual confusion and frustration expressed by the refugees about the lack of good options and the difficulty of getting the information they needed to make informed decisions about the future. This young population also appeared to lack incentive to create change in their lives, because so often they had so few resources available to do so. Most of the young people who filled out my questionnaire were in Gambian schools and, therefore, the majority could read and write; 33 percent planned to stay in The Gambia indefinitely and 40 percent planned to return to Sierra Leone “some time in the future.”¹¹ They lacked the ability to make firm decisions about repatriation not because they were uninformed or uneducated, but for the other reasons discussed below.

Many refugees also deeply mistrusted the UNHCR for their “advice” about repatriation. One refugee from the Basse camp in The Gambia who I managed to interview told me how she had voluntarily repatriated to her Sierra Leone village in 1999 when the war was declared over, only to see fighting break out in her village where she

¹¹ A few had literate friends who helped them to fill out the questionnaire for them.

suffered serious physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the rebels. She then returned to the refugee camp in The Gambia in worse condition than when she left. Because of stories like this many Sierra Leoneans were skeptical that the war was indeed over, and that it was safe to return home.

Some Sierra Leoneans actively avoided returning home. Stories circulating from Freetown indicated that inflation and crowding had rendered living expenses sky-high, and that rents would be beyond an average worker's salary due to the international community and influx of one million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Plus news from home in Sierra Leone in general was rarely ever good. When people returned home and finally reconnected with their family or any part of their past from a decade prior, they often felt alienated. They also felt that unreasonable demands were made on them for assistance. As Abu explained, "When I finally got home after 11 years away and buried my brother and then my sister, my mother and my step-father started asking me for money." Sierra Leoneans who remained in their country during the war looked to relatives from outside for help, and Sierra Leonean refugees relied on remittances from relatives abroad in Europe or in the United States. Many of my informants decided to wait it out in The Gambia, hoping to be allowed to immigrate to the United States or Europe. Despite the fact the UNHCR issued a statement that neither UNHCR nor countries of resettlement were processing or planning on processing Sierra Leonean refugees for resettlement after June 2004, many still clung to the belief that perhaps the tide would turn and they would be granted asylum in greener pastures.

Sierra Leonean refugees did not trust the advice or information given by UNHCR staff and were skeptical of the registration process. I think this explains why so few went through the process, which involved waiting in long lines in the blazing heat, only to arrive at the front of the queue to be told that they did not have the right papers and to “come back tomorrow.” Besides being frustrating, few benefits were gained from registering. Even worse, they told me maybe if you registered, you could be found guilty of entering the country the wrong way, or at the wrong time, or under the wrong circumstances, and then you would be disqualified from something else. Fear of being sent to a refugee camp was linked with the UNHCR; Sierra Leoneans knew they were not wanted in the city, and since only 200 were registered in the camps, obviously thousands more were illegally residing in the cities. They were living as unregistered refugees, or as the UNHCR labeled them, “resident aliens.” These people did not want to be discovered and placed in refugee camps, or sent home, and so avoided registering.

Sierra Leonean refugees who were based in the Koundoum camp about three kilometers from Basse town were told that if they opted not to return to Sierra Leone by the end of the June 2004, they would be required to make their own accommodation arrangements elsewhere as the camp was to soon be closed. My single experience with the umbrella organization that oversaw the refugee camp, known as the Anglican Mission, told me more about why refugees may have reasons to distrust or fear NGOs and UN-affiliated organizations. In the summer of 2001, I attempted to get permission to visit Koundoum by making an appointment with the mission headquarters in Banjul. I was told to bring a letter of affiliation from my academic institution. I had carefully

traveled with such a letter of introduction signed and sealed by the Chair of the Anthropology Department at Boston University just for such instances. I also brought my Ford Foundation pre-dissertation research grant proposal to show my areas of research in the field. I met with the Mission Director and was asked over and over again the intended purpose of my visit to the refugee camp, despite my letters and my explanation that the purpose of my research was focused primarily on urban refugees. Having worked for the United Nations World Food Program (UNWFP) in refugee camps in Guinea, I wanted a comparative perspective, if only for a couple of days. She told me she would get back to me.

