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Liberians in Ghana: living without humanitarian assistance

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Introduction[1]

> Being a refugee doesn't mean that I am helpless and in need of assistance. I want UNHCR to know that yes, I am a refugee as long as I am living in exile as one who had to flee persecution and problems in my country, but I don't want one dollar of their help. Don't give me material assistance. Give me economic opportunity so that I can help myself. That's all I ask. (Wilfred Brown, a Liberian refugee in Accra, Ghana)

A long brewing crisis in Liberia broke out on 24 December 1989 in Nimba County, plunging the country into seven years of intermittent anarchy and bloodshed. As a result, Liberians fleeing the violence scattered throughout the West African region and beyond. Liberians who escaped to Ghana began arriving there around May 1990 on evacuation flights meant for Ghanaian nationals leaving Liberia. By August 1990 the Ghanaian government set up an ad hoc Committee on Refugees in response to the arrival of an increasing number of Liberian refugees by land and sea. This committee decided to use the abandoned church premises of Gomoa Buduburam, located about 45 minutes drive East of Accra, as a reception centre for accommodating this influx.

By the end of September 1990 there were about 7,000 Liberians at Buduburam, the refugee camp, with an estimated 2,000 settled on their own in Accra (Essuman-Johnson, 1992:37). While Ghanaian churches and generous individuals were the first to come to the aid of the refugees, the Ghanaian government called upon the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide assistance. Under the care of the humanitarian aid regime, a flood of relief aid descended upon the refugees making food, blankets, medicine, water and other necessities available (Karnga, 1997).

My aim in this paper is to use data that I collected in Ghana during the summer of 2000 to provide further evidence to refute what Gaim Kibreab (1993) has called 'the myth of dependency' among refugees. This myth is based on the assumption that living on handouts fosters a lack of motivation and willingness to work and take initiatives in order to earn an income and become self-sufficient. If this were true one would expect that Liberian refugees would be unable to survive in Ghana without humanitarian assistance, but this has not been the case. Although the gradual process of reducing aid to Liberians began in 1997, as of 30 June 2000 UNHCR officially withdrew all assistance to Liberian refugees in Ghana and the West Africa region in general with the hope that this would encourage Liberians to repatriate. However, Liberians remained in Ghana for reasons that will be explained.

On the basis of the data collected, I will argue that Liberian refugees are capable, enterprising and industrious, adapting survival strategies and adjusting to changing circumstances in order to maximise opportunities available to them in exile. These findings have general implications for understanding how refugees anywhere are able to live without humanitarian assistance and why they may choose to remain as refugees even when the aid regime considers repatriation the preferable solution.

[1] This paper is based on a thesis submitted for a Master's degree at Oxford University, 2001.

Literature review

An overview of the literature on the humanitarian aid regime is a necessary starting point since Liberians in Ghana have been under the regime's umbrella until recently, at least officially if not actually. A commonly held perception among humanitarian aid workers is that the reluctance or refusal of refugees to give up entitlements to food rations, to leave the camps and to repatriate is an indication of alleged dependency (Kibreab, 1993:329). In contrast to these assumptions, recent research has shown that rather than being passive recipients of aid refugees are in fact capable of making the aid regime work for them in ways they deem appropriate for facilitating their own rehabilitation and development while in exile. In addition, refugees may not consider returning home their best option for a variety of reasons.

To begin with, it is necessary to determine what is meant by the humanitarian aid regime and to specify what it does. The key actors of the regime are the UNHCR, host governments, and various non-government organizations (NGOs), or private organisations.[2] In a refugee crisis, it has become standard practice for host governments to place refugees into settlements or camps. Typically because the cost of assisting refugees is high, the host government calls upon the UNHCR, which annually raises funds to assist refugees. The UNHCR usually takes on the role of coordinating and funding the various NGOs, called implementing partners that provide direct assistance to the refugees.

There are several perceived advantages for utilising the refugee camp assistance strategy (Black, 1998). First, it is argued that host governments can better enhance the security of refugees in camps as well as protect their own population from insurgents. Second, refugee health care can supposedly be more effectively monitored in a camp situation. Third, in camps, refugees are highly visible making it easier for the aid regime to raise funds to finance their operations. Fourth and perhaps most important, aid can be delivered efficiently to a central location and distributed to those who need it. In an apt summary, the refugee camp tradition has been described as "the most efficient method of distributing aid to a constituency that [has] been labeled as requiring it" (Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995:210).

