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## **Remittances as informal aid: Livelihoods and migration in a Liberian refugee camp**

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## **Introduction**

When I arrived at the Buduburam Liberian refugee settlement in Ghana at the end of 2008 to study household economies, many Liberians had been living there in exile since 1990. While the earliest years of the camp included the full provision of humanitarian food aid, Buduburam had since evolved into a long-term or protracted refugee situation accompanied over time by significant reductions in aid. Many international institutions had shifted their focus from aid to development, while many refugees continued to struggle to make ends meet. Within this context, the resettlement of Liberians to wealthier countries enabled the distribution of financial remittances, money sent through a delivery service such as Western Union, to some of those who remained at Buduburam and provided an important, though contested source of aid.

This paper examines the implications of the shift from a formal system of humanitarian aid to an informal, personal system of aid based on the use of transnational financial remittances. My analysis explores how remittances, which functioned as key components of refugee livelihoods, altered social structures and opportunities within the context of refugee migration. My primary argument is that remittances reinforced desires for refugee resettlement to the U.S. and exacerbated long-standing inequalities between Liberians with connections to “America” and those without.

The analytic framework for this paper builds upon Voutira and Harrell-Bond’s (1995) relational sets of power within refugee camps. Voutira and Harrell-Bond outlined seven possible relational sets of power between refugees, hosts, aid organizations, governments, and international governing bodies. This paper proposes a new relational set of power especially characteristic of the long-term camp: the informal aid relationship between Liberian refugees and their transnational family and friends. Using Wolf’s (1999) concepts of interpersonal, organizational, and structural power to analyze ethnographic data on the intimate details of refugee livelihoods and migratory options, I chart the various layers of inequality that frame the long-term refugee experience and demonstrate some of the risks associated with unexamined shifts in aid programming.

This paper is divided into four sections, preceded by a brief discussion of research methodology. The first section presents a brief overview of the historic relationship between Liberia and the United States and demonstrates the impact of this relationship upon categories of social status in Liberia. The second section presents a brief history of humanitarian aid provisions at the Buduburam camp and draws upon interviews with aid professionals to outline the recent history of food aid policy and provisions at Buduburam, including the reduction of food aid in the context of the long-term camp. The third section explores how transnational financial remittances marked a representative shift from formal to informal aid at Buduburam and in doing so, introduced new power relations and distinctions within the camp and transnationally. The fourth section considers the relationship between remittances and migration and frames the Liberian refugee desire for resettlement as an outcome of a transnational class system. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of some of the challenges and implications of using remittances as an informal aid strategy and engine for development.

## *Research methodology*

Research for this paper was conducted at the Buduburam Liberian refugee camp in Ghana from December 2008 to June 2009. Prior exploratory research was conducted from May to July 2005. As an anthropologist, I developed a research methodology that made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. During each research trip I resided at the camp, first with a host family and later in a house rented from a refugee who had repatriated to Liberia. The first phase of research in 2008 consisted of semi-structured interviews in thirty-one households. These interviews focused on all aspects of the household food economy and were used to develop an ethnographic measure for household food security and a larger Household Food Economy survey. I also conducted interviews with eleven stakeholders (UNHCR, camp management, UNHCR implementing partners, Church World Service resettlement staff, World Food Program, and several non-profit organizations).

During my research I collaborated with three research assistants, all of whom were Liberian community health workers, to carry out the Household Food Economy survey in 148 households. This survey collected data on household demographics, assets, and market practices. Additionally, the survey included administration of the 13-question food security measure that I developed and the completion of a social resource map. This resource mapping was an adaptation of a power-mapping method used to understand water resources in Ghana (Schiffer and Waale 2008). For the purposes of my research, social resource maps collected data on an individual's social relations and resource exchanges in the form of money, food, provisions, labor, and emotional/spiritual support. Participants used a bean allocation method to evaluate the weight or significance of each relationship.

To gain an in-depth understanding of livelihood and household management strategies, I conducted a month-long daily household economy recording exercise in two households. The two households were purposely selected based on similar characteristics (each household consisted of a single mother with three children) and differing access to transnational resources (one household received regular financial remittance payments, while the other did not).

In addition to these formal measures of data collection, I participated in daily life and wrote daily ethnographic field notes, including write-ups of numerous informal interviews and conversations. My neighbors were both Liberian refugees and Ghanaians and my participant-observation within a neighborhood at the camp was irreplaceable; my participation in various forms of domestic life—cleaning, washing outside, hauling water, cooking and sharing food (Liberian, Ghanaian, and American)—provided me with privileged access to camp life and serves as the foundation for this paper. To provide further context on the state of migration I traveled to Liberia, where I spent two weeks living with a family in Monrovia in May 2009.

## **Liberia, the United States, and social status**

The connection between the United States and Liberia is ensconced in a deep and often tumultuous history. Prior to the American Colonization Society's (ACS) seizure of the Monrovia colony in 1822, West Africans had developed extensive relations with international traders and missionaries and had adapted and adopted many Western goods and customs. However, the ACS's appropriation of land and creation of the colonial settlement of

Monrovia (and eventually the Liberian state) introduced deep layers of inequality between the Americo-Liberian settler elite and indigenous Africans.

The American Colonization Society (ACS), a private organization comprising prominent men, many of whom were U.S. federal officials, set out, in their words, “to promote and execute a plan for colonizing (with their consent) the free people of color, residing in our country, [by resettling them] in Africa” (American Colonization Society 1818). ACS members were variously driven by competing ideas of Christian salvation and agendas for the continuation of slavery in the U.S. and struggled to find freed blacks, who were willing to travel to West Africa.

The few freed, primarily middle-class, blacks who opted to travel to the west coast of Africa were largely motivated by ideas of individual freedom and Christian salvation for the “heathens and pagans” in Africa (Staudenraus 1961:12). The concept of freedom that settlers carried to Africa mimicked the republicanism of the Antebellum South—“an ideology that advocated representative democracy based on an informed, land-owning politically active citizenry” (Burrowes 2001:32)—and sought to counter their experiences of pervasive racism in the U.S. (Moran 1990:58).

The history of the Americo-Liberian settlers featured prominently in the development of the Liberian Constitution, which aimed to prevent discrimination by restricting citizenship to blacks. “We were everywhere [in the U.S.] shut out from all civil office. We were excluded from all participation in the government. We were taxed without consent. We were compelled to contribute to the resources of a country, which gave us no protection. We were made a separate and distinct class, and against us every avenue to improvement was effectually closed (Liberian Constitution, quoted in Burrowes 2001:37).”

While the ideals of the Constitution aimed to prevent racism, in practice a new form of discrimination against indigenous Africans emerged based upon exclusion from the Americo-Liberian settler elite through the category of being “civilized.” Being “civilized” or *kui* (a Kru word meaning “Western”) was narrated in contrast to being “uncivilized,” “country,” “tribal,” or “native.” Being “civilized” was distinguished by education, job, income, property ownership, and social affiliations. On a daily basis, material practices of “Western” lifestyle—dress, home (furnishings and household care), food, cars, and marriage—marked “civilized” status.

