

Losing Place

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LOSING PLACE

*Refugee Populations and Rural Transformations
in East Africa*

Johnathan Bascom



Berghahn Books
NEW YORK • OXFORD

First published in 1998 by

Berghahn Books

Editorial offices:

55 John Street, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10038 USA
3, NewTec Place, Magdalen Road, Oxford, OX4 1RE, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bascom, Johnathan.

Losing place : refugee populations and rural transformations in
East Africa / Johnathan Bascom.

p. cm. — (Refugee and forced migration studies : v. 3)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57181-083-8 (alk. paper)

1. Refugees—East Africa. 2. Eritreans—Sudan. I. Title. II. Series.

HV640.4.S73B37 1998

97-45095

362.87'09624—dc21

CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper.

Look and see our reproach!
Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers.
Our houses to aliens.
We have become orphans without a father,
Our mothers are like widows.
We have to pay for our drinking water,
Our wood comes to us at a price,
Our pursuers are at our necks;
We are worn out, there is no rest for us.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah 5:1b-5

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Preface

May 24, 1993 ... That morning the world woke to the news of a brand new nation. The longest war in modern African history was finally over. What began as an isolated skirmish on the arid lowlands of northern Ethiopia in September of 1961 ended with official independence at midnight. Benign rockets splayed light and sound overhead as throngs of people danced through the streets of Asmara, the new capital. The new country is Eritrea ... *but* most of the exiled population has yet to return home. This book is about the experience of these refugees and many other displaced populations living in rural areas throughout the developing world.

Refugee flight, settlement, and repatriation are not static, self-contained, or singular events. Instead, they are three stages of an ongoing process made and mirrored in the lives of real people. For that reason, there is an evident need for historical and longitudinal studies of refugee populations that rise above description and trace the process of social transformation during the “full circle” of flight, resettlement, and the return home.¹ This book will probe the economic forces and social processes responsible for shaping everyday existence for refugees as they move through exile.

The plight of the Indochinese boat refugees brought into stark focus the relationship of refugee populations to global politics. We have witnessed the same in Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, and Bosnia. But refugees are caught in the web of a tightening global economy as well. The circumstances under which refugees flee are certainly not of their own choosing, but neither are the conditions under which they settle. Even rural refugees on the edge of very large countries, as in the specifics of this study, are increasingly being forced to negotiate their livelihoods from the opportunities and constraints posed by the economy into which they move. Hence there is

a greater need than ever to move beyond the bounds of a “refugee-centric” focus that represents displaced migrants as independent beings with little regard for the economic environments that they are moving out of, settling into, and returning home to.²

This book required data and evidence that were sufficiently intensive to understand the unfolding dynamics of process and power in rural communities comprised of both refugees and their hosts. This is the principal reason why concentrating on a representative field site was necessary. The bulk of the analysis was completed within a large concentration of refugees living in a border area outside the protection and assistance of the United Nations. Refugees in camps or official settlements are buffered by material assistance and physical location. Unassisted refugees, however, have no choice but to satisfy the conditions of their own subsistence inside the larger processes operating within a host society.

Extensive archival research was completed at documentation centers in the United States, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and the United Kingdom. Primary data were gathered during a ten-month-long study in 1987/88 and subsequent research conducted over three weeks in 1992 and three months in 1993. The “lead” objectives for each visit to the field were as follows: to examine the relationship between agrarian transformation and refugee resettlement (1987/88); to assess refugee responses to the opportunity to repatriate back home (1992); and to explore the “terrain” within refugee households and appraise changes during the intervening five years (1993).

My field techniques included survey research with standard questionnaires, open-ended interviews with groups and individuals, oral histories for select households and ethnic groups, and participant observation among unassisted refugees. There is no need here to detail the strengths and weaknesses of these methods, but I would like to highlight a number of factors that contribute to the overall reliability of the study.³

I began field work by collecting ethnographic histories from each of seven sheiks (ethnic heads) who outlined the time and circumstances under which his sub-community arrived in Sudan. Each one identified the number of households under his jurisdiction based on a registry for dispersing subsidized sugar quotas from the government. The resulting village census corroborated with another one administered independently by a non-governmental development agency.⁴ To ensure representativeness, the number of respondents chosen for each ethnic group was kept proportional to the size of that group compared to others. In addition, interviews were interspersed throughout each residential ward as we moved from home to home.

The final numbers reflect the ratio between farmers and pastoralists among the refugee population.

