

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **When is a refugee not a refugee? Flexible social categories and host/refugee relations in Guinea**

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## Introduction

UNHCR and humanitarian agencies commonly use the category of “refugee” in order to determine the population eligible for aid or resettlement. However, for understanding the dynamics of long-term conflict and how the displaced themselves negotiate their survival with their hosts, this demographic category obscures more than it reveals. This paper focuses on relations between the residents of the Sembakounya camp, Kola camp, and the neighboring Guinean villages and towns during the first months of these Guinean camps’ existence, as initial fears and stereotypes were being formed and negotiated.<sup>1</sup>

Tania Kaiser raised the issue of refugee/host relationships in her 2000 report entitled “A beneficiary-based evaluation of UNHCR’s programme in Guinea, West Africa”. While the major concerns at that time in the pre-crisis Gueckadou region were land scarcity, food shortages, lack of identification papers, and the low-level of funding for UNHCR’s programs, in a prescient statement, she drew attention to the needs of the surrounding communities: “Given the length of time that UNHCR has been operating around Gueckadou, little attention has been paid to the host population in this refugee affected area. Some of UNHCR’s partners feel that there should be a more balanced response to both refugees and hosts” (Kaiser: 2001: 26).

The goal of this paper is to examine more closely the role of refugee/host relations in the new camp. My analysis of the relations between the recently transferred Sierra Leonean and Liberian residents of Sembakounya camp and the host community of Sembakounya village focuses on the specific concerns of both refugees and citizens - how the Liberians and Sierra Leoneans define themselves vis a vis their hosts and create support networks outside of the emergency relief structure. What specific and particular needs do long-term refugees have, and how might these evolve over time? In particular, I will focus on interactions between the refugee population and host population and the factors that play a role in the management, resolution, or continuation of refugee/host hostilities. I also discuss the ways in which the different groups portray each other in order to construct both commonalities and divisions.

This paper begins by problematizing the concept of “refugee” and then defining what it means to be a resident of the Sembakounya camp from the perspective of those living in the camp. The second section focuses on particular areas of interaction with the host population, such as trading relationships, income-generation activities, markets, worship, and meetings between locals and refugees who work for humanitarian organizations. This discussion highlights the different facets of identity that give substance and meaning to the multiple types of relationships between the residents of the Sembakounya camp and the surrounding communities.

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The third section describes the transfer of refugees to a new camp in the N'Zerekore region and touches on the complexities of creating a new camp in an area where there are long-term refugees, self-settled populations, and internally displaced persons. The paper concludes by posing questions about the future of the camp and the camp residents in Sembakounya and by making a series of recommendations. My hope is that this discussion will lend new insight into the dynamics of long-term conflict and how the displaced themselves negotiate their survival with their hosts.

This paper is based on five weeks of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Guinea from July-August 2001 under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The research was carried out in two locations: Dabola and N'Zerekore. Time was spent in both the camps and the towns, identifying the composition of the camps, understanding the different types of "refugees" in each site, observing the type and quality of interaction between locals and refugees, and participating/observing IRC and other non-governmental organizations (NGO) and UN programs.

Methods used included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and attendance at Participatory Rural Analysis meetings in two host villages. Access in the camps was premised on the good will of both NGOs and the resident Refugee Committees. Therefore, contacts were made with camp residents through referrals and by walking transects of the camp in order to interact with a random selection of the camp population. The case studies presented in this paper are intended to elucidate different types of relationships that occur and to raise questions for future research.

## **Refugees in Guinea**

Since 1990, Guinea has accepted between 390,000 and 450,000 refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia (UNHCR 2000).<sup>2</sup> Guinea, with a population of 7.4 million and an average life expectancy of 46 years, remains one of the poorest countries in the world (UNEP 2000:7). The 54 camps and settlements in Guinea continue to host the largest concentration of refugees on the African continent, a situation that has now lasted 14 years (UNHCR 2000:93). Early arrivals were first received into local communities until the size and demands of the refugee population expanded beyond the capacities of their hosts.

Many refugees moved over relatively short distances and were familiar with the environment, ethnic groups, and languages in their host areas (Black 1998). The refugees were then settled (either voluntarily or with the active encouragement of the host government and the relief agencies) in various types of camps and organized settlements where they were registered and received official assistance (Jacobsen 1997).