The “civilized” Americo-Liberian elite restricted the political participation of indigenous, “uncivilized” Africans by denying rights to citizenship and land; indigenous Africans within the Liberia were not permitted the right to vote until 1946 (Gershoni 1985:104). Prior to this time, an indigenous African could petition to individually own land, but would have to be Christian and adopt a Western lifestyle in order to be considered for citizenship (Gershoni 1985:37-38). Early scholarly work described the “civilized” distinction as an “embryonic class structure” that allowed individuals to move up and down in the system (Fraenkel 1964). Movement happened primarily through child sponsorship: the 1836 Apprenticeship Law allowed Americo-Liberian families to have indigenous child wards that were responsible for a variety of domestic tasks and received room and board in return (Liebenow 1969:16). The ward system ranged from systems of enslavement to fostering. In some cases, wards also were sent to school and could take on the “civilized,” Americo-Liberian name of the father in the household. In this way, “uncivilized” children could attain “civilized” status, which functioned as an exclusive, albeit fluid marker of social prestige and power.

“Civilized” status could be further activated or repressed, as a person could be considered a “civilized country” man, such that being “civilized” was epitomized by settler life but was not restricted to it (Tonkin 1981:319). Likewise, men could choose an identity, Gola, Kpele, or Americo-Liberian “in order to reinforce alliances or pursue an advantage” (d’Azevedo 1970:112). These social categories have featured prominently in the recent history of Liberia. In 1980, an “indigenous” man, Sergeant Samuel Doe, a man without formal education from the Krahn ethnic group, sought to replace the dominant rule of the Americo-Liberian True Whig Party. Doe pursued power in the name of the liberation of “country” people, but subsequently followed many True Whig practices of government, including embezzlement, nepotism, corruption, and the creation of an ethnic constituency (Ellis 2007:64).

Through the creation and exploitation of ethnic identities and constituencies in opposition to the Americo-Liberian elite identity, Doe gained political support by pitting his own people, the Krahn (and later the Mandingo) against the Gio and Mano peoples, who themselves organized into ethnic patronage systems (Ellis 1995:177-178). Doe also assigned numerous government positions to his own people, creating a “Krahn hegemony” (Dunn 2009:181) that led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Liberians. In the following decades of civil war and conflict, ethnic categories were put into the service of political power (see Ellis 2007).

In 2006, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected as president, a moment that marked a peaceful transition to democracy in the eyes of international observers. However, the election process has similarly activated long-standing ethnic and Americo-Liberian diaspora status distinctions. Johnson-Sirleaf was educated at Harvard and previously worked at the World Bank, but during her election campaign she had highlighted her Gola and Kru ancestry, most notably her two illiterate grandmothers, to appeal to non-diasporan Liberians (Sawyer 2008:187).

However, once elected, Johnson-Sirleaf appointed fellow Liberians from the U.S. diaspora to key cabinet positions in the ministries of Commerce, Finance, Information, Labor, and Agriculture (Pailey 2008:np). Writing about the role of “diaspora returnees” in the Liberian government, Pailey (2008) posed a haunting question: “Could the returnees constitute a political enclave, a new constituency not based on primordial ethnic or sectarian affiliations, but based on their orientation as people who lived abroad during the war, acquired certain skills, and now have the capital and expertise with which to contribute to the country’s political development?”

The returnees have instituted a new order of social status “defined by the experience of life abroad—schools attended, associational affiliations, accents, and networks/alliances in the Diaspora” (Pailey 2008). Pailey likened the new terms of status to the old term “civilized,” and has questioned to what extent the new order has constituted a “returnee hegemony.” The Liberian social system is now defined by “deterritorialized boundaries” (Pailey 2008) that span the globe. As potential returnees to Liberia, refugees at Buduburam struggle to find their place within a Liberian social structure defined across this transnational space. As I demonstrate, both deep and recent history in Liberia frames the lives and migratory options for Liberian refugees in Ghana. The next section outlines a brief introduction to the Buduburam settlement and discusses refugee experiences as shaped through the provision of humanitarian aid.

## **The Buduburam Liberian refugee camp**

Rose, a middle-aged woman, and I sat inside the screened porch of her house, hiding from the mid-afternoon sun as we drank cold glasses of Foster Clarks tropical fruit juice drink. Rose described her journey to Ghana in 1990. She and her young son had made their way from Liberia on a Nigerian ship called the River Ollie. As the River Ollie pulled away from the coast of Liberia, warlord Prince Johnson had launched a missile at the ship, attempting to prevent it and the people on it from leaving.

As the evening set in and our conversation about the camp's history deepened, Rose pulled out photographs showing the tented days of Buduburam—a sharp contrast to the contemporary landscape of concrete block housing. In one snapshot, Rose held her son, about four years old at the time, inside their water-damaged tent. In another picture taken inside their tent, she and her son sat nearly lifeless and very sick. The next photograph, taken the morning after a storm blew their tent away, showed another scene of hardship. These were not easy times.

Although Rose referred to herself as one of the Buduburam “originals” who arrived in September 1990, the first Liberian refugees flew to Ghana in May 1990 following the outbreak of civil war near the end of 1989. Able to afford airfare, these first refugees were relatively wealthy and stayed with friends or family in Accra, the capital city of Ghana (Essuman-Johnson 1992:79-80). Consistent with scholarly literature on class-based migration orders (Van Hear 1998), the wealthiest people fled Liberia first. Then, greater numbers of refugees in need of assistance started to arrive and the Ghanaian government opened the Afienuya Training School to receive refugees in need of food, clothing, and medical assistance. Faced with logistical problems at the training school, the Ghanaian government offered the abandoned church land of Buduburam as a refugee reception site in August 1990 (Okae-Mensah 1997:72).

The Buduburam camp is located about 44 km west of Accra in the Buduburam Gomoa district and runs along the edge of the international road stretching from Togo in the east to Côte D'Ivoire in the west. The first seven refugees went to the Buduburam site on August 2, 1990 and one month later the MV Tano River ship brought another group of fifty refugees that also made their way to Buduburam. By the end of September 1990, 7,000 Liberians were living at the Buduburam camp (Okae-Mensah 1997:61). The Ghanaian government's National Reception Task Force took sole responsibility for refugees during the first three months of the camp (Assuah 2001:62).

On December 1, 1990, the UNHCR stepped in and took primary responsibility for the Liberian refugees, providing services in collaboration with Ghanaian implementing partners (Essuman-Johnson 1992:126). The Ghana Red Cross Society (a Ghanaian national organization) provided sanitation, medical, and supplemental feeding services. The National Catholic Secretariat (NCS, a national organization) of Ghana managed the World Food Programme's (WFP) wet (cooked) food distribution from 1990-1991 and the dry (uncooked) food distribution from 1991-1996. The Christian Council of Ghana (a national organization) organized educational, counseling and recreational activities. World Vision International, an international organization, maintained the camp's water supply and supported women's agricultural income-generating projects (Essuman-Johnson 1992:127).

When Liberians arrived in Ghana during the rainy season of 1990, the country did not have a national law pertaining to the treatment and care of refugees. Once the Ghanaian government requested international assistance, Liberians received *de facto* refugee status (Essuman-Johnson 1992:147). Unable to process individual applications for the large number of refugees arriving in Ghana, the UNHCR used a group determination procedure that granted *prima facie* refugee status to Liberians in Ghana and issued ID cards. *Prima facie* refugee status meant that Liberians in Ghana would receive refugee status until or unless other circumstances proved they were not refugees, as defined by the UNHCR. Group determination sped up the bureaucracy and provided refugees with quick access to urgent care and assistance.