All interviews were completed during the dry season months of December to June when farmers and pastoralists were in residence. Most interviews were conducted in Arabic. The assistance of university students helped me explore important events and relationships when they emerged during administration of standardized questionnaires.⁵ All three research assistants had refugee parents and grew up at the main field location. Two more factors mitigated against refugees dramatizing answers: most respondents had moved beyond the post-flight “crisis” stage and the possibility of securing assistance from a well-endowed relief agency was not at stake.

Data for this study were gathered from four principal sources:

1. *Official reports.*

Examples include colonial reports at the London School of Economics, Kew Gardens, and the Rhodes House Library in Oxford; documents from various ministries in the capitals of Khartoum and Addis Ababa, as well as from outlying regional headquarters like Gedaref and Showak; and, project reports of various agencies such as the United Nations, World Bank, and European Economic Community.

2. *Refugee documents.*

Published and unpublished documents were collected from holdings at many documentation centers. Primary examples include the Refugee Studies Programme in the United Kingdom and the offices of the Commissioner for Refugees and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Sudan.

3. *Oral histories.*

Detailed oral histories were obtained from five representative households to illustrate different vocations, ethnic relationships, and social positions among refugees. Extended dialogues with individual members provided a way to trace their social networks, apprehend their points of most vivid identification, and construct a clearer understanding of their “life-world.”

4. *Unprinted material.*

- (a) Landsat imagery to evaluate regional land use and environmental degradation.
- (b) A market study to evaluate the scope of entrepreneurial activity occurring at the field site.

- (c) Ten representative profiles of production costs, labor requirements, and profit margins for large-scale, mechanized schemes in the hinterland surrounding the field site.

5. Interviews.

- (a) Focus interviews with groups of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds.

Extended discussions allowed me to probe important issues, clarify the meaning of local terms, and recount critical events in a small group context. They proved ideal to introduce the research project upon arrival at the primary field site, familiarize myself with changes upon subsequent returns, and test tentative conclusions with refugees themselves before leaving.

- (b) Interviews with key actors and informants.

Key actors and informants provided an opportunity to investigate important or sensitive topics. Such interviews involved, for example, meetings with the head of the local rural council, the main sheik (*nazir*) of the village, the head of the small farmer association, and operators of large mechanized schemes.

- (c) Interviews with members of the institutional hierarchy.

Interviews with civil servants, development officers, and staff members of relief agencies helped place primary data collected from households into the larger context of regional development, agricultural mechanization, and climatic change.

- (d) Interviews with survey questionnaires.

The initial field work was completed using a large, standardized questionnaire to interview the male heads of 131 Eritrean, 45 Ethiopian, and 27 Sudanese households, twenty-three percent and ten percent of the households in the refugee and indigenous community.⁶ This roster of households became the sampling frame for more interviews in 1992 and 1993. A second questionnaire, built around the topic of repatriation, was administered to a subset of 35 household heads from the original 131 Eritrean households interviewed in 1987/88. Three more questionnaires were used to appraise changes associated with age and gender: one with 15 different women chosen from the subset of 35 households; another with 20 boys and girls between the ages of ten and fifteen selected from the 35 households; a third with a sample of 10 youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. The data collected from these 283 interviews with survey questionnaires formed the basis on which to complete an in-depth and longitudinal study of social transformation in exile.

There are recursive loops of explanation throughout the text because the conceptual framework for this study focuses on junctures between different levels of analysis. But the progression of the book does involve three distinct shifts in the scale of analysis which lend form and structure to the narrative: the region, the locale, and the household.

Chapter 1 maps out the conceptual framework for approaching the process of refugee migration, building on critical themes and tensions in previous studies. Chapter 2 surveys border settings throughout East Africa where refugee populations have settled during the last three decades. It highlights patterns of military conflict, population movement, environmental degradation, and agrarian change. Chapter 3 focuses on the zone where the borders between Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia meet. It charts the making of the three economies from the colonial past to set in context what follows when refugees are “catapulted” between different economic settings.

The next part of the book becomes more focused in time, place and theme. It grounds the analysis of refugees and rural transformation to a specific location. Chapter 4 documents the process of agrarian change, prompted by the arrival of refugees and tractors in eastern Sudan. The distinction between two basic sources of livelihood among rural refugees forms the next chapter division. Chapter 5 assesses the integration of refugees who depend primarily on agricultural cultivation to secure a subsistence. Chapter 6 appraises the position of refugees who depend primarily on livestock pastoralism as a way of life. Both chapters explain the different ways in which refugee households are positioned within the local economy and host society.