Not wanting to waste time waiting for what I assumed would be a favorable response, I headed up-country through Georgetown on my way to Basse town. Once in town I called the Mission again from a pay phone and was told again they could neither confirm nor deny my request, but that I should keep waiting. Instead, I decided to borrow a bike from some Peace Corps Volunteers in town and check out Professor Parker Shipton's former anthropology research site near Basse town, in the Mandinka and Sarahule village called Koli Kunda. I decided I would drop off some articles he had written about notions of savings and loans in the area, along with a pile of his photographs, and bring his greetings from Boston. The overnight trip gave me the opportunity to experience a rural Gambian village and also connected me to the legacy of anthropologists' long-term connection to their field sites. The villagers were equally amused and pleased when I unexpectedly showed up sweaty and rain drenched to tell

them that, “Parker sent me!” They proudly showed me Parker’s namesake, the finest female cow in the village!

The following morning, on my return to Basse town, I passed the refugee camp of Koundoum and stopped to chat with the Sierra Leoneans by the side of road. Soon I was invited to come sit down under the shade of a nearby veranda and chat. Within 10 minutes, however, the Sierra Leonean “camp chairman” appeared and everybody grew quiet. He asked to speak to me in private. I was escorted across the road as far away from the tarp dwellings as possible in to an empty “office” and asked who gave me permission to come. They knew who I was: “You’re the lady from Boston University!” and after much discussion, I realized that the “camp chairman” was told not to let me enter the camp or talk to anyone. I was saddened because it was clear that the camp residents wanted to talk to outsiders but were being prevented from doing so by the Anglican Mission. A few Sierra Leonean refugees told me they knew I was blocked from coming in to the camp, but that they would like to meet me in town the next day in secrecy. We set up a meeting time in Basse town and five Sierra Leoneans showed up, four of them women.

These interviewees in the Koundoum camp felt their rights were being violated by the organizations that were supposed to protect them.¹² According to the Sierra Leonean camp refugee women I interviewed that summer, sexual assault and violence in the camp

¹² Upon return to Boston University, I learned that anthropologist Marc Sommers wrote a report for Human Rights Watch about the human rights abuses/violations taking place in the camp by the administration overseeing the camp. He said in effect, nothing was done about it, except now the Anglican Mission allows no researchers into the camp. He said, “They probably freaked out when they saw another anthropologist from Boston University coming their way. Sorry if I screwed that up for you.”

itself was a constant threat. A growing survival strategy for camp women was urban migration in search of employment. They worked as bar maids and waitresses, but even more often, they worked as prostitutes. If marriage was not a possibility, young women preferred leaving the sexual exploitation of the camp for the independence and income of being a sex worker in the cities.

One woman I interviewed described how NGO workers in charge of the refugee camp practiced a policy of food and clothing “promises” to young women in exchange for their affection. Another woman I interviewed explained to me that nowhere was safe for female refugees. She told me her traumatic story of repatriation. In 1997, when war briefly ceased in Sierra Leone, thousands of refugees returned home with the help of the UNHCR. This woman returned to her Mende village only to be raped by soldiers. After three short-lived months of peaceful stability, the rebel forces resumed fighting. She was forced to return to the refugee camp poorer and more destitute than before. She told me how she now views “safety” in relative terms. For some refugee women prostitution is a coping mechanism in the harsh environment in which they live. Since the Gambian villages and cities lacked the social support networks catering to refugees’ physical and mental health needs, many sought alternative adaptive (and maladaptive) strategies of resilience.

Forms of Social Support for Resident Aliens

During my six months of United Nations development work in the spring of 2000 in Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugee camps in rural Guinea (the Gueckedou region), I

identified clear distinctions between registered refugees living in camps and unofficial (unregistered) refugees living in cities. In interviews with UNHCR staff and Sierra Leoneans I discovered that most refugees identified themselves as “self-settled migrants” and thus were ineligible for the UNHCR umbrella of humanitarian aid. Relatively few received structured aid from relief agencies, while many relied on support from family and friends abroad. Many Krio Sierra Leoneans relocating to Serekunda and Bakau in The Gambia had high school degrees and sought jobs in trade, such as selling music, clothes, and local wares in the Serekundakaw market, or as high school teachers in Gambian public schools. By contrast, camp refugees lacked the economic opportunities of the city, became dependent on the government for support and subsistence, and risked developing a sense of ‘learned helplessness’ (Harrell-Bond, 1999). In the next section, I show how, and to what degree, social support systems affected refugee social cohesion and/or assimilation into host communities.