The persistence of war in Liberia and the subsequent movement of refugees into Ghana prompted the UNHCR to open a full branch in Accra in 1993. The Ghanaian government also created a bureaucratic entity, the Ghana Refugee Board (GRB) in 1995 to advise the government on refugee policy, help determine programs for refugees with the UNHCR, and ensure that programs are in line with government policy. Headed by a chairman named by the President, the GRB consisted of representatives from the Ministries of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Education, Employment, and Social Welfare as well as the Ghana Immigration Service, Ghana Police Service, Bureau of National Investigation, and the National Mobilization Program. A representative from the UNHCR also sat on the GRB (Assuah 2001:57).

At Buduburam, the GRB funded a camp manager to oversee the day-to-day operation of the camp, while the Liberian Refugee Welfare Council (LRWC) participated more directly in the actual affairs of refugees, including providing sanitation services and hearing and resolving disputes. The chairman of the LRWC interfaced with the UNHCR, GRB, and refugees and also oversaw the twelve zonal heads appointed to each zone, or neighborhood, of the camp. All LRWC positions were voluntary and unpaid, though staff members gained non-monetary benefits, such as occasional bags of rice. Initially, the chairman of the LRWC was an elected position in 1990, but the LRWC chairman had subsequently been appointed by the camp manager.

Over time the geographic and demographic size of the camp increased, reaching 17,000 people in 1997 (Dick 2002b:12). After the resurgence of civil war in Liberia, population figures at the camp increased. However, the flexible movement of refugees through and within the camp made it difficult to establish an accurate estimate of the population. A 2007 WFP assessment reported 38,000 refugees living at Buduburam (UNHCR and WFP 2007). In 2009, the UNHCR reported a population of 24,000 at Buduburam (UNHCR 2009:196). However, the UNHCR data reflected the number of refugees possessing UNHCR ID cards and was likely an underestimation of the actual number of people living at the camp. For example, in my survey of 148 Liberian households representing 815 people, 501 (61%) had a UNHCR ID card.

The remaining population at Buduburam in 2009 faced significant migration pressure; the Ghanaian government had extended many resources, but had grown tired and impatient following a women's protest at Buduburam in 2008 that had eventually resulted in intervention from the Ghanaian police force (Butty 2008). The UNHCR encouraged voluntary repatriation as the most viable solution, especially given the United States' commitment to scale back and close resettlement programming for Liberians (Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration 2011). Eventually in June 2012, the UNHCR invoked a



cessation clause for Liberians, forcing many people to return to Liberia. Nonetheless, Omata (2013) reported a lingering population of 5,000 at Buduburam following the cessation clause.

*Humanitarian food: the provision of aid in a long-term camp*

Shifting out of the sadness of the tent photographs, Rose had handed me an old photograph of her son surrounded by a group of friends, grinning and holding a birthday cake. Rose had learned to bake in Liberia and had been able to earn a little money at the camp by baking and selling cakes for special occasions. Although the UNHCR and WFP worked with several agencies at the camp to provide basic food aid throughout the 1990s, these distributions did not fulfill all food needs; people still needed money for fresh foods, water, bathroom facilities, and household items.

In the course of nearly two decades, Rose had cycled through numerous small business and petty trade ventures to help extend her food and household resources. By the time we spoke in 2009, Rose had not received food aid in years. Here I analyze the interpersonal power dynamics that governed the implementation of food aid, and apply Wolf's concepts of organizational and structural power to show how, in the long-term context of limited and reduced humanitarian aid, food aid was inevitably linked to migratory options.

By 1997, refugees at Buduburam received half of the quantity of food aid that they received in the early 1990s (Okae-Mensah 1997:87); it was considered a supplemental food aid program, rather than providing a whole diet. To deal with the challenge of dwindling aid resources and the question of who should receive the limited aid, the humanitarian aid system at Buduburam was structurally guided by "vulnerability criteria." Vulnerability was a group-based criterion that provided aid and services—primarily food aid at Buduburam—to refugees aged sixty and above and their dependents, malnourished children and their immediate family members, people with disabilities, people with chronic or terminal illnesses (HIV, TB, cancer) and their dependents, unaccompanied minors, and socially vulnerable refugees. In each case vulnerability was assumed to lead to economic need, or in the case of the socially vulnerable category, the vulnerability *was* poverty.

Being identified as vulnerable became the means to livelihood support, but only by rendering oneself subject to the organizational power that determined these criteria. Wolf described organizational or tactical power as the "power that controls the contexts in which people exhibit their capabilities and interact with others" or the ways in which "individuals or groups direct or circumscribe the actions of others within determinate settings" (Wolf 1999:5). At Buduburam, organizational structures of aid were mobilized to determine aid eligibility. In 2003, the Ghanaian government and UNHCR opened the Social Welfare Office at the camp, which, along with UNHCR and other aid partners, saw to the general welfare of camp residents, most specifically to "vulnerable" groups. The Social Welfare Office and the LRWC both screened and referred "vulnerable" refugees and made recommendations for services to UNHCR implementing partners.

In practice, vulnerability existed as a fluid category that relied on interpersonal relationships to determine, deny, or verify the status and ultimate eligibility for food. Aid workers at Buduburam were primarily responsible for carrying out the vision and intention of providing aid to vulnerable refugees. In their seven potential relational sets of power in refugee camps, Voutira and Harrell-Bond (1995:212) argued that the aid workers who distributed the food

into the hands of refugees possessed the most power. In this exchange, interpersonal power, “the ability of an ego to impose its will on an alter in social action” (Wolf 2001:384), superseded other forms of power; humanitarian aid became personalized when the aid worker could choose to increase, decrease, or withhold aid. Indeed other scholars have demonstrated that refugees with “power, connections or money” have greater access to aid (Horst 2006:102; see also Crisp 2003:15).

The aid relationship became quickly complex as aid workers struggled to distinguish need from within an immense sea of need. Kwame, a Ghanaian aid worker who regularly referred vulnerable individuals for aid, experienced how extreme and personal the stakes of determining need can become; he struggled intensely with deciding when to give and when not, even providing money out of his own pocket. “People tell stories. Seriously, tell a lot of stories...Basically, these mothers don’t make up stories the way other people. Like today a woman came to my office saying I should please help...I saw her in the market [a few days ago], she was selling water. The bucket she was using to sell water was not even big...so you can imagine how much she was able to sell. So I called her to the office. She has two children. She was crying. How can someone who is crying lie?”

Hoping to provide aid to the most vulnerable, Kwame often had one of his staff members visit a person’s house to see the condition, which helped him to make a decision. If they had a big television or other nice things, he believed they did not need assistance. While this may have been an approximate indication, I learned that many refugees furnished their houses by accumulating things from people who resettled: material wealth did not always mean a family had the ability to access food. While some refugees sold household goods in order to buy food under dire circumstances, this reflected an extreme condition and required a willing buyer.