While attempts were made to provide health services and educational opportunities that encompassed the surrounding communities, events of 2000 demonstrated that considerable antagonism existed towards refugees on the part of the host population in the Forest region and elsewhere. In September 2000 a radio address by President

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<sup>2</sup> These population figures are arguable, given the discrepancy between the estimated population at the time of the UNHCR 1999 census (467,758) and the numbers given following the crisis in June, 2001 based on registration and camp transfers (227,758).

Lasana Conte fanned local fears of rebel infiltration and called citizens to arms. Guinean authorities and segments of Guinean society increasingly began to blame refugee populations for bringing violence into the country (US Newswire 2000). Tens of thousands of refugees fled the looting, killing, and rape that took place in camps and towns. This massive displacement, coupled with recent border tensions, compelled the UNHCR and the Guinean government to move refugee camps farther inside the country.

Refugees were relocated from the isolated “Parrot’s beak” region of southwestern Guinea to new camps established in the Dabola Prefecture, 200 km away from the volatile border region. The central region of Dabola had never before experienced such a great influx of refugees and there was initial resistance to the creation of the Sembakounya refugee camp. A riot took place in the town of Dabola after stones were thrown at UN vehicles to protest the resettlement of the refugees. In the peace building meetings that followed the riot, Guineans made it clear that they feared the presence of refugees would bring rebels, as had happened in other regions of the country.

UNHCR and the Guinean government undertook a “sensibilization” campaign to convince the local population that their fears were unfounded and to provide sufficient financial incentives to obtain consent for the camp construction. The chief of Sembakounya village in particular (for which the camp was named) was promised benefits if he would allow the camp to be built less than one km away, benefits such as: improved roads, health services, agricultural development projects and small business assistance as well as new water sources in the villages - wells which were conveniently dug in the chief and Imam’s compounds. While these campaigns ultimately proved successful, uneasiness prevailed among locals about the impending refugee influx.

As the following discussion illustrates, refugees’ struggle to create a legitimate place in time and space can be located in not only day-to-day interactions with hosts - both citizens and aid organizations - but in the perceptions and stereotypes of the “other” that are constructed and shaped following these encounters. In conversation Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees display ambivalence concerning relationships with their Guinean hosts and their future in Guinea, a sentiment echoed in a variety of ways by their Guinean hosts who live around the camp. The following discussion explores these relationships, recognizing that the stark refugee/host contrast obscures locally important differences as well as commonalities.

A crucial aspect of understanding these processes is to explore the complex and multidimensional nature of the category “refugee”. Classically, refugees have been seen as uprooted and deterritorialized in contrast to the assumption that the homeland or country of origin is not only the normal but “the ideal habitat for any person, the place where one fits in, lives in peace, and has an unproblematic culture and identity” (Malkki 1995: 509). This view assumes therefore, that refugees are empty vessels, stripped of all cultural traits.

Recent work contests these notions of “rootedness” and territoriality as defining populations (Gupta and Ferguson 1999; Kearney 1986, 1995; Malkki 1995b, 1997; Appadurai 1991; Glick Schiller 1995). Lisa Malkki, through her research among Burundian refugees in Tanzania, demonstrates the ways in which refugees deepen,

embellish, and persistently grapple with cultural identities, experience, and constructions of history. Her discussion of culturally-constructed social relations and identities illustrates how the various intersecting levels of ethnicity, class, historical memory, and politics influence and are influenced by displacement and civil conflict.

In her recent book, *Unraveling Somalia*, Catherine Besteman describes how elders of the Goshu community did not allow subjugation by the Somali pastoralists to essentialise their identity as a group. “They sought to claim their rights to equal status as individuals, not as a ‘minority group’. This dynamic recognition of multiple facets of identity undermined their representation as a ‘tribe’ or an ‘ethnic’ group, or as we can use it in this context, as ‘refugees’” (Besteman 1999: 155). Much in the same way, residents of Sembakounya camp do not see themselves as unproblematically fitting into the “refugee” category.