Chapter 7 moves farther down in scale. It is a study of socioeconomic interaction within refugee homes to provide a clearer understanding of how rural transformation has changed the life experience of individual members, most especially women and children. My primary aim is to focus on the reorganization of gender and age relations among refugees. Chapter 8 examines refugees’ motivation and logic for deciding whether to repatriate. As we explore this question through the eyes of exiled Eritreans, the importance of rural transformation resurfaces once again. It plays a prominent role in determining the prospects for repatriation, the process which refugees reach a decision, as well as the success of reintegration in the homeland. Chapter 9 summarizes the principal findings of the study and assesses their meaning from two vantage points – their implications for future studies of refugees, and their applications for refugee policy.

Before setting off, I want to acknowledge my chief limitation. As Wilson aptly notes: “... before we (researchers) can explain and pre-

scribe, we need to understand. That involves us in working with a group, not on them, and it involves an appreciation of their history, culture, lifestyle, and life strategies. In short, it involves grounding our work in the experience of refugee groups”⁷ I have sought to ground this work in the experience of a particular group of refugees, following the “footsteps” of many individuals and households living in eastern Sudan. I am not a refugee and therefore I remain a foreigner to the acute realities of disruption, uncertainty, and hardship that refugees endure. I become more aware of this fact each time I return to Africa. And invariably, a displaced person, who is patiently answering questions, will pause to remind me that I can choose to come and when to go, but refugees can do neither.

Notes

1. V. Robinson, “Into the Next Millennium: An Agenda for Refugee Studies. A Report of the 1st Annual Meeting of the International Advisory Panel, January 1990,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 3 (1990): 13.
2. R. Chambers, “Rural Refugees in Africa: What the Eye Does Not See,” *Disasters* 3 (1979); Robinson, “Into the Next Millennium.”
3. On method, see A. Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (London, 1984); B. Harriss, “Analysing the Rural Economy – A Practical Guide,” Discussion Paper No. 164 (School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, 1984); C. Marshall and G. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research* (London, 1984); J. Pretty, RRA Notes – Proceedings of RRA Review Workshop, No. 7 (Sussex, 1989); M. Miles, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods* (London, 1994).
4. Save the Children, USA completed an unpublished population estimate of 9,597 for early 1987 that agrees with my own estimate of 9,534 late in the same year. See census on page 194.
5. My primary research assistant completed his undergraduate studies in rural sociology at Gezira University between 1986 and 1993. He is an Eritrean refugee from a pastoral family, with whom my wife and I lived for five months. The other two research assistants were also university students. One, the son of a Sudanese merchant and an Eritrean mother, completed his undergraduate degree in education from the University of Khartoum between 1986 and 1993. The other, a refugee and daughter of a prominent civil judge from Eritrea, completed her degree in family and child development at Affad University in 1993.
6. Ten percent of the field site community is from Ethiopia rather than Eritrea. The Ethiopian community is comprised of Amhara, Tigrean, and Wollgeyiet. They are former land owners and their families who fled during a nationalization campaign in 1975 and 1976; young single men who have deserted the army, evaded conscription, or abandoned a refugee camp elsewhere in Sudan; and young single women who are widowed, divorced, or separated. These people are a far more definite minority than their Eritrean counterparts, symbolized by their Coptic faith and by their homes around the market, both of which isolate them from the community at large.
7. Wilson, cited in Robinson, “Into the Next Millennium”, 12.

Abbreviations

ABS	Agricultural Bank of Sudan
CERA	Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs
COR	Office of the Commissioner for Refugees (Sudanese)
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front
ICARA	International Conference on Assistance to African Refugees
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MFC	Mechanized Farming Corporation (Sudanese)
OAU	Organization of African Unity
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

Acknowledgments

My appreciation begins with the community, both refugees and Sudanese, in the village of Wad el Hileau. Four persons in particular played important roles in the success of this project: Mecca opened her home to us, while Hamid Ahmed el Amin, Abdul Hakim Ali el Amin, and Kaltoum Idris Totil offered tireless enthusiasm and research assistance. Scholars at the University of Khartoum were a source of indispensable assistance.

I deeply appreciate the advice, counsel, and friendship of numerous professional colleagues, most notably Mike McNulty, Abdi Samatar, Barbara Harrell-Bond, and Leo Zonn. Several institutions provided financial assistance at different stages of the project. The initial fieldwork was completed with a Fulbright-Hays grant from the International Institute for Education and a dissertation support grant from the National Science Foundation. Smaller grants from the American Philosophical Society and East Carolina University supported a second study. Another National Science Foundation grant funded the necessary follow-up field work to complete this book, and a Research Scholar Fulbright-Hays grant provided support for a summer of archival research in Oxford, England. Pat Guyette, Becky Moye, Tim Bascom, Brian Andrews, and Chad Delp gave indispensable reference, administrative, and graphic help. At East Carolina University, I have been privileged to work with a superb group of colleagues in the geography department.