At the time of our interview, Kwame had recently made the decision to stop the daily allowance of a man with a severe medical condition because he felt that the man was refusing medical treatment so that he could get a daily allowance from a private international NGO working at Buduburam. Shortly after the allowance stopped, the ill man passed away. Kwame struggled immensely with his decision to stop providing assistance and lamented the imperfect knowledge upon which he made a decision to help someone. Kwame’s power at the interpersonal level was always mediated by the tactical power of “vulnerability” that governed how aid workers were expected to carry out the provision of services.

In part, Kwame’s struggle was entangled with the broader concern of discerning “true” need from “false” need so as to deter aid dependency. This sentiment was reflected in one of my interviews with another aid worker at Buduburam who stated: “a lot of refugees would be self-sufficient by now, but they have a victim syndrome—they feel they should be helped all of the time.” Institutionally, implicit concerns about dependency were weighed against the mission to provide food aid for vulnerable refugees. From the perspective of the World Food Programme (WFP), the Ghanaian officer had to balance food aid at Buduburam in relation to other food needs in Ghana. In part, the needs at Buduburam were evaluated in relation to the expectation that Liberian refugees should return to Liberia since the 2006 election of President Johnson-Sirleaf.

During an interview, a WFP program officer in Accra explained that food rations were initially scheduled to end in June 2008, but were extended to December 31, 2008. The WFP gradually reduced its list of “vulnerable” recipients, but at the end of 2008, a WFP

implementing partner had a list of 8,063 vulnerable refugees, representing approximately 51% of the Liberian refugee population (UNHCR 2008:92). In March 2009, the WFP and UNHCR each notified the settlement via letter—posted throughout the camp and at the four food distribution “kitchens” at Buduburam—that food aid distribution would end after June 2009. Even though the WFP implementing partner still had a list of 5,806 refugees (about 24% of the officially refugee population) who were eligible to receive food aid in May 2009, the last food distribution at Buduburam took place just before I left in June 2009 (UNHCR 2009).

The uncertainty and fluctuation within food aid policies was linked to the political situation of Liberian refugees and the policies that governed their migratory futures. In looking at the various institutional explanations for the extensions of food aid at Buduburam, the connection between food aid and the policy preference for voluntary repatriation of Liberian refugees becomes clear. To start, the WFP explained that the decision to grant these extensions came out of a request from the UNHCR to continue providing food aid. However, UNHCR officers in the Accra office explained to me that the most recent extensions were granted because the WFP had gained access to additional food resources that would allow them to continue food distributions at Buduburam.

The WFP officer stated that as an institution they relied upon international donors, primarily governments, to fund food programs. In this context, structural power, which “not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the direction and distribution of energy flows” (Wolf 1999:5), governed the terms upon which the WFP could conduct business. The WFP officer explained that they had written several proposals soliciting assistance for Liberians in Ghana in the past year, but only received one positive response, from the United States, allocating US\$150,000. As a multilateral entity reliant on donor funds, the WFP remained limited by the agendas of national governments, which the program officer interpreted as follows: “Liberians seem to be doing well in their [donors’] minds and I am sure they think people should...assistance should go to Liberia directly rather than to continue to assist them through camps, which by now should be closing down and so on.”

The WFP officer further demonstrated this line of thinking and argued that the continued provision of food aid was directly in response to the low performance of the UNHCR voluntary repatriation program. “We extended because we were told repatriation of a certain number of people would be out [of the camp] by the 31st of December and it would not be needed. But the 31st of December [those people had not left and] there was still a need. We extended to June 31st [2009] based upon a request from UNHCR. The proposal [to end in June] came by looking at projections for repatriation, saying that we should have considerably reduced people...The projections were done in such a way that by June, we were to be finished.”

While the WFP acknowledged they had received a US\$150,000 donation for food assistance to Liberian refugees in Ghana, this was not *their* reason for extending food aid. Food aid operated in relation to migration policies: food distributions and aid were warged in relation to the expected repatriation of refugees. While neither agency seemed to want sole responsibility for the decision to discontinue food aid, what the WFP and UNHCR could agree on was that an increase in the repatriation of refugees would lead to a decrease in the need for food aid.

However, aid workers on the ground—those directly providing aid—did not necessarily agree. One aid worker argued that repatriation was making the situation at the camp worse; the people who repatriated were those with resources and those who remained at the camp were the most vulnerable, made even more vulnerable by the flight of resources with repatriation of more economically affluent individuals. Similar to other long-term refugee camps, petty trade and service industries provided the bulk of income-generating activities (Jacobsen 2005:11).

According to data from my Household Food Economy Survey, 155 people (32%) operated a business at the camp. Often this meant a table outside the house or a small shop to sell oranges, cube (Maggi chicken soup seasoning), pepper, biscuits, and spaghetti. Other businesses were service oriented, such as hair braiding or shoe repair. In 2005, phone booths with a cell phone or landline appeared throughout the camp, but in 2009 the phone booths were replaced with shops selling phone card units, because many people had their own cell phones. Internet cafes were also a relatively vibrant industry at the camp.

Money exchange, bars, nightclubs and cook-shops also offered higher monetary returns: one nightclub owner reported daily profits of US\$25 (and lamented the earlier camp days when he could make up to US\$100 a day). However, few could afford to start such a business and had to rely on much smaller income-generation activities. In sharp contrast, some people picked up empty water plastics from the ground and sold them to a recycling company. One woman explained that it took her several weeks to fill a giant plastic bag, about 5 feet high and 2 feet wide. She was paid by weight and if she was lucky, it would have rained and made the plastic weigh more. Usually she earned about US\$1.50 – \$2.25 for a few weeks' worth of work.

Businesses with mid-range incoming earning potential, such as income from selling water, cooked food, petty trade and plaiting (braiding) hair were more frequent than either lucrative (exchanging money in Accra) or low earning businesses, such as collecting plastics. But even these mid-range income-earning businesses could rarely provide for a household on their own; refugees had to supplement this income. The next section considers the role of transnational networks and financial remittances in contributing to one's position and means at the camp.

### **Remittances: the shift from formal to informal aid**

Economists, anthropologists, and international lending agencies have actively debated the quantity and impact of remittances in various settings around the globe. Key among the questions about impact of remittances is whether remittances spread out to increase the quality of life in the community or exacerbate inequality (see Fajnzylber and Lopez 2008; Maimbo and Ratha 2005). In this section, I draw from my survey data and qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and participant-observation to explore the impact of remittances in the context of a long-term refugee camp.

Remittances have often served as a survival strategy for many refugees in long-term camps (Jacobsen 2005:29) and Buduburam was no exception: remittances provided much-needed income for many Liberian refugees. As I demonstrate, the distribution and allocation of remittances involved layers of interpersonal, organizational, and structural power. In many ways, the interpersonal power relations between refugees and their transnational networks

was transformed into organizational power at the camp as the presence of remittances changed the way in which people organized themselves and their migratory paths.

Koenig has argued, in the case of Mali, that migration and the creation of multilocal networks—and subsequent channels of financial support—changed social systems such that “wealthier households began to control new assets, which, although not used to capture the labor of poorer households, did create qualitatively superior life chances” (2005:52). Here, “money was crucial in turning one set of local resources into another or moving between local and national systems” (Koenig 2005:53). In a similar manner, remittances were significant at Buduburam because they potentially introduced access to a qualitatively different set of different resources at the camp and beyond.