How people identify themselves depends on a number of factors which may fluctuate over time: timing of departure, geographic location of the conflict, familiarity with different regions of Guinea, kinship ties to hosts, strength of familial connection to Guinea (whether they or their parents had been born in Guinea and left for Liberia or Sierra Leone prior to the war) and important social and human capital such as level of education, business experience, and available trading partners (Andrews 2001).

The more useful local distinction, in the Guinean context, is between refugee and returnee.<sup>3</sup> While there are no absolute definitions and individual experiences are much more complex, from the perspectives of camp residents a refugee is generally someone born in Liberia or Sierra Leone with no connection to Guinea before fleeing. To be a returnee implies common ties of language, ethnicity, and kinship as well as familiarity with the region. Returnees are relatively common in the Dabola region, as many Fulbe and Maninkas migrated to Sierra Leone and Liberia from the 1930s to the 1980s. Freetown fared better in terms of job opportunities and higher wages than did many areas of West Africa during the Great Depression (Jalloh 1999: 17).

For West Africans in general, Monrovia and Freetown were seen as modern, connected places with opportunities for economic growth. As well, political persecution in post-independence Guinea caused a rapid emigration to Sierra Leone and Liberia. It is estimated that by the end of Sekou Toure’s rule, up to two million Guineans, predominantly Fulbe and Maninka, had fled to neighboring countries (Momoh 1984b: 757). Most of those who emigrated have since returned to Guinea during the refugee crisis in different waves.

The recognition that displacement and migration has been a constant part of peoples’ lives for generations helps to move attention away from the stark refugee/host dichotomy and towards a more nuanced understanding of how people are creatively

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term returnee in this paper as it is defined by the residents of Sembakounya camp, rather than the UN definition, which views returnees as one of the durable solutions for refugees. For UN purposes, the term returnee is closer to repatriation where, according to the UN’s field guide for protecting refugees: “The objective in monitoring returnees is to help ensure a successful and lasting repatriation, including a durable relationship between the citizen and the state and the early and full restoration of national protection. Returnee monitoring is not meant to provide returning refugees with privileges or to elevate their standard of living above that of the local population. Rather, it seeks to ensure that all returnees’ human rights are respected and that returnees are not targeted for harassment, intimidation, punishment, violence, or denial of access to public institutions or services or discriminated against in the enjoyment of any basic right (A Field Guide for NGOs, 2001: 71).

resituating their lives and futures in a long-term conflict situation. These social constructs of ethnicity, nationality, and refugee status have obvious consequences for those defined; yet simultaneously provide opportunity for strategic manipulation. This cross-hatching of language, origin, and identity can be seen in the interaction of the newly settled refugees with the local population.

### **Sembakounya camp**

Not surprisingly, many of the chiefs of the surrounding villages have spent time in Sierra Leone and there was one village mentioned in particular, about 35 km from the camp, where “everyone speaks Krio”. Therefore, certain Sembakounya residents - those returnees of Guinean origin from the region or those who could speak local languages and could claim kin ties—have been generally accepted on an individual basis. The Sembakounya camp has quickly become a meeting place of people from different nations, with a variety of languages, ethnicities, socio-economic and education levels and life experiences, from farmers to politicians to traders to teachers.

Historic commonalities of language and ethnicity have been tested, as refugees came to Sembakounya from all regions of Guinea. One camp resident in particular, Bangura, provides an example of the complex nature of refugee identity and relationships with the local communities. Bangura is a Maninkakan speaker whose father is originally from Guinea, but went to Sierra Leone in 1930 and married a local woman. He was born in Sierra Leone and can therefore strategically claim either refugee or returnee status. There is a difference, therefore, in how people wish to be viewed by UNHCR and the humanitarian aid organizations and how they wish to be viewed and to interact with the local population.

With his refugee status, Bangura works as a teacher for the IRC, one of the more steady employment opportunities in the camp system. As a returnee, he has the crucial human capital that facilitates his lucrative business as a traveling medicine salesman. His connection for the medications is in Kissidougou, where he last worked for IRC, and his business partner has already come to Sembakounya to continue their business. Bangura reads English and French, so he can translate directions and dosages as well as give advice as to what medications customers should buy for certain complaints. His supply of medicines includes remedies for fever, constipation, and backache as well as contraceptive pills and he recounts conversations with locals that make him sound like a psychiatrist as well.