Each of these purported justifications for camps has been taken to task by academics in the field of refugee studies. As to security issues, camps can become a base for military operations, and the safety of civilians can be jeopardised as a result as was the case in camps set up for Rwandan refugees in Zaire and Tanzania from 1994 to 1996 (Black, 1998:5). Health concerns also arise in situations where camps are crowded and refugees have insufficient access to curative care (Harrell-Bond, 1983:214-229). In some cases camps may in fact exacerbate the marginalisation of refugees onto the poorest quality, least accessible land (Black, 1998:5). In other situations, the privileged position of refugees who have access to international assistance may create tensions between the poorer host population and the refugees

[2] These actors are identified in the *Statute of the Office of the UNHCR* (1950) which stipulates that "*The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, acting under the authority of the General Assembly, shall assume the function of providing international protection, under the auspices of the United Nations, to refugees who fall within the scope of the present Statute and of seeking permanent solution for the problem of refugees by assisting *Governments* and, subject to the approval of the Governments concerned, *private organisations* to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of such refugees, or their assimilation within new national communities" (emphasis added).

(Chambers, 1986:245). In general, camps are characterised by “segregation from the host population, the need to share facilities, a lack of privacy, plus overcrowding and a limited, restricted area within which the whole compass of daily life is to be conducted” (Stein, 1981:324).

However, the more general, all encompassing critique of camps concerns matters of power, patronage and control. Barbara Harrell-Bond’s analysis of the humanitarian aid regime in *Imposing Aid* (1986) offers a stinging critique of the way in which humanitarian aid fosters dependency and cripples the dignity of refugees by treating them as helpless and in need of outsiders to plan for them and to take care of them. According to the aid regime the condition for the free gift of aid “is construed in terms of absolute destitution on the part of the recipient” (Harrell-Bond *et al*., 1992:207).

The media perpetuates these images and NGOs often find them useful for the purpose of fundraising based on the assumption that compassion is what governs humanitarian assistance. However, western notions of compassion tend to be inherently ethnocentric, paternalistic and unprofessional. ‘Proper refugees’, that is, refugees of concern to NGOs and the ‘compassionate’ public, are those who conform to the image of an ‘exemplary victim’. Liisa Malkki (1996) argues that rather than helping the situation, portraying refugees in this way in effect serves to silence them. Refugees stop being specific persons and are relegated to the status of pure victim. As a generic category, they are viewed “no longer as a woman, a man or a child in need of protection, but rather as a unit of flight, a unit of displacement, to be contained and thereafter channeled down whatever humanitarian corridor leads to whatever political end” (Goodwin-Gill, 1999:246).

In order to maintain access to aid entitlements, refugees under the aid umbrella often change their behaviour to match the expectations and requirements of the aid regime. Under the care of UNHCR, they feel obligated to assume the role of dependent children. Harrell-Bond (1986:91) points out that Sudanese refugees often referred to UNHCR as their ‘mother’ or ‘father’, highlighting the type of relationship that exists between the benefactors and beneficiaries of aid. As UNHCR’s ‘children’, refugees have little choice but to surrender autonomy and freedom of action. However, her argument is not that refugees are in essence dependent, but rather that the humanitarian aid regime requires camp refugees to act as though they are dependent even if they have the desire to become self-sufficient.

Kibreab’s (1993) analysis of Somali refugees reinforces this distinction between actual and perceived dependence. He points out the seemingly paradoxical combination of the willingness of refugees in the camps to work “often for infinitesimal returns, whenever opportunities existed” (p. 332) and their unwillingness to give up their assistance entitlements. He argues that even though Somali refugees exhibited simulated traits of poverty or dependency, this was not a reflection of actual dependency but rather representative of the low levels of income they earned from the activities in which they were engaged. Holding onto their food rations was a completely rational strategy for facilitating their livelihood in exile, even for those whose lives would not have been immediately at risk if they relinquished their rations.

So rather than viewing refugees as dependent on the aid regime, it would seem that the aid regime has become dependent on the dependency of refugees. Emanuel Marx (1990:198) argues that:

> The competent authorities rarely concede that the helpless refugees they met on arrival gradually acquire some power of their own, and that they integrate into society. The organisations try to hold onto their powers, and to treat their wards for as long as they can as 'refugees', thus denying them such basic rights of mobility, work, education and housing.

