EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

African Refugee History

Introduction

In *Purity and Exile* (1995a), Liisa Malkki's ethnography of Burundian Hutu refugees living in mid-1980s Tanzania, Malkki draws attention to a complex and paradoxical relationship between refugees and history. As Malkki argues, the global system of nation-states, composed of national governments, United Nations bodies, and humanitarian agencies, all present "the refugee" as a kind of victim, one who has been expelled from a national and natural "home." This point implies that "the refugee problem" is a recurring phenomenon that may be solved through proper management of this system, and without knowledge of specific histories that generate particular contexts of displacement. Most academic work in the interdisciplinary domain of refugee studies reproduces this managerial, ahistorical, and indeed, apolitical perspective.[1] Nevertheless, as Malkki's study demonstrates, historical knowledge—both in the sense of knowledge about the past and of knowledge about how people narrate the past in the present—may be immensely important for comprehending the dynamics within a given displaced community and for enabling displaced people to pursue their desired futures. From this standpoint, Malkki calls for a "radically historicizing" approach to refugees and displacement, an approach that "insists on acknowledging not only human suffering but also narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory" (Malkki 1996:398).[2]

In the twenty-five years since Malkki's foundational publication, scholars across the social sciences and humanities have developed overlapping critiques of humanitarian government, including the system for governing refugees, now often referred to as "the international refugee regime." Nevertheless, most of this critical literature does not address Malkki's central argument about history, refugees, and displacement. Focused on the manner in which humanitarian "biopolitics" allegedly strips people of the capacity to act politically, scholars often look past the political ambitions and historical

subjectivities of refugees and others thought to have been so stripped.[3] In the process, "the refugee" is reconstituted as a generic type, and displaced peoples' differing locations within, and responses to, the refugee regime become seemingly insignificant details.[4] Little has changed in this regard since 2015, amid heightened public controversy over refugees in the European Union, the United States, and elsewhere. Although scholars have examined refugee issues with renewed vigor, they have focused far more attention on the biological needs of refugees and the biopolitics of refugee management than they have on unique refugee histories or on the historical construction of "the refugee."

Perhaps more striking than ahistorical studies of refugees among scholars broadly is the paucity of good historical work on refugees within the discipline of history itself. As Peter Gatrell observes in his monograph *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, there is a "general absence of refugees in historical scholarship" (Gatrell 2013:11; see also Gatrell 2016). Moreover, "the social history of population displacement in sub-Saharan Africa" is especially "uncultivated"—a striking point when one considers that, for the past sixty years, much of the world's refugee (not to mention internally displaced) population has lived in Africa, and that many refugees living in Europe and North America today have traveled there from Africa. Gatrell ventures several explanations for the current state of refugee historiography, including the observation that while refugees are discussed in the records of organizations that have administered them, refugee voices are highly constrained in these and other archives (Gatrell 2013:250; see also Malkki 1996). Beyond this point, it is worth noting that the nation, the still dominant framework of much historiography, tends to present human mobility according to a limited set of logics—logics that may offer little insight into the diverse motivations and interwoven histories that have compelled people to cross international borders.[5] Moreover, African history, the sub-discipline that one might expect to historicize African refugees, has given relatively little attention to mass displacement since 1960, due, at least in part, to the logistical and political complexities of studying postcolonial history in many African contexts (Cooper 2002:xi–xii; Ellis 2002; Lee 2010, 2011). As a result, even scholarship which presents African refugees historically tends to render a global history of humanitarian interventions *on behalf of* refugees, offering much less attention to refugees themselves with their unique experiences of displacement and varying relationships to the term "refugee" (see, e.g., Loescher 2001; Barnett 2013).

Nevertheless, there are rich veins of scholarship now emerging at the interface of anthropology, African history, and refugee studies on these and related topics. To begin, one might return to Malkki's *Purity and Exile* and other extended ethnographic research with displaced Africans (Harrell-Bond 1986; Hyndman 2000; Sommers 2001; Englund 2002; Agier 2008, 2011; Lubkemann 2008; Turner 2010; Jaji 2011; Abdi 2015; Williams 2015; Besteman 2016; Ikanda 2018a, 2018b). Collectively, these texts make two key contributions to refugee history. First, they draw from refugee voices to

present richly detailed accounts of various places where refugees and other displaced people have lived, especially camps. In so doing, they illuminate a key space in the global system of refugee management, especially as that system has unfolded in Africa, complicating claims made by Giorgio Agamben (1998) and others about "the camp" by tracing how different groups of displaced people have responded to different camp environments. Second, these texts often return to the significance of history as a resource for displaced people, seeking to make meaning, construct identities, and negotiate relationships in various sites of displacement and repatriation. Much of this work focuses on refugees whom anthropologists have accessed through participant observation fieldwork in camps since the 1980s, thus mirroring the shallow historical foundation of scholarship on refugees generally. Nevertheless, these ethnographies contribute to understanding how particular groups of people have experienced displacement and refugee status at particular locations and moments in time.