As soon as Bangura arrived at Sembakounya camp, he went to investigate the three surrounding villages and found that they were all inhabited by Maninkakan and Krio speakers. Bangura’s account of his first visits focus on how he was offered the hospitality due to a stranger in the form of food or water before he was asked about his origins. He was quite aware of the hesitancy on the part of locals to engage with refugees due to fear and resentment. For Bangura, it was crucial that his relations with locals were based on being a stranger who spoke the language rather than on his status as refugee. Creating commonalities with the local population, based on language, ethnicity, and parental/own place of birth, is key to encouraging successful independent business activities, credit opportunities and the creation of trading partners.

For a number of these villages, Bangura has become an interlocutor, describing life in the camp and the various advantages such as a health center, water pumps, development projects and the tremendous growth of the weekly market. According to Bangura, several local chiefs are eager to start businesses in the camp. They have heard about the video hall, the barbershop, the restaurants, and the market stalls that have already been set up by refugees and locals. For instance, during his first visit to the village of Passaya, 35 km south of the camp, the chief asked Bangura to tell him about the video hall, as he wanted to replicate it in his village. The chief was also very concerned as to whether the road to Sembakounya would be extended all the way to his village, as he has a portable sawmill and tractor and wants to transport the wood he is harvesting to the capital.

There are many businesses currently operating in the camp that utilize networks and social ties to establish and continue their business. Some refugees have been able to start their businesses through credit extended to them from local businessmen. These connections most often occur when the refugee has connections to the local community but may also be based on ethnicity, language skills, and region of origin in Sierra Leone or Liberia. The following three examples illustrate the different ways in which refugees interact with the local population in the course of engaging in income-generating activities:

**Camp bar:** The proprietors of the camp bar buy beer from various suppliers in Dabola. They go two times per week, getting rides on the HCR and GTZ trucks that go back and forth from the camp. The bar is a wooden board building with a tarp roof from HCR tarps with pieces cut in a fringe pattern as decoration. The bar is open from 8:30 in the morning until 12 at night. The bar manager says they have regular customers, most of whom work for NGOs and come with their paychecks to relax. He says that citizens come as well to drink there, those who are employed in the camp. A soft drink company gave him the kerosene-driven refrigerator for advertising.

**Camp barbers:** Alasanne Kamara, Mohammed Kamara, and Abdoul Toure own and run the barbershop. They came from Gueckadou and the Nyeadou camp. Alasanne came from Sierra Leone in 1991 and stayed in Gueckadou town until 1993. He trained his two friends to help him with his business. Their place in the previous camp was fancier, with complete mirrors and creams and spirit powder and a cement floor, as opposed to the dirt floored, tarp covered Sembakounya version. They used to be able to charge 1500-3000 for a wave cut and 500-1000 for a regular cut. Now they charge 500, but said that they will help a brother with a free cut if he is getting “bushy head”.

**Coffee bar:** Diallo, a young Guinean man from Dabola, runs one of the construction site coffee bar/restaurants. He is bringing his new wife to come live at the camp. His main competitor is a Guinean woman, rather than a refugee. The camp is a profitable place for business, opening up opportunities for refugees to create partnerships with the local community.

Unlike Bangura and those in the returnee category who had fled Sierra Leone, the Liberians in the camp interact less with the local population, as the commonalities of language and identity that served them well in the Forest region are less useful in Sembakounya. Prior to September 2000, the camps were closer to town and residents could easily start businesses. In Sembakounya, previously urban and peri-urban refugees are living in a rural context in which they do not have access to the jobs and



opportunities as before. They see the surrounding population as backwards. Among the traders who came to Sembakounya camp from the Kissidougou area, many decided to keep their former trading relationships rather than create new ones in Dabola, as the prices they were offered were not as favorable as in Kissidougou.

The degree of harassment from the host population during the crisis of 2000 also affects camp residents' willingness to interact with the local population. Bettie is a Liberian woman who came to Sembakounya from the Forecariah camps. Through her discussion of life in Forecariah, Bettie draws attention to the differences in experiences among the many refugees in Sembakounya camp. In the Forecariah camp, she said that they lived with the host population side by side, "Why, we went to parties together and lived with them!" Because she does not speak the languages of this area, Bettie has found it difficult to become motivated to start another business. In Famoreah the camps were close to town and residents could easily start businesses.