Perhaps a clearer rendering of the concept should read "aid workers treat refugees for as long as they can as 'their wards'". Many refugees recognise that "as the visible signs of one's social refugeeness fade, one's worthiness as a recipient of material assistance [is] likely to decrease" (Malkki, 1996:385). Ironically, in the very act of trying to make needy victims into self-sufficient people, the aid regime runs the risk of requiring self-sufficient people to act like needy victims.

For aid agencies to remain in business, they need to provide goods and services that refugees are thought to be unable to provide for themselves, otherwise there is no reason for them to exist. From the perspective of the aid regime, the gift of aid should be gratefully received by the recipients and used for pure consumption. However, it is very common for refugees to "transform material assistance into currency to acquire the other essentials [and non-essentials] of life" (Harrell-Bond *et al*., 1992:210).

When this happens aid workers and donors often try to enforce 'correct usage' of aid, namely direct consumption, reasoning that the recipients of aid have no right to sell that gift in order to buy items such as other types of food or new clothes.[3] As a result, refugees who take aid when it appears that they no longer need it or use it in ways not prescribed by the aid regime are considered 'illegal'. They pose a threat to the legitimacy of the aid regime that exists only to provide for the basic needs of desperately poor and needy people.

Contrary to the aid regime's typical perception of camp refugees[4] as "broken men accepting charity", a more useful metaphor for understanding the actual workings of the refugee community is that of "a set of chessmen deployed across the board" (Harrell-Bond, 1986:118-152). Refugees strategically switch roles and divide themselves up so as to maximise whatever opportunities come along. If refugees can find better ways to sustain themselves than what the aid regime can offer, they will pursue those opportunities even if it means that their entitlement to aid may be jeopardised.

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[3] Harrell-Bond *et al.* (1992:210) argue that "the humanitarian regime behaves as though through the act of receiving, the refugee has accepted a contractual obligation to consume whatever has been given, regardless of the adequacy or appropriateness of the gift. To ensure such compliance requires the regime to control refugee populations and it has assumed the right to introduce (extra-judicial) sanctions for their failure to comply".

[4] Harrell-Bond (1986:119-120) also mentions the tendency for outsiders to assume that self-settled refugees are "brave individualists maintaining their freedom in the face of adversity". However, the distinction between camp refugees and self-settled refugees may not be so clear cut when one considers the variety of coping mechanisms refugees typically employ in order to maximise every possible economic option available.

As a result refugees tend to be highly mobile. Some family members may stay in the camps to claim food rations while others are employed in whatever day labour is available in urban areas, and still others may be sent to rural areas to look after family livestock (Harrell-Bond, *et al*., 1992:211). Refugees are often considered as a monolithic, homogeneous category, but the reality is that they represent a diversity of experiences, skills and abilities that facilitate varying levels of economic success. The population in camps typically becomes considerably stratified and various standards of living emerge among the refugees ranging from abysmal poverty to comparative comfort (Kibreab, 1993:341).

From the perspective of UNHCR, the question that must constantly be considered is 'how long is a refugee a refugee'. In other words 'for how long is this person eligible to receive assistance'. The basis of confusion over who is and who is not a refugee seems to stem from UNHCR's broadened view of the definition of what is 'protection' and who is a 'refugee'. The official mandate of the UNHCR is to provide international protection for refugees and, together with governments, to seek permanent solutions to their problems.[5] Traditionally, UNHCR's protection mandate referred to the organisation's diplomatic and legal efforts on behalf of refugees, but in recent years it has been interpreted to mean the provision of material assistance to refugees in places where the host government is unable or unwilling to provide for them (Goodwin-Gill, 1999:222). As a result of this shift, a refugee is often defined, if not explicitly than implicitly, in terms of whether or not he or she needs aid.

From an international law perspective, the definitions of 'protection' and 'refugee' are defined more narrowly. Rather than defining 'protection' in terms of material assistance, the concept is based on the principle of non-refoulement which "[obliges] states, even now non-parties, not to return a refugee to a territory where his or her life or freedom may be endangered" (Goodwin-Gill, 1999:221). A person eligible for this protection is a refugee, defined as someone who has "a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, outside the country of his or her nationality" (*UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 1951, Article 1).

The political reality is "that those who prove entitlement to non-refoulement wind up also with an entitlement to asylum [in the host country] in the stronger sense" (Martin, 1991:33). So while the provision of aid may be interpreted to be a part of protection, whether or not a refugee needs aid is not the defining criteria for maintaining one's status as a refugee and the right to seek asylum. The point is a refugee remains a refugee until he or she no longer has "a well-founded fear of persecution" in his or her country of origin or until he or she naturalises in a host country.