### *Remittance sharing*

The World Bank reported that US\$126 million in remittances were sent to Ghana in 2008; however, regional data was not available (World Bank 2010). Anecdotally, a representative from the GRB claimed that the Buduburam branch of Western Union received more money than any other branch in Ghana. Extrapolating from a Western Union bank manager’s claims that the Buduburam branch regularly processes US\$10,000 in remittances a day, the camp manager estimated that 35% of refugees received remittances. This estimation stands in stark contrast to beliefs expressed by some of the participants in my focus group with young adults, where a young woman argued that nobody could survive at the camp without remittances and suggested that about 99% of households had to receive remittances.

The results from my Household Food Economy Survey fall in between these two estimations: 111 household heads (75%) received a financial remittance payment at least once during their time living at Buduburam. The greatest percentage of household heads, 31% (34 people) reported they received remittances irregularly. The next largest group, 28% (31 people), received monthly remittances, followed by 13% (15 people) receiving remittances every few months. Seven people (6%) had only received a remittance once, though two anticipated they would receive more; 3 (3%) had received remittances a couple of times; two (2%) no longer received remittances; two (2%) received remittances “most times”; and 1 (1%) received remittances to purchase goods for export. Finally, sixteen (14%) chose not to provide frequency information.

Individual monthly remittances ranged from US\$50 to US\$1,000. The average minimum monthly remittance was US\$90.84, with an average monthly maximum remittance of US\$191.40. These figures may be inflated due to one individual who reported a monthly maximum of US\$1,000 and reflect only the experience of one member of the household; many participants did not know or were unwilling to discuss whether other members of the household received remittances, especially in large, complex households with many adults. Here qualitative data from interviews helped to flush out some of the ways in which remittances circulated.

Western Union and MoneyGram, the two key financial institutions through which people sent money, both charged significant fees for sending money. These were determined based on the amount of money sent; for example, US\$9.99 would be charged for sending US\$25 or US\$100 and sending US\$500 might only cost US\$10.50. This fee structure made it quite costly to send small sums of money to multiple people. As a result, Liberians would send

“family money” or larger sums of money that would be split into smaller amounts once at Buduburam.

Robertson, a young man in his early 30s, described how his mother in the U.S. would occasionally send US\$400 or US\$500 to him and then call him and tell him to get a pen and paper. She would then dictate the amount of money that Robertson would give to each person in the family, usually around ten or eleven people. Robertson always divided the family money as it was supposed to be done, so his family at the camp was happy when it was sent to him, because they knew they would get their money. In this example, the distribution of remittances was governed by interpersonal power relations at the local and transnational level as necessitated by the larger structural system through which remittances circulated; however, refugees also engaged in numerous informal financial exchanges.

Analysis of the financial sharing practices of the household heads who received remittances provides some insight on the spread and impact of remittances. Of the 111 household heads that reported receiving remittances of *any* frequency, 69 (62%) gave money to a total of 122 other people at the camp. Eighty-two (67%) of these relationships were financially reciprocal, meaning the household head also received money in return. Of the 82 reciprocal relations, I obtained data on the amount of the last financial exchanges for 33 (40%) of these relations. In 14 (42%) instances, the person who received remittances gave more than they received and 17 (52%) received more than they gave to others at the camp. In 2 (6%) exchange relations, the last financial exchange was equal. As this data demonstrates, a slightly higher percentage of remittance recipients received more money than they gave in their exchanges at the camp, which suggests that they engaged economically with people of similar means.

Of the 31 people who reported receiving monthly remittances, 26 (84%) also reported that they provided financial support to others living at the camp, a figure higher than the aggregate (62%) of the people who received remittances at any frequency. The 26 people providing financial support gave money to 51 people, of which 27 (53%) were financially reciprocal. So, slightly less than half (24 or 47%) of the instances of sharing money were provided to people who returned the assistance at some point in time. This suggests that, to some extent, remittances extended beyond the individual who received them, either as a form of mutual reciprocity or direct giving. This use and distribution of remittances reflected a generalized reciprocity—the practice of giving when you have so that others will assist you when you need help—that was characteristic of livelihood structures in Liberia.

However, the influx of transnational economic capital altered the potential inequalities. Exploring the details of the last reciprocal financial exchange demonstrates that among those who received monthly remittances, most actually gave less than what they received from other people at the camp. Of the 27 financially reciprocal relations, I was able to collect data on the amount of the last financial exchanges for 11 (41%) of these relations. The majority (6 or 55%) received more than they gave to others at the camp; 3 (27%) people gave more than they received; and 2 (18%) exchanges were equal.

While people who received monthly remittances had a greater rate of sharing financial resources to others at the camp (84% versus 69%), the data still illustrates that remittance receivers tended to share resources with others of similar means. Unlike the group of people with remittance income of any frequency, the monthly remittance recipients with reciprocal financial exchanges at the camp actually gave less money to others at the camp than they received from other camp residents (27% vs. 55%, respectively). While my survey data

demonstrates that remittances circulated quite significantly, there is no clear evidence that remittances created greater equality among camp residents.

### *Remittances and power within Buduburam*

People who received significant remittances from family and friends were often described as powerful. As Robertson explained, one must be careful not to get in a fight with someone who received “heavy” remittances because they could just lock you up in jail, even if you were not at fault. Remittances equaled power, as shown in this scenario: “Oh man, move from here! You, you nothing. You...gotta sell water before you eat. Me, I can’t sell water. [As] soon [as] I take telephone one time, my money will come just now. I can even feeeed [you].” In this quote, the impact of remittances extended outside the context of interpersonal power; through the implication of being able to feed others because of remittances, this passage represented organizational power (Wolf 1999), such that remittances shaped the economic and social context in which refugees operated.

Some refugees successfully solicited significant financial support from individual sponsors on the internet, often through sharing their experience and condition as a refugee. In turn, sponsors were moved to provide financial support. Support could be provided once or on a regular basis and in some cases remittance figures from internet sponsors were claimed to reach as high as US\$20,000. However, out of 148 surveys, only one person reported having an internet sponsor and another man reported that he was actively looking for a sponsor. Five participants also reported that a family member or friend had an internet sponsor.

Sponsors ran the spectrum from friends or benefactors to “419” or internet fraud. One young Liberian man wanted to go to a university in the U.S. and had hired a friend to search on the internet for an immigration and financial sponsor. At the other end of the spectrum, a group of boys prominently displayed their success in getting “junk”—the colloquial term for an internet sponsor—by driving around the camp in their old teal Volkswagen bearing the window inscription “Yahooz Boyz” in fat yellow lettering. Men with internet sponsors were seen as powerful due to the large amount of money they received and were often feared, in part because they were believed to practice witchcraft in order to gain the support of a sponsor. Both the power of witchcraft and the ability to use money to bribe law enforcement in any potential altercation were a source of fear.

During one focus group, participants heavily debated the extent to which people with “junk” should be considered within the larger social constitution of the camp. Most participants urged that they were morally problematic and could not be considered to have high social status simply because they had been able to obtain money. One woman defended the social position of those who lived through “junk” and claimed that they were working just as hard as anyone else to earn a living. As evidence of their moral worth, she cited the example of a young man who purchased bags of rice and distributed them to his neighbors when he had received a large sum of money from an internet sponsor. However, this example stood as a narrative anomaly; most research participants spoke negatively and fearfully of those who had obtained internet sponsors and dismissed their use of the money as wasteful spending.