Bettie is a well-educated woman and from her descriptions of life in Liberia and her deceased husband's connections with the government, it seems that she was well off before she fled to Guinea. Her reticence to be involved in the camp leadership structure and her fear of the local population is in direct contrast to her involvement in the previous camp. During the September violence, Bettie said that Guineans targeted her because she was a leader in the camp. She was punished by having her daughters raped in front of her. She finally reached Conakry with her daughters and according to her, UNHCR would not consider their case for repatriation unless they went to Sembakounya. One of her daughters has stayed in the city to go to school and is afraid to come to the camp because of what happened in September.

This woman's outlook on host/refugee relationships - a perspective that is based on past experiences and images of an undifferentiated 'other' rather than current interaction - is similar to that of Guineans living near the camp. When asked about the refugees, Guineans talk about them as a homogenous group with generally undesirable traits and characteristics. However, these attitudes held about the respective "other" are replete with contradictions and consist of complex combinations of positive and negative attitudes which surface depending on context (Schildkrout 1979: 184).

Some of the most obvious differences between refugees and Guineans have to do with dress and appearance. There are striking visual cues that differentiate Guineans from Liberians and Sierra Leoneans: Liberian women wear more make-up, regularly wear trousers instead of dresses or wrap-around cloth, relax their hair, and often keep it unbraided. In contrast, few Guinean women wear trousers or makeup, and hair is most often tressed with hair extensions. Among Guinean men, short trousers are not considered acceptable for grown men, while Liberian men and women will wear shorts in informal settings, public and private. Men's hairstyles also differ, in that they follow American fashions and often keep their hair shorter than Guineans.

The young men who started a barbershop in the camp were quite attuned to these differences and spoke at length on the differences between Guineans and Sierra Leoneans. "If someone wears their shirt tucked into their pants and wears slippers that he must be a citizen, for no refugee would wear their shirt tucked in with slippers. With jeans, you should always wear sneakers, not like the dress shoes and high heels the Guineans wear! You can also tell by the cool way that refugees walk who they

are”. The young barbers believe that the refugee style is influencing the Guineans to become more like them.

Opportunities to attend formal meetings between camp-based programs and their Guinean hosts illuminated the ways in which the two groups interacted and discussed different issues. These were programs instigated by western NGOs and implemented by their camp-based, refugee employees. The official nature of these meetings and the content served to accentuate the differences between the two groups rather than forge commonalities.

My first experience was a meeting held in the village of Sembakounya, one km away from the camp. This meeting was called by the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence program (SGBV) and was the first formal encounter they had with the neighboring village committee of Sembakounya. The meeting was held in the chief’s compound and included the village elders, the chief and two women, the wife of the Imam and the women’s group chairwoman. It was a brief, formal meeting that served to introduce the program and talk about ideas for a joint day of festivities. The two SGBV educators: one man and one woman who were refugees from Sierra Leone, sat on benches with the elders of the village, while the Guinean women sat on the ground underneath the tree.

Differences in dress were most acutely obvious during formal meetings such as these, where the Liberian and Sierra Leonean women would often wear trousers in contrast to their the Guinean women in headscarves and boubous. The exchange of formalities and greetings was translated from Krio to French to Maninkakan and then back. I would hear from time to time the English words “gender”, “equality” and “domestic violence” being used in all three versions of the dialogue and wondered what indeed was being communicated between the two groups.

I also attended a SGBV conference in Dabola, which was attended by notables in the Dabola town government and social hierarchy as well as students in the local youth center. Participants were especially animated and argumentative concerning the topics of polygyny and wife beating. Having a debate about ideas of equality and human rights was difficult in a context where people felt compelled to defend traditional ideals. This area of non-communication between the locals and the refugees that represented the NGOs was a difficult chasm to cross.