Issues of legal status can become complicated when peace and security are restored in the refugees' country of origin, especially when that peace is tenuous a best and a cover for ongoing turmoil at worst. In Africa, refugee status is often granted on a prima facie, or collective, basis when large numbers cross international borders at the same time.[6] When conditions at home improve prima facie refugees may still feel they

[5] See footnote 2 for UNHCR's mandate.

[6] According to the *OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa* (1974, Article 1), the term refugee also applies "to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part of or the

have a legitimate claim to asylum while the host government may disagree as is the case for Liberians in Ghana. However, it is very difficult for host governments to remove refugee status on a prima facie basis. Instead usually each person's claim for remaining as a refugee must be assessed individually. This process is typically time-consuming and requires a great deal of bureaucratic organisation. In developing countries such as Ghana that have limited resources to fund such a bureaucracy, the government often gives low priority to the process of individual status determination.[7] In the mean time whether or not the population is in fact de jure refugees, there are often benefits to maintaining the bureaucratic label on a de facto basis.

Zetter's analysis (1991) of the housing policy for Greek-Cypriot refugees in Cyprus is instructive for understanding these benefits. First, for the Greek-Cypriot refugees, even when housing was no longer a specific need they continued to use it as a negotiating device since dependency on the government for housing meant that the providers would be obligated to adopt new responsibilities and widen existing provisions generation by generation. Second, by sustaining an image of being in transition the Greek-Cypriots maintained their status as a special interest group with room to maneuver and manipulate opportunities.

The refugees were better able to avert the marginalisation of their interests by failing to assimilate into the host community. In turn the government of Cyprus was willing to play the dependency game in order "to sustain an international identity of an unresolved international issue" (p. 56). Corresponding to the Greek-Cypriot situation, in section four of this paper the ways in which Liberians benefit from maintaining the refugee label will become evident. Even though Liberians have resisted the humanitarian aid regime's control over their lives, they find it in their best interest to avoid integration into the host community and to hold on to their de facto refugee status in order to pursue their own interests.

Another consideration for why refugees may wish to remain refugees and resist repatriation rests not on the feasibility of actually getting home, but the difficulties associated with securing a livelihood and resuming daily life once they actually are home (Green, 2000). If refugees stay on in exile at least they can maintain the status quo, but returning home requires amassing working-capital to re-establish their households and their businesses, a task that is beyond the reach of many refugees who struggle to provide their daily needs. As a result the process of returning home is often gradual as refugees consider the costs and benefits of shifting from the camp to home. For example, a household may send one or two family members home first to scout out conditions and make initial preparations. The perceived opportunities or lack of opportunities at home play a significant role in determining who goes home and when.

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whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality". In expanding the parameters of the UN definition, the OAU makes provisions for recognising large groups of refugees often displaced by wars in Africa.

[7] In Ghana, the government has begun an individual status determination process, but as of September 2000, it was not widely or strictly implemented.

In considering the refugee experience as a whole, it is often assumed that the experience of war causes social norms to disintegrate. An alternative perspective more
in keeping with the realities of a changing world holds that pain and suffering, rather than being anomalies, are part of ordinary social experience (Davis, 1992). People place catastrophes such as war into their collective social memory and incorporate it within their accumulated culture. A study of an urban Greek refugee settlement in Turkey (Hirschon, 2000) provides empirical evidence to support this claim. Although the community faced material deprivation, economic disadvantage and marginalisation, the refugees maintained their cultural practices and values and were able to create a well-functioning neighbourhood life. Similarly Liberian refugees in Ghana have not been incapacitated by their war experiences but instead they move forward constantly adapting to meet present challenges in familiar ways.

In summary, the 'myth of dependency' erroneously perpetuated by the media and by the humanitarian aid regime assumes that refugees function in a historical vacuum devoid of assisting social networks and previously gained skills and experiences, thus severely underestimating the capabilities of refugees. More accurately even though refugees may make adaptational changes to profit from the aid regime that rewards dependency, this does not mean that refugees relinquish their former culture and values and their desire for independence from outside control. Instead the history and culture of refugees contribute to the ways in which they are able to sustain themselves in exile. It has been argued that "the majority of coping mechanisms are based on precedents" (Bennet, 1976:849 in Kibreab, 1993:338). Such has been the case for Liberian refugees in Ghana as will be demonstrated.