Our friendships with “the group” in Iowa City, the CPC family in Greenville, and the Longwood neighborhood have been a source of welcome delight amid our treks. Some must bear mention by name for time, prayer, gifts, or laughter: the Minges, Bourdeauxs, D’Amatos, Bechtolds, Kimmels, Prices, Carl Brannan, and four generations of Bascoms. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the four persons with whom I am closest: Betsy Page Bascom, my life companion and fellow traveler during three arduous stints of fieldwork; Ethan and Joanna, fountains of great joy for us; and, the One most deserving of praise – the God who *is* really Here.

Credits

The illustrator for this book is Tim Bascom.

The map of the principal field site is adapted from an original rendering by Tom Killion.

All other maps are the work of cartographer, Brian Andrews.

Permissions to use revised material from four venues are gratefully acknowledged. Portions of the following pieces have been reworked and updated after their first publication in view of additional field work that I conducted in Sudan:

“Food, wages and profits: Mechanized schemes and the Sudanese state.” *Economic Geography*, Vol. 66, No. 2, pp. 140–55 (April 1990).

“The peasant economy of refugee resettlement in eastern Sudan.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 83, No. 2, pp. 320–46 (June 1993).

“Border pastoralism in eastern Sudan.” *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4, pp. 401–15 (October 1990).

“The dynamics of refugee repatriation: The case of Eritreans in eastern Sudan.” In *Population Migration and the World Order*, Gould, B. and Findlay, A. (eds), pp. 225–48, Sussex: John Wiley & Sons (June 1994).

1

Introduction

As you open this book, consider one enormous fact: something like 1 in every 135 of us on Planet Earth is a displaced person – at least 41 million of us; 17 million refugees outside their own countries, something like another 24 million internally uprooted.

Erskine Childers
Refugees: Rationing the Right of Life

Although the number of empirical studies on the integration of refugees is increasing rapidly, there is a dearth of theoretical reflection – at least as far as the specific problems of coping with refugee flows in the Third World are concerned.

Tom Kuhlman
The Economic Integration of Refugees in Developing Countries

Africa enjoys an unenviable reputation as the home of poverty, starvation, and displaced populations. Contemporary news stories center on crisis events, so almost inevitably the dominant characterization of the continent's woes telescopes into the grave image of a single, distraught refugee languishing in an isolated region.

A visual image conveys an essence to its viewers, but pictures, shorn as they are of context, are hollow. The same can be true of a written depiction. Attempts to explain problems and processes associated with refugees often dissipate into description, and descriptive studies fall short of providing a coherent and purposeful analysis of the interplay between the forces of change, choice, and context in refugee life experiences – analysis that would help in deriving practical ways to provide relief and assistance.

Conceptual differences are not merely academic. They generate contrasting analyses of the problems that lead to policies and pro-

Notes for this section begin on page 11.

grams that affect people's lives. I have chosen a perspective that relies on recent theoretical developments in social theory, economic geography, and peasant studies. The prime characteristics of my framework are a central concern with the transformation of rural economies grounded in an historical approach. Its chief characteristics include the role of the state, different responses by household units to changes within the relations of production and of exchange, and sensitivity to narrative accounts of events, decisions, and choices by the participants.

In practice, there have been few attempts to identify refugees' structural position within host societies or relate their integration to larger socioeconomic processes at work in agrarian settings.¹ But using a perspective that is more fully cognizant of the transformation of peasant and pastoral economies can strengthen refugee analysis. It provides a basis from which to explain the logic of survival strategies adopted by refugees; explicate the material roots of social tension between refugees and the host community; understand land management practices and labor allocation strategies adopted by refugees; make a more discriminating and considered evaluation of refugees' net impact – contributions and burdens – upon a regional economy; determine more effective policies for resettlement by apprehending mechanisms of impoverishment that impinge on refugees; and predict differential responses by refugees to repatriation opportunities.

This type of approach is particularly appropriate in view of new contextual variables that amplify the complexity of refugee movements in a tightening global economy. Refugee movements are more and more conditioned by identifiable social forces housed at different scales of analysis – global, regional, local, household, and individual. Hence, the basic objective of this study is to place the complexities of everyday life for rural refugees into a larger context, both in time and in social “space.” Our basic method will be to explicate the changing dynamics of structure, process, and power that weave rural transformation together with refugee flight, settlement, integration, and repatriation. This emphasis differs from other studies that focus on patterns, typologies, and measurement. The brief review in the next few pages clarifies the components of my conceptual “lens” and specifies basic tools for analysis.

The Theoretical Challenge

A spate of research is rapidly replacing a previous paucity of academic interest in refugees. Anthropologists are challenging the stereo-