My other encounters with the SGBV program in Sembakounya were informal. I heard the statement “I’ll take you to gender!” being used as a threat by women towards their male partners. “Gender” seemed to be understood as a camp institution that protected the rights of women or at very least, could get men in trouble. “Gender” did not appear to address men’s issues however, as the domestic dispute I encountered resulted in the man being dragged off to see the Guinean military. His wife brought the dispute to the attention of the military because her husband had stopped financially supporting her and she wanted him locked up. He was in detention with the police, sitting on the bench. His version was that she had refused to cook for him. In retaliation he held all her goods and would not give her any support because she had not shown him the proper respect.

This instance highlights some important strategies of resistance employed by women in domestic relationships, but also points to a gap in attention to how men view

disputes. While this is one isolated case, it does make one wonder, could the husband have taken his wife to “gender” for not cooking for him? If he cannot support his wife and family financially, what is the effect upon gender roles within the family? This case also raises the question of how the relationships between men and women in the camp setting are parallel to that of locals and how they differ.

This discussion of gendered roles and relationships is particularly important in light of the ways in which sexuality, femininity and masculinity are used in descriptions of Guineans by refugees and vice versa. Both groups used sexuality as a way of differentiating themselves. Health educators hired from the refugee community by IRC described how the young Liberian and Sierra Leonean women they worked with in various camps were viewing sexual intercourse as a rite of passage to adulthood, and that 16 was seen as the time to lose one’s virginity. If young women waited much longer, it was said that they would become too tight and men would have trouble “vaginating” them. According to them, virginity was no longer an absolute for women at marriage. The refugees saw Guineans as being more conservative, maintaining that virginity was still required at marriage.

From the Guinean perspective, refugees have problems with alcohol, are not modest in their dress or behavior, and the women are sexually promiscuous. Guineans often told me the same litany of problems: locals fear the refugees’ presence will lead to sickness, banditry, alcohol abuse, and rape of the local women. It was said a number of times that Guinean women fear the sexual wiles of Sierra Leonean women who try to entrap their husbands. Locals connect this moral laxness to religiosity as well, as the Christian or animist refugees are not seen to abide by the perceived norms of the Muslim community. In this sense, “The moral value attributed to the sexual behavior of women was a measure by which the community reaffirmed its self worth and value” (Abdulrahim 1993: 67).

Religious beliefs are not only a source of division, however, but are also perhaps the strongest connection camp residents forge with their hosts in Sembakounya village. The Imam who resides in the camp is a well-recognized figure who has created strong connections with the local communities through his involvement with the village mosque. He has been appointed to the 14-member Islamic committee in the Sembakounya village, which draws people from the surrounding villages for Friday prayers. As a committee member, he assists with funerals, marriages, and naming ceremonies/baptisms. He helps plan the ceremonies of both camp residents and citizens and often preaches in the mosque one hour before the main service on Friday, which draws Muslims from all the surrounding villages.

While there are divisions within the refugee Islamic community due to ethnicity and sect, they are unified in their attendance at the Sembakounya village mosque. It was said on one Friday prayer session that the local communities would allow refugees to marry their daughters, a crucial note of acceptance.

Although the neighboring communities are ambivalent about the presence of the refugees, they recognize and comment favorably on the changes and development brought along with the construction of the camp. Refugees provide a cheap and welcome source of wage labor on people’s farms. With the need to transport large heavy loads to the camp has come the total reworking of the road, which provides locals with bountiful job opportunities where there had been none before. Prior to

construction, the road was a dirt, rut-pitted affair that became near impassable during the rainy season due to washed-out bridges and mud sinkholes. The road improvements have facilitated the growth of the weekly market, which draws traders from all over the region.

The massive increase in the consumer population, 7,600 to be exact, has encouraged traders to bring all kinds of goods, both local and exotic. Many refugees are able to travel relatively long distances from the camp (although the use of public transport and identity cards is fraught with difficulty) and bring a larger variety of goods to sell. As well, refugee small businesses often get their start at the market by selling non-food items given to them by aid agencies, particularly pot sets and blankets, as well as food rations. A full pot set and plates can bring as much as 18,000 GF. When replacement pots can be bought for as little as 9,000 GF, this leaves a sufficient amount to invest in a new business (a kilo of rice is 600GF).