Methodology

Before beginning, the analysis a description of my research methodology is in order. Information obtained from secondary sources is supplemented by the following. First, dissertations on related topics written by Liberian undergraduate students in Ghana provided useful background material for this study (Appendix 1). Second, a survey of churches at the camp, referenced in chapter three, highlights the prominence of church activity at the camp and supplements the analysis of the important role Christianity plays in the lives of Liberian refugees (Appendix 2).

The basis of the analysis of the current situation Liberians face in Ghana, contained in the following sections, comes from primary source data collected from aid workers, government representatives and various individuals knowledgeable about Liberians in Ghana (Appendix 3) and from Liberian refugees themselves (Appendix 4).[8] I conducted field research in Ghana between 31 July and 10 September 2000, and the majority of that time I lived among Liberian refugees at the Buduburam Refugee Settlement, 'the camp', but I also spoke with several Liberians living in Accra and

[8] To distinguish information given by refugees in informal discussions from information that was given by non-refugees in formal interviews, refugees are referenced as "(The refugee's first name, the date on which the information was shared)" and non-refugees are referenced as "(Interview with (the interviewee's surname), the date on which the interview was conducted)". I felt it appropriate to credit refugees for information given by using their first names only. I withheld their surnames in order to provide a degree of anonymity. In some cases in the discussion I withheld the first name of a person when I considered the information he or she provided to be of a sensitive nature.

Kumasi. My primary method of research was informal interviewing. In conversations I took on the role of learner and asked refugees about their daily activities, about life in Ghana, about their plans for the future and followed up with questions on the topics that seemed important to them. I decided against having a formal interview schedule to prevent the possibility of refugees feeling obligated to tailor their responses to my perceived expectations. Relying on qualitative approaches to data collection such as participant observation and informal focus group discussions seemed a more appropriate way to collect reliable data.

Data from my field research comes primarily from thirty-five Liberian refugees although I had opportunities to interact with many more refugees whose comments have informed my research as well. It should be made clear that my sample is purposive, not random. I lived with a Liberian pastor and his wife in the camp and spent a lot of time with them and their friends and acquaintances. Generally one acquaintance would lead me to others, and thus my sample was derived from a snowballing technique. In discussions having a pen and paper seemed to distract people, so I usually wrote up my field notes after each conversation, or whenever convenient. My recollections may not be exact, but I trust that they accurately reflect what was said.

I have compiled a chart (Appendix 4) that provides some basic information about the Liberian refugees who participated in this study showing what economic activities they were involved in, how frequently they receive remittances from the US, their level of church involvement and their future plans. These categories were formed after the research was conducted in order to provide a cursory overview of issues that came up over and over again in conversations with Liberians. Because I did not have a set interview schedule, I did not always obtain complete information from every individual in each of the categories. In some cases, especially in regards to money and religious involvement, I did not think it appropriate to ask for information unless the person brought up the subject first. My analysis of the data will highlight the significance of the information represented.

In the analysis, I distinguish between camp refugees and town refugees, the town being Accra. However, these categories are not rigid since there is considerable movement back and forth between the town and camp. For example, town refugees often come to the camp for social visits and the population of the camp is said to swell whenever resettlement interviews are being conducted. In turn, camp refugees may go to town to engage in various economic activities or to go to school. Although precise figures are not available with estimations of the number of Liberians in Ghana ranging from 8,000 to 20,000, it is generally assumed that significantly fewer Liberians live in Accra than at the camp.[9]

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[9] No one really knows precisely how many refugees there are in any of the countries that host refugees (in Harrell-Bond *et al*., 1992:212). However, for purposes of fund-raising it is necessary for UNHCR to produce 'official' statistics. UNHCR usually depends on host governments to provide statistical information, but often host governments in developing countries do not have the resources to adequately conduct such a survey. In addition, political reasons may influence either the over-estimation or the under-estimation of the number of refugees in a host country. According to the most recent statistics published by the Ghana Refugee Board and UNHCR-Ghana (*Help Refugees Help Themselves*, p. 18), the number of Liberian refugees in Ghana peaked at 20,000 in December 1996. But as of June 1998 numbers were down to 13,474. However, according to the Ghanaian Camp Manager at Buduburam (Interview with Akyempong, 15/8/00), appointed by National Mobilisation Programme which is the government organisation responsible for dealing with crises in Ghana, there

Therefore, even though almost a third of the refugees in the study were town refugees, this does not accurately reflect the distribution of Liberian refugees. Rather it is indicative of my original intention to do a comparative study between camp refugees and town refugees.[10] My research assistant who lived at the camp took me to visit several of his friends in town, and other refugees at the camp introduced me to some of their Liberian friends in town as well. So while the chart divides refugees on the basis of where they live, this does not indicate that the refugees in a particular category confine themselves to the town or to the camp.