Beyond this ethnographic literature, there is new historical work that traces Africans seeking refuge over longer periods. As Brett Shadle maintains in his chapter outlining this emerging scholarship, "seeking refuge" focuses attention not on "some singular category of 'refugee,'" but rather on the process through which "one leaves a home… and creat[es] and renegotiate [es] social relationships in a place of relative security and promise" (2019:249). As such, the field responds, implicitly at least, to Terence Ranger's earlier call to "place forced migration back into the flow of social history" (1994:279). Indeed, Africans created livelihoods and responded to crises through migration long before European colonization, and colonialism often had little impact on these long-standing migration practices, even as it created new reasons for people to leave their homes as Africans fled European conquest and entered the colonial economy (Lubkemann 2008:4–5; Gatrell 2013:223–24; Rosenthal 2015). In such contexts, it is misleading to describe refugees as passive objects, whose movement has merely been "forced," for even in the most imposing of circumstances, people make choices about how to move, reflecting pathways and networks established over time (Lubkemann 2008). This point has methodological implications as well. As several scholars have noted, examining international border crossing as a social process requires attending to the personal narratives of individuals whose movements are often unintelligible within nationalist frameworks and, therefore, excluded from, or misapprehended by, the archives that nations produce (Englund 2002; Barrett 2009; Williams this issue).[6] It follows that life history interviews and biographical writing are crucial to the historical study of Africans seeking refuge.

Finally, there is work emerging that examines the international refugee regime and the construction of the global category "refugee" from African historical perspectives. As many scholars have narrated, the international system for governing refugees became standardized in the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe, as the Allied powers managed people whom the war had displaced there, resulting in the United Nations Convention

Relating to the Status of Refugees and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1951 (see Malkki 1996:497–503; Loescher 2001:21–49).[7] Nevertheless, it was only through applying this system amid decolonization in Asia and Africa that the refugee regime became truly international and the term refugee became meaningful for much of the world. Indeed, as Joanna Tague emphasizes in her monograph (2019), Africa's 1960s and 1970s were crucial years for the international refugee regime's development—a period when hundreds of thousands of Africans were compelled to cross international borders and yet fit awkwardly within the UNHCR's mandate and international refugee law (see also Glasman 2017). In turn, Africans constructed what it meant to be a refugee as legal terms created for displaced people in post-war Europe took on new meanings in the midst of nation-building projects in early postcolonial Africa (Panzer 2013; Rosenthal 2015; Tague 2019; Williams 2020). African refugee crises figure prominently in UNHCR debates about the organization's role during these years, leaving a substantial and significant body of archival sources for scholars to trace (Ibhawoh this issue). At the same time, African perspectives on refugee identity may best be gleaned through fieldwork that draws local memories and far flung archives into conversation with one another.[8]

The articles published in this Forum on African refugee history draw from, and contribute to, all three of these streams of research. In their articles, Bonny Ibhawoh [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.43] and Christian Williams [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.89] draw attention to the enduring significance of refugee crises on the continent during the latter half of the twentieth century. Ibhawoh focuses on the Nigeria-Biafra War and the 4000 children whom relief agencies airlifted from Biafra to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire in 1968 and who were (partially) repatriated by the UNHCR two years later. Representations of these children were hotly contested at the time, with the Nigerian government and its allies presenting the children as "Nigerian evacuees" and the Biafran authorities and their allies presenting the children as "Biafran refugees." As Ibhawoh emphasizes, this case highlights an important moment in the history of humanitarianism, for there was little precedent for the UNHCR in determining refugee status and managing repatriation in Africa before the Biafran crisis. Moreover, the article illuminates the political interests shaping how a range of international organizations and nation-states depicted these 4000 children, offering a critical perspective on a then-emerging global humanitarian discourse and suggesting the importance of histories drawn from, and centered on, refugees.

Williams, in turn, presents such a refugee-centered history, focused on the biography of one former refugee child, Mawazo Nakadhilu. Born to a Namibian refugee father and a Tanzanian mother near Kongwa, Tanzania, in 1972, Mawazo lived with her mother's family until 1983, when her father's exiled liberation movement, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), first relocated her to a camp in Zambia and later "repatriated" her to Namibia just prior to the country's political independence in 1990. It

follows that Mawazo has sought refuge and been entangled in others' refuge seeking over many years, perhaps especially in Namibia, where tenuous links to family and SWAPO have undermined her ability, and the ability of other "struggle children," to make a home. By tracing these dynamics, the article highlights legacies of refugee flows during Southern Africa's decolonization and the potential of biographical work to bring such widely overlooked histories and legacies to light.