There are full pharmaceutical stands, food stalls and restaurants, clothing vendors and tables overflowing with any sort of plastic object you could imagine. The Wednesday market is a natural meeting place where information is passed and connections made between traders, both refugee and host. Entrepreneurial camp residents have been able to start their businesses through credit extended to them from local businessmen. These agreements are often part of a long-term relationship that is based on kinship, parental connections, and one's reputation as a businessperson. While there are extremes of opinion regarding the refugees and vice versa, the chief of Sembakounya village, along with most other village members, has adopted a wait and see attitude. According to the chief, "If the harvest comes in well and they (the refugees) don't steal anything, then things will be okay".

The Sembakounya camp case study is an example of a camp being created in a region where there had not been a long-term presence of refugees prior to camp construction. The following section describes the construction - or rather reconstruction - of the Kola camp in the N'Zerekore and the situation of self-settled Liberians in the town of Lola, located in the Forest region of south-eastern Guinea during the same time period: July-August of 2001.

### **Kola camp/Kola town relations**

The history of relations between the host community of Kola and the aid agencies is crucial for understanding the diverse contexts in which new programs are being implemented in the Forest region. According to the UN protection officer who participated in the planning of the Kola camp in March of 2001, the people of Kola town were not enthusiastic about the rebuilding of the camp. When the first Kola camp was originally built in 1993, UNHCR promised the people of Kola a new school building, compensation for the fields that would be overtaken by the camp; basically anything that would get the town to agree to host the refugees. The UNHCR received permission to build the camp, brought the refugees and, according to the townspeople, did nothing for Kola town. The school was eventually built in Bweke, the next village over, not in Kola.

According to the UN protection officer, the mayor of Kola, and the refugees who stayed in Kola even after the camp closed, there were problems from the very

beginning between the refugees and the locals. The language barrier prevented people from communicating and the UNHCR did not obtain land for the refugees; they said that the refugees should negotiate for the land themselves. It was said that the local farmers would take the refugees' tools when they went to farm and both sides constantly battled over use of the land. The refugees also said they did not know the difference between certain species and would cut down Kola trees and coffee bushes when clearing the land, greatly angering the local population.

While relations between the two populations gradually improved, on September 26, 1999, UNHCR cut off assistance to the camp. Despite the cessation of aid, there are still 63 family heads living next to the Kola village who are from the original Kola camp: roughly 200 people. Originally there were 3000 + people in Kola camp. Some Liberians repatriated to Liberia, but returned in waves due to problems resettling and then when conflict erupted once more. There are traditional programs in the village as well as activities in the camp that bring the two populations together: Saturdays are dance nights in Kola village.

As in the Sembakounya camp situation, religion is a strong unifier between the townspeople and the Liberians who stayed after the camp was disbanded. The religious composition of the refugee community reflects that of the town: the refugees are mostly Christian, with one or two Muslims. The refugees have a church, which was created in 1993 and is still standing, and did a peace and reconciliation training in Lola in 2000. The church also works with vulnerables and unidentified minor cases. There are many more Muslims arriving as refugees to the newly constructed Kola camp this time, which will alter the previously established Christian majority.

Following the conflict in 2000, UNHCR returned to Kola in order to construct a new camp, promising the mayor and townspeople of Kola - as preconditions to camp construction - to restore the town hall, construct a maternity center and school, renovate the market area, and recondition two hand pumps. UNHCR set up the new camp adjacent to the old site, as they wanted to avoid mixing the "old" and "new" refugee population right away.

The mayor of Kola believes that the camp is being built for 15,000 (even though the carrying capacity of Kola has been determined at 6000 because the site is on a swamp). The biggest conflict has been over land rights, as construction was so delayed that local farmers had already planted cash crops on the camp site. UNHCR had to negotiate again at the last minute to get access to the land for construction. It was not until July 5 at 3 pm that the construction was able to start, several months after the original start date. Many members of the Kola community are employed in camp construction activities, even to the detriment of the ongoing school construction in Kola.

Many of the children who came to Kola camp on the first convoy, particularly the ones who were on their own, had come for the IRC schools. There was a small boy who was with his auntie and was willing to leave his mother in N'Zerekore for the chance to attend school. One said that his mother stayed in Sierra Leone and sent him to go to school here. The convoy consisted mainly of women with many children - 9 or 10 - without husbands present. They were mostly Liberians, many speaking Mandingo or Kpelle. They said that the UNHCR told them to go, that it would be safer there and their children would be able to go to school and they would have food

given to them. The success of programs both within and outside Kola camp are clearly bound up with the history of refugee politics in the area as well as the specific concerns of a diverse population in the Kola town/camp area: local farmers and residents, “old” refugees, and now the “new” refugees.