### *Remittances and transnational power*

Decisions about the distribution of remittance resources were not limited to relations at the camp, as was demonstrated above in the example of Robertson, who distributed money to his family members according to his mother's specifications. However, in many cases, the process did not go as smoothly as Robertson described and often created conflict and tension. This tension often spanned generations and geographic locations, reinforcing transnational inequalities.

Lucy took care of the teenage son of a friend who lived in the U.S. and occasionally received remittances from the boy's family. The authority over the use of the remittances was unclear: the boy's grandmother called Lucy and gave her the information to pick up the money and explained that she should use it to take care of her grandson, but, at the same time, the grandmother called her grandson and told him that she was sending him money. When the money actually arrived, there were regular confrontations over how the money would be used. The boy insisted that the money was for him to spend on a new phone, while Lucy needed the money to pay his school fees, buy school uniforms and supplies, and buy food. This case exemplified many other such instances at the camp, when the authority over the use of remittances was contested. In such cases, the person sending remittances took little role in mediating the confusion over the money and it was left to domestic dispute.

Furthermore, these transnational remittance exchanges influenced family hierarchies. In several interviews, research participants pointed out that a younger sibling sent money to support them. While generally appreciative of the support, some research participants nonetheless classified the practice as outside of typical social codes of behavior. Mary, a young woman in her late 20s, joked that her younger sister had become her "ma" because she had been sending her money from the U.S. every month for the past thirteen years. Mary's joke had a double entendre about the close relationship between social and economic power: "ma" was a colloquial term for money. Such social reorganization of family relationships extended to Liberia; a woman explained how her husband's younger brother traveled to Switzerland and got a well-paying job, so his older sister in Liberia started calling him "papa."

These interpersonal power dynamics were influenced by structural power (Wolf 1995). Global structural and economic inequalities allowed those living in the far diaspora, who typically had greater financial capacities to send remittances (Van Hear 1998; Van Hear 2006:137), to shape the structural opportunities for survival and livelihood at Buduburam. However, these transnational structural dynamics were most often narrated in terms of interpersonal power struggles.

Refugees frequently described communication with their families or friends in the far diaspora as riddled with tension. Beatrice, a woman in her early 40s, described her relationship to her resettled family: "years they are not calling. They are in America of course." Samuel described a similar situation: "If I will be sick or I have problem and I will keep asking, asking calling calling calling calling calling [tapping the table for emphasis]. 'I'm not working. I'm not this. I'm not that.'" Emilie explained that even when she was able to get someone on the phone, he or she insisted that it was not the right person and she had become afraid to call her daughter in America because she yelled at her.



This unavailability contrasted with the on-call status of the people living at the camp, who needed the remittances. During an interview with a woman in her early 40s, she explained her financial situation with a rare degree of moderate security: she had a large family network overseas that she could rely on. If her immediate family was unable to send her money, she could reach out to her aunts and uncles. However, this sense of security was extremely relative. As we talked, her cell phone began ringing. She could not locate her phone and started running around the house, looking for her phone as she shouted “I looking for money from America.” While she kept a sense of humor about not being able to find her phone, she explained the urgency in needing to take an international call should it come.

From the perspective of Liberians at the camp, this transnational relationship was extremely unequal and family members had taken on the perspectives of aid givers: refugees were seen as a liability and dependent upon the remittances that were sent. Mabel, a mother of three in her late 20s, described her situation: “I mean, [we] just a liability. You not doing anything. No, not working, just depending on somebody. So it’s still miserable...When you broke, you call them on that side [America] too much; they get vexed with you.”

Emilie experienced a similar response from her sister, who regularly sent school fee money for the children at the camp. Emilie’s sister often yelled at her and was “bold to talk,” demanding to know what Emilie was doing at the camp and telling her that she could not be dependent on her. Emilie had tried several businesses at the camp, including selling small snacks, setting up a provision shop, and exporting goods to Liberia, but she still needed remittances to help her get by. As one research participant aptly explained: “people with jobs still need Western Union.”

Even those who received regular remittances experienced inequality and struggle in navigating transnational relationships. In Helena’s case, her fiancé in the U.S. wanted her to become more independent, so he set up an online Western Union account, which he expected her to check regularly so that she could retrieve the information needed to collect the money on her own. Helena attempted to access the remittance money online, but given internet security settings, she was able to access the Western Union website only inconsistently. Helena sometimes spent multiple hours trying to log into the site, without avail. In one instance when Helena could not get onto the Western Union site after trying several times, the children called their father and begged him to send the control number for the money he sent. Eventually he sent the number, but Helena received the money several weeks after he had actually sent it. In the meantime, she had been stretching resources and borrowing money for food.

Less commonly, Liberians favorably described the dynamics of their transnational relationships. In one case, while completing a social resource map, a young woman said she would not lie and would “give flowers to her mother while she is alive.” Her mother sent monthly remittances, sometimes up to US\$500 per month. While not quite at this financial level, other research participants experienced some degree of certainty in their monthly remittances. Of the 31 people who received monthly remittances, most (23 people or 74%) did not have to ask for the money to be sent.

While most transnational relations were financially unequal with the flow of remittances into the camp, a few people had a limited capacity to reciprocate. For example, Rosaline received most of her financial support from her mom in the U.S., but her mom was on the verge of losing her house. Rosaline wanted to send her a token of appreciation for what she has done

for her. However, Rosaline also explained that she was able to make the “decision to close her eyes” and spend money in the first place because she could appeal to her extended family in the U.S. for financial support if her mom were to become unable to send her money. Rosaline admitted that it was very difficult to try to do something nice for family overseas, because the relation was so laden with financial pressure and inequality. Sometimes she liked to just call them or send them a message to see how they were doing, but the outreach was most often interpreted as a veiled request for money (see Lindley 2007:21).

To some extent, the ability to engage in reciprocal relations with family members overseas mediated both the experience of being overpowered and also the potential returns gained. As illustrated in Rosaline’s awareness of how the economic crisis impacted her family in the U.S., refugees were concerned that the global economic crisis would affect whether or not their family would continue to support them. Furthermore, as pressure to repatriate mounted in 2008 and 2009, remittances had become even more important as people left the camp and local business dropped in response to a decreasing population. In this climate of economic and political pressure, transnational social relationships were focused on the future: where would refugees go, how would they get there, and how would they manage?

### **Remittances and resettlement: the possibility of migratory aid**

On the surface it may have appeared that the UNHCR, the Ghanaian government, the U.S. government, and even the Liberian government had significant power in determining the migratory paths of refugees through the shaping of refugee policies and practices; however, the actual decision to migrate also took place on various transnational levels of relationships. Refugees often negotiated and evaluated their migratory options—staying at the camp, repatriating, working towards resettlement, or some combination thereof—with their family in the U.S. (as well as other resettlement destinations) and Liberia.