Duduzile Ndlovu [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.65], Maarten Bedert [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.51], and Katherine Luongo [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.42] shift our focus to more recent episodes of refuge seeking, pointing to displaced Africans' lives and historical narratives of displacement constructed over the past two decades. Ndlovu focuses on displaced Zimbabweans now living in Johannesburg and how they narrate the *Gukurahundi* violence which the Zimbabwean government perpetrated on its own citizens in Matabeleland from 1981 to 1987. In particular, she highlights the evolving narratives of two organizations, the Zimbabwe Action Movement (ZAM) and the Mthwakazi Liberation Front (MLF), both of which have emphasized atrocities perpetrated on ethnic Ndebele during the Gukurahundi, but have offered competing visions for the future, with ZAM emphasizing the need to create a reconciled Zimbabwe and MLF advocating for an independent Ndebele nation. As Ndlovu maintains, these historical narratives present visions of home shaped by contexts of displacement, including not only the space in which her research participants have lived (the focus of most ethnographic work on refugees) but also events over space and time. Such historical processes and shifting identities tend to be overlooked in literatures aimed at managing displaced people whose nation and "home" are assumed, but they may be traced through research that attends to historical narration.

Bedert draws us back to West Africa, highlighting experiences of refugees from Côte d'Ivoire living in Liberia between 2011 and 2013 in the aftermath of Côte d'Ivoire's contested 2010 elections. As he explains, across the Upper Guinea Coast, migrants have long been incorporated into communities through relationships between those seen as "landlords" and others seen as "strangers." Nevertheless, the label "refugee" has tended to prevent recently displaced Ivoirians from being fully accepted as strangers by their Liberian hosts, reducing them "to a distant and essentialized Other" in a border region with deep histories of cross-border migration. These dynamics, Bedert contends, are easily overlooked by national and international programs aimed at managing refugee populations, but they may be traced through ethnographic research focused on individual refugees seeking to incorporate themselves into host communities.

Finally, Luongo discusses Africans seeking refuge outside the continent, focusing on individuals applying for political asylum in Canada and Australia on the premise that they are "perceived witchcraft practitioners" or "victims of witchcraft." As Luongo explains, over the past two decades, African asylum seekers have increasingly constructed personal histories that present witches

and their victims "as people with a well founded fear of being persecuted" because they belong to "a particular social group" (PSG). In so doing, they appeal to the vaguest and most contested criteria of the 1951 UN Convention, drawing from precedent in recent years to expand the definition of PSG along cultural lines. Although Canada and Australia have very different approaches to adjudicating such cases, marked by efforts to apply human rights law and deter asylum applicants respectively, both countries are similarly incapable of evaluating the risks of witchcraft-related violence among asylum seekers because of immigration officials' insufficient knowledge of the contexts in which the applications are framed and general incredulity towards witchcraft. Thus, Luongo contends, officials should appeal to relevant ethnographic and legal expertise so that they may apply the UN Convention more justly to such asylum seekers.

It follows, then, that across far-flung contexts and different threads of argument, the authors here address the importance of historicizing refugees through engagement with Africa. In so doing, they trace emerging contours and potential lines of flight for African refugee history, a field long overdue and with much to contribute in years to come.

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Notes

1. Liisa Malkki develops this point most fully in her essay "Refugees and Exile" (1995b).

2. Malkki also develops this point in *Purity and Exile*, 8–14.

3. In analyzing humanitarian biopolitics, social scientists are working, above all, with arguments advanced by philosophers Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben (see Foucault 1979; 2003:249–53; Agamben 1998).

4. For related critiques, see Malkki 2002; Dunn 2012; Williams 2014; Ikanda 2018a, 2018b.

5. See here Malkki on "the national order of things" (1995a; 1995b) and other scholars (e.g., Lubkemann 2008, Jansen & Löfving 2009) who have also worked with this notion to discuss displacement across national borders.

6. Harri Englund, Michael Barrett, and Christian Williams's arguments overlap with a seminal essay by Emanuel Marx, in which Marx emphasizes that "the social world" of refugees should be constructed beginning with the individual (see Marx 1990).

7. As Gil Loescher notes, the League of Nations appointed the first High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921, but the contemporary organizational and legal framework for managing refugees was only established from 1951 (2001:21–22).

8. See Joanna Tague's discussion of the significance of uncovering "fugitive narratives" for historical scholarship on refugees (2019:13).