### **Lola town**

Like Kola, there is a long history of interaction between the refugees and the locals in Lola town. Lola hosted a camp until 1999 and there are many refugees who stayed even when they no longer received aid. Currently there is no camp in Lola and the refugees from the former camp live in Lola town. There is still a refugee executive committee, although they no longer have financial support from UNHCR. According to the refugee chairman, there are 3-4000 refugees in the prefecture and an estimated 2000 in Lola town itself.

Each neighborhood in Lola town has a coordinator for the refugee activities who also work with the local authorities. This is how information is disseminated and if anyone wants to address the population, this is how they are contacted. The chairman claims that his role is to engage in community activities not handled by the representative of the BCR (Bureau for the Coordination of Refugees).

There are a variety of businesses owned and operated by refugees, both men and women. Some women have a soap-making business and many market-goers buy from them rather than locals because their soap is cheaper. Many women also work as domestic workers washing clothes, cleaning, and cooking. Other common job opportunities are to dig latrines and wells, work in the swampland, and have shops such as beauty salons, cosmetics and jewelry stores, fish and produce stalls, and video stores.

The IRC schools started in 1991. The refugees and UNHCR met with the Guinean education ministry, who eventually allocated them space in a Guinean school building. At first they shared these facilities with Guineans, but received permission in 1992 to build their own schools. IRC brought materials for the school construction and paid for the labor. The teachers at the Lola IRC school are concerned about the future, as they have heard that the school is about to be closed. UNHCR gave this as a reason why they should move into newly constructed camps, such as Kola. As well, it was suggested at a UN coordination meeting of implementing partners (N’Zerekore, August 7, 2001) that refugees be told that IRC schools were going to close and that they would have to move into a camp if they wanted to attend school.

There is clearly insufficient information available for refugees concerning the fate of the community schools in Lola and Beyla. Is the goal to have the schools be self-sustaining through the communities or will the schools close for good, given the Guinean government’s policy of removing all refugees to camps? Is the continuation of schools encouraging refugees to stay in towns? The example was given of the situation in Beyla, where “refugees” were refusing to move to the new camp, saying that they are actually “returnees” and are in their natal village. However, if they are returnees, then it is not in the humanitarian agencies’ mandate to be providing schools for them.

Refugees need to have a voice in this process and at very least the information necessary to help them decide whether to stay in Lola or go to the Kola camp. Refugees have been living in Lola for 10 years and are reluctant to move to a camp. Following the September 2000 crisis, displaced Liberians, Sierra Leoneans and Guineans from the Macenta and Gueckadou region also came to Lola town. There were some problems during the crisis, but most people I interviewed said that their neighbors protected them. Many refugees are adopting a wait and see attitude, because they want to know what the Kola camp is like before they move.

## **Conclusion**

Rumor has it that the Sembakounya camp, and by association, the Wednesday market will be closed in July of 2003 (IRC Correspondence: 7 November, 2002). Whether unfounded or not, this possibility raises many questions: What choices will people make about residence, work, and refugee status? Will they relocate to another refugee camp or stay where they are, enmeshed in local relationships, or return to their communities of origin - whatever that may mean for people? What will happen to people like Bettie, who were told that their cases for resettlement would only be considered if they went to Sembakounya? What will be the effects on the local economy and population?

These are questions that the camp residents think about all the time, questions that are answered not in a particular moment, but in the process of living out each day and responding to the challenges of living in a refugee camp. These questions bring our attention back to the cultural context of identities: how people's definition of themselves and their history is shaped in particular political moments, as a result of particular historical experiences, and in the memory of particular historical nightmares (Besteman 1999: 11).

The perspectives of the camp residents emanate from a set of assumptions and life strategies that view humanitarian assistance as simultaneously a resource to be exploited and a constricting force to be managed. This paper has brought attention to the ways in which the displaced look outside of this assistance framework to create networks of support with the local community, networks that are premised on flexible categories of refugee, returnee, and host.





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