Refugee policies operated as a form a structural power—“power that structures the political economy”—and as a way of understanding “why and how some sectors, regions, or nations are able to constrain the options of others and what coalitions and conflicts occur in the course of this interplay” (Wolf 2001:384-385). While Wolf primarily approached structural power in relation to tactical or organizational power, the relationship between UNHCR policies and implementing partners, I explore the relationship between refugees and resettled refugees to demonstrate the theoretical and practical connections between structural power and interpersonal power—“the ability of an ego to impose its will on an alter in social action” (Wolf 2001:384)—within the context of refugee aid and migration.

In 1998, the UNHCR spent a little more than half of the Liberian refugee budget in Ghana on repatriation (Adjei Sefah 1999:38). At the end of the year, the Ghanaian government stated its intention to close the camp (Assuah 2001:67) and in June 2000 the UNHCR withdrew all assistance from the camp (Dick 2002:16). However, when the second war in Liberia intensified in 2003 and new refugees began arriving in Ghana, the UNHCR returned and third country resettlement picked up. With the end of the civil war and the inauguration of President Johnson-Sirleaf in 2006, both the UNCHR and Ghanaian government stated intentions to resolve the refugee situation in Ghana. To this end, in 2007, the UNHCR conducted a verification exercise to count the number of refugees living in Ghana and collect information on their education and skill level.

After the 2007 verification, according to a UNHCR program officer, the UNHCR focused funding on skills training and education to prepare refugees for repatriation. The UNHCR also supported local development in the camp region, including the construction of new police and fire stations at Buduburam in 2009. In the spring of 2009, the UNHCR conducted another verification exercise to count the number of remaining refugees and assess skill level once again. In my interviews with UNCHR and GRB representatives, both agencies raised the possibility and inevitability of a cessation clause. The cessation clause would, and eventually did, remove refugee status from Liberians, making them ineligible for refugee protection and services, including resettlement.

### *Resettlement as structural power*

In the last twenty years, Liberian refugees were resettled to the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Norway, and Sweden, among other countries. While the UNHCR utilized third country resettlement as a last resort when no other solutions were available, each of these countries had its own procedures for screening and admitting refugees. Here, I focus exclusively on the U.S. refugee admissions system as many refugees vied for access to this program and U.S. policy on Liberian resettlement was closely linked to UNHCR policies.

The U.S. “Presidential Determination” comprises an annual determination of the number of refugees allowed to enter the United States. Allocations are divided among geographic regions, such as Africa, and generally function as a ceiling rather than a target. Since the peak of Liberian resettlement to the U.S. in 2004, arrivals steadily decreased and reflected the growing sentiment that Liberians were no longer an urgent case for protection and resettlement.

The U.S. resettles all refugees according to a three-tiered priority system. Priority 1 admits individual referrals from the UNHCR, U.S. Embassy, or authorized NGOs. Individuals referred through the P-1 program are people who do not have access to any other durable solution. Priority 2 refugees are group-based referrals, based on one or a combination of characteristics pertaining to nationality, clan, ethnicity, religion, or location. Priority 3, Family Reunification, enables refugees resettled to the U.S. to bring their spouse, unmarried children under the age of 21 or parent to the U.S. through the refugee program. The majority (95%) of P-3 applications have been from refugees on the African continent, particularly Somali, Ethiopian and Liberian refugees (UNHCR Washington 2008:3-5).

While the UNHCR could identify and refer P-1 cases at any point in time, the end of war and subsequent democratic rule in Liberia made such urgent cases rare in 2009. Due to a lack of sufficient staff, the UNHCR had stopped making P-1 referrals for Liberians on October 29, 1999 (Dick 2002b:31). The U.S. government has not had a recent P-2 program for any Liberian population, and the most recent Liberian resettlement cases were admitted through the P-3 program. As I demonstrate here, the particular structure of the P-3 program for resettlement enhanced growing transnational disparities in interpersonal power.

The U.S. government contracted with the Church World Service Overseas Processing Entity (CWS-OPE) to process refugee applications in Ghana and in 2002 CWS-OPE opened a full office in Accra. From 1990 – August 6, 2009, a total of 13,120 Liberians were resettled from Ghana to the United States (Holzer 2010:27). Once a P-3 case passed initial eligibility

screening by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), CWS-OPE worked on the case in Ghana. P-3 refugee applicants proceeded through three interviews with OPE staff: 1) pre-screening; 2) form filling (biographic data); and 3) case work interviews. After completing the CWS-OPE interviews, a refugee was interviewed by the Refugee Corps, a unit of DHS that traveled to refugee population locations to conduct the DHS interview. DHS then approved or denied the case and CWS-OPE distributed the case decision letters to refugees at their office in Accra.

Refugees could appeal the decision within a 30-day period; however, a representative from CWS-OPE stated that most original decisions were upheld. If a refugee had been approved for resettlement, he or she needed to get a medical screening, coordinated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and attend a 3-day cultural orientation at CWS-OPE. IOM made travel arrangements and coordinated the travel loans that refugees had to pay back upon resettling in the United States.

The U.S. stopped accepting new P-3 applications from Liberians on September 30, 2006, but stated a commitment to complete the processing of all open P-3 applications. However, upon hearing instances of fraud in the overall P-3 program, the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) initiated a pilot phase of DNA testing in East Africa. When less than 20% of cases could be confirmed for biological relation, PRM issued a moratorium on the P-3 program in March 2008 (UNHCR 2008:5). After the 2008 moratorium on U.S. resettlement, all open P-3 cases needed to undergo DNA testing for claimed biological relationships before an application received final approval (Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration 2009b).

During a March 2009 interview, a CWS-OPE staff member in Accra stated that the processing of applications had slowed down since the new regulations were issued and CWS-OPE experienced a no show rate of about 50% for P-3 interviews in Ghana. At the time of the interview, approximately 250-500 applications remained open for Liberians in Ghana and about 500-750 total cases remained open for Liberians in the West African region. OPE planned to clear all Liberian cases by April 2010 and the OPE-Accra office stopped processing applications as of June 1, 2010.

### *Resettlement as interpersonal power*

As a result of the P-3 resettlement program requirement of family sponsorship, the programmatic change from P-1 to P-3 resettlement stimulated a shift in the locus of power from a humanitarian entity to the intimate social worlds of refugees. Accompanying this shift, the ability and responsibility for resettlement extended beyond the U.S. government and UNHCR and into transnational relationships. As outlined in previous sections, these relationships already existed within unequal structural and economic contexts. As I demonstrate next, these inequalities merged into the context of migratory options and decisions.

Robertson traveled to Buduburam in 2001 with the intent of joining his mother and brother in the U.S. through a resettlement program. But after nearly eight years of waiting without results, Robertson began to talk with his mother about returning to Liberia. While he taught at a school in the camp, Robertson felt that he was starting to waste time by not being in school, especially in contrast to his younger cousin who had just graduated from the University of

Liberia. While Robertson had decided that he would return to Liberia to receive more education, his lack of economic and social power resulted in a decision-making process that was primarily guided by his mother, who would provide the financial resources for migration.

In contrast to the supportive relationship between Robertson and his mother, Caroline explained how her family in the U.S. actually prevented her from traveling. While she was in Liberia, her family in the U.S. contacted her saying that they had been informed that her resettlement case had been called for an interview in Guinea and that she should travel there immediately. Once she arrived in Guinea, Caroline learned that her case had not been called for an interview in Guinea, but in Ghana, a mistake she interpreted as intentional.