Other forms of social support outside of the institutionalized NGOs were Sierra Leonean youth clubs (there were about 15 in Serekunda at the time of the survey). These were sports and social clubs geared primarily to males between the ages of 17 and 35; they had fancy or jaunty names such as “The Pace Setters,” “No Limits,” “All Walks of Life,” and “Cotton Tree Heritage.”¹³ Recently an all-Sierra Leonean Muslim Jaamat had been formed in Serekunda center, on the outskirts of Banjul, whose purpose was to teach the Koran, and not to offer social and sports activities such as dancing and soccer. Many

¹³ The Cotton tree in central Freetown is adjacent to the Sierra Leonean Court House, and as the symbol of Freetown it is also prominently featured on the 5,000 Leone paper bill.

of these clubs and social associations also belong to the Sierra Leonean Union SLENU.¹⁴ This umbrella organization, started in the 1980s in The Gambia by Sierra Leoneans, became a powerful force to mobilize and educate Sierra Leoneans regarding refugee status and Gambian laws and regulations. The Gambian State and the United Nations often communicate via the SLENU to reach the Sierra Leonean population. While social clubs and activities are a lively and powerful force in among Sierra Leoneans in The Gambia, humanitarian aid organizations such as NGOs and refugee organizations are not. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, relatively few humanitarian “development” organizations operated in The Gambia because it had few “official” refugees (those living in its single refugee camp): now that the refugee camp has closed there are even fewer. International and Gambian aid organizations have rarely funded programs for Sierra Leoneans. Furthermore, they seem to have concentrated on the rural populations up country rather than within the cities where most refugees actually live (2001, UNHCR Report).

Returning to the topic of my research questionnaire about forms of associations, clubs, and social support for refugees living in The Gambia, 8 percent of the 88 informants belonged to an urban Hunting society, and all of these had fled Sierra Leone and migrated to The Gambia without family members or friends. For the Sierra Leonean refugee youth, especially the unmarried and unengaged group with no family network, the Hunting societies provided a stable, and at times, a critical surrogate family.

¹⁴ Other social clubs include AWOL (All Walks of Life), Sierra Leone Muslim Jaamat, Sierra Leonean Club, Elite Club, The Pace Setters, Sierra Friends, No Limit, Leonnex, Marines, Bassama (Kono for Unity), Freetown Players, Cotton Tree Heritage, and Sierra Stars (in honor of F.C. Kallon, a footballer whose national team was organized under United Clubs Union (2001).

As Abu, a young Sierra Leonean Muslim, separated from his girlfriend at the Gambian border (his girlfriend was allowed to pass but he was sent back to get different papers in Conakry) explained to me:

When I finally entered The Gambia I had nothing. No family, no contacts, no relations, and no understanding what to do next. One day to my surprise I saw the familiar devils [masked dancers] come out in Banjul as I was strolling. It was the very same devils! The very same Hunting! The men were singing the Yoruba songs just like those from Freetown! I decided to join one a few weeks later. I was so happy to learn that something from Sierra Leone that I knew from before was also in The Gambia.

Abu is still a member of Igi Iroko Hunting society and has lived in The Gambia since 1994.¹⁵ He returned once for the burial of his sister and brother in Freetown after more than 10 years. He stayed for about six months and then decided that it was less expensive and less stressful living in The Gambia as a wood carver so he returned. Upon his return he carried with him two carved head-pieces for his Igi Iroko Hunting society and had over 40 neckties sewn for the Thanksgiving ceremony to celebrate the society's 30th anniversary.

Given The Gambia's lack of institutionalized humanitarian aid and social support for refugees (mainly of Sierra Leonean, Guinea-Bissau, and Liberian descent) and the relatively few refugees living in camps,¹⁶ it seems that urban Hunting societies could offer key insight into the lives of Sierra Leonean refugees and how they supported each

¹⁵ Mohammed, my host father, had introduced me to Abu years ago and he was one of my main informants and friends in the Hunting societies. He helped me in the field both in The Gambia and upon his brief return visit to Freetown in 2005.

¹⁶ One camp, Koundom Basse, for Sierra Leoneans, closed in June 2004, and another for Senegalese refugees from the Casamance civil unrest remains open.

other and built trusting relations in The Gambia. This is the basis for my doctoral dissertation on trust building in post-conflict West Africa.

Conclusion

In this article, I showed how Sierra Leonean refugees live as “resident aliens” in urban Gambia and how the UNHCR and social support structures affect their lives. I began by exploring some stories of the dangers and disruptions of migration that were collected from young refugees. I then outlined various forms of employment, entertainment among the (mostly undocumented) refugees, and some of the reasons they are mistrustful of UNHCR and of the possibility of returning home. As refugees who are ‘betwixt and between’, they have an affinity for the entrustment characteristics of urban Hunting as a substitute “family” that provides a home away from home.

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