Caroline missed her opportunity to travel and placed her experience within a broader narrative about the power relations between family overseas and those who live at the camp: “Some people got family and family don’t want for they and them to be on the same level so they suppress them, in the sense that they always for the person to be a beggar. And that person don’t want to help to pull them up in the sense of making a way for them to come over to them [in America] and struggle on that side...just want to suppress them. Always want that person to be beneath them.”

Another young woman similarly described her aunt in America: “Like my aunt, she just been wicked to us. When you call her, the phone can be ringing, but she doesn’t answer. When she was going, she filed for us. They called us [for the interview] and she said she wasn’t ready [for us to travel to the U.S.]” As Voutira and Harrell-Bond (1995:212) explained, the last person on the chain of the humanitarian giving—the person who tips the cup of grain into the hands of the recipient—actually possesses the most power. In looking at a new set of relational power—between refugees and resettled refugees—it becomes clear how the structural power of the P-3 resettlement program hinges upon transnational, interpersonal power relationships. The benevolence of family members in the U.S. had the potential to disable the possibilities for resettlement.

#### *Repatriation—an extension of transnational power*

Prospects for the future were also negotiated in relation to other migratory options, most notably voluntary repatriation to Liberia. Omata (2012) outlined several factors—lack of housing, lack of jobs, security concerns—that inhibited refugees from returning to Liberia. Omata’s (2012) analysis revealed how complex migratory desires and decisions shifted in relation to policies and socio-economic realities. In concluding these considerations, I explore how the prospect of repatriation existed within the broader context of transnational relationships and aid.

Liberian repatriation efforts have more than a decade of history in Ghana. The Liberian transitional government issued a “declaration of the rights of returnees” on January 3, 1996 and in 1997, 700 refugees repatriated with UNHCR support (Assuah 2001:63, 67), which included transportation, initial reception in Liberia and a stipend for travel within Liberia. In 1998, the UNHCR expected 10,000 people to repatriate, but only 3,400 returned (Adjei Seffah 1999:43). Repatriation slowed from 2004 to 2007, when fewer than 9,000 people went to Liberia. In 2008, the UNHCR started providing stipends of per adult and US\$50 per child for repatriation.

Repatriation was scheduled to close on December 31, 2008; in the months preceding this deadline, trips were scheduled to leave the camp three times per week, repatriating approximately 9,000 people. The camp closure date was then extended to March 31, 2009, but in the three months preceding this new deadline only 498 refugees repatriated. In a March 2009 interview, a UNHCR representative stated that after March 31, they would clear the list of those who registered for repatriation before the March 31 deadline. After this, the UNHCR planned to continue registering people for repatriation until they “exhausted the people of concern,” those who had been verified (via fingerprinting) as refugees.

Outside of the formal structures of repatriation, refugees communicated amongst one another and with family and friends in Liberia and abroad to evaluate the prospect of return. Refugees often voiced fear about the prospect of being labeled as “wasted years” upon return to Liberia. “Wasted years” was a derogatory term that had become widespread in its attachment to people who had lived at the camp for a long time and later returned to Liberia with nothing. As one young man described, “when you go and 2-3 months they see you are not doing anything [in Liberia] they say you wasted all your years in Ghana doing nothing. ‘You went to Ghana for resettlement and you never went anywhere. Now you come back again.’”

During a brief visit to Liberia in 2009, I spoke with some refugee returnees about their experience with the stigma of “wasted years.” A woman in her early 30s who had lived at the camp had returned to Liberia where she operated a small cook-shop, but in order to avoid stigma, she often elected not to tell people that she had lived at Buduburam. Facing such negative prospects of reception, refugees at Buduburam wanted nothing more than to avoid being “wasted years.”

Money and education were the two primary ways to return to Liberia with your social status intact or improved. When I asked Blessing about prospects for return, she responded: “if you go back to Liberia with money, your family will welcome you.” Those who had been able to acquire some education in Ghana did not express concern about being labeled as “wasted years.” Without traveling first to the U.S., returning to Liberia would result in decreased social status, stigma, and shame for many refugees: they would continue to need aid. However, “America” offered an opportunity to be on the giving end of the aid relationships.

Tita – a young mother of six – explained that she, as a person without formal schooling, could travel to America, save US\$15,000 - \$20,000 and then build a house in Liberia, where a “book-learned [educated] person is minding the house.” During an interview with a woman in Liberia who had never been in exile, she insisted that people who resettled in the U.S. or another wealthy country should come back and invest in Liberia so that their “name will spread and get big.”

The return of resettled refugees to Liberia, most often to build houses, encouraged the gap between refugee and non-refugee returnees. “Professional” returnees, as they were sometimes called, and their economic means and social status amplified interest in resettlement. As a result of these interpersonal transnational relations, many refugees saw resettlement as the most viable option for eventual return to Liberia. In this regard resettlement was not a *final destination*, as prescribed by the UNHCR, but part of the larger migratory *route* home to Liberia.

## **Conclusion: Remittances as aid or development?**

In the long-term camp context, the flow of international aid has become framed much less in terms of humanitarian aid, but more as a strategy of development, as was evidenced in the UNHCR's approach to development through local integration. At Buduburam, such programming helped to fund the construction of a new police and fire station at the camp to serve refugees and the surrounding Ghanaian populations. This shift from humanitarian aid to development also reflected a wider rhetoric of collective development rather than individual humanitarian assistance.

Moreover, development institutions, such as the World Bank, have become very interested in the role that migrants can play in development; current World Bank discourse focuses on "harnessing" remittances for development. While the new discourse of development via remittances is consistent with the experiences of many Liberian refugees who were interested in accessing a migratory route home by way of the U.S. so that they could invest in Liberia through increased status *and* economic means, the impact of these transnational financial and migratory processes on refugees who are unable to migrate remains unknown. My research contributes to an emerging body of literature (see Kelegama 2011) that has begun to question the potential of remittances to lift people out of poverty.

As I have argued and shown, the shift from humanitarian to informal, personal networks of aid at Buduburam was influenced by and perhaps contributed to transnational structural and interpersonal inequality. Financial remittances certainly provided support beyond the initial recipients through business investments and extended disbursements; however, social resource mapping data revealed that most financial exchanges were reciprocal and did not reflect a form of neutral aid, but rather exchanges based on personal relationships and generalized forms of reciprocity. While reciprocity is not unusual for Liberians, the changing transnational context, facilitated through resettlement, in which reciprocity is carried out potentially introduces new kinds of inequalities.

From these preliminary conclusions, there are several risks associated with situating remittances as a form of aid or development. By positioning development at the level of the individual, as the P-3 resettlement program essentially did, assistance was directly governed by access to personal resources. A reliance on remittances as a form of aid would direct resources to those individuals who already have access to them. As a result, remittances may serve to complement, but not supplement or replace aid and development efforts. Future research could more directly explore the impact of remittances in Liberia, especially since a cessation clause has been invoked and most refugees from Buduburam have returned to Liberia. Transnational, multi-sited research could focus on understanding how refugees resettled in the U.S. engage with Liberia and how resettlement has impacted social status categories as well as the transnational flow of resources through personal channels.

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