In addition, I include information given by Liberians living in Kumasi, which is located three hours North of Accra by bus. These three refugees reported that there is a very small population of Liberians in Kumasi, and they have very little, if any, interaction with Liberians at the camp or in Accra. Although they did not benefit from the aid distributed at Buduburam, Liberians in Kumasi are utilising survival strategies similar to those used by the other refugees interviewed. It should be noted that I knew the Liberians in Kumasi previous to my visit with them.[11]

The refugees in the study are usually represented as individuals (in a few cases as siblings or as a couple) although some are related to each other so the information they provided may overlap. For instance, two refugees may benefit from remittances received from the same family member in the US, or a person may be a student with no reported economic activities when in fact another family member engaged in some income generating activity is providing for him or her. Unfortunately, this makes it difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the relative importance of remittances and/or economic activities in people's survival strategies.

In some ways singling out individuals instead of focusing on households has skewed my data, but gathering more precise information was constrained by the following factors. First, because I was in Ghana for only six weeks, I did not have sufficient time to come to a clear understanding of how family networks and acquaintances are linked together and benefit one another. Second, many Liberian families were split up during the war, so individuals within a household may each have very different stories to tell, and it is difficult to piece together when and where they were together and how they assisted one another. In addition, the number of people in the household may fluctuate often. For example, in the house where I stayed, we had anywhere from three to seven people sleeping under one roof depending on who was visiting and who was travelling. Finally, Liberians tend to call friends and acquaintances 'auntie,' 'uncle,' 'sister' and 'brother' regardless of biological relationship so it is not always immediately obvious who is part of the household and who is just visiting. Recognising these limitations I trust that the data accurately reflects the issues most important to Liberian refugees.

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are about 8,000 'official' Liberian refugees at the camp and about 8,000 'illegal' residents. He defined 'illegal' residents as people not recognised or registered as refugees by the Ghanaian government or UNHCR. He explained that because there are many ways to enter the camp, it is impossible to regulate who comes and goes.

[10] When I began my research I assumed that the distinction between town and camp refugees would be clear. Upon discovering that town and camp refugees have more similarities than differences in regards to coping mechanisms used for surviving without aid, it proved more relevant to assess the similarities rather than to make distinctions.

[11] I lived in Liberia from 1980-1989, and the Liberians in Kumasi are friends from that time.

The history that shapes Liberian refugees

Refugees are often portrayed in the media as a mass of desperate humanity pouring across international borders in search of a safe haven. While there is some truth in this perception, it tends to dehistoricise refugees making them a generic category, universally defined (Malkii, 1996). But each refugee crisis is a product of a long history culminating in the conflict that causes people to flee their homes. And once refugees reach a place of safety, social norms and cultural practices are not necessarily discarded. On the contrary, the conditions of exile require displaced populations to adapt and adjust, but refugees continue to utilise old patterns of survival employed in new ways given the changed circumstances. All refugees may have similar basic needs for food, shelter and water, but to understand how a refugee community re-establishes themselves in a foreign land, refugees must be understood within their historical context.

In this section, I will focus on three broad aspects of Liberian history that have influenced and continue to influence the lives of Liberians in exile. First, the historical significance of Liberia's origins in the US must be established since the US continues to be of great importance for the way Liberian culture evolves, for social networks Liberians maintain, and for the opportunities they are able to pursue. Second, an outline of Liberia's subsequent history traces the unraveling of the nation, leading up to the civil war that caused hundreds of thousands of Liberians to flee their country. Third, while a consideration for material explanations of the war is of primary importance, spiritual explanations will also be considered as an essential parallel to understanding political and social transformations taking place. In highlighting the significant aspects of Liberia's history the groundwork for understanding Liberians in exile will be shown.

Liberia: America's solution to slavery

The founding of the nation of Liberia has been described as the "privatisation of a public responsibility," the public responsibility being the problem of slavery in the US (Sanneh, 1999:203). In search of a solution to this evil, the white founders of the American Colonisation Society (ACS), established in 1787, advocated the establishment of a colony in Africa. The benefits of such a colony appeared obvious (in Liebenow, 1969:2-7; Sanneh, 1999:187-192; Sawyer, 1992:13-41). First, sending freed slaves back to Africa would rid America of a social and moral problem. Second, it would allow Africa to receive what were considered to be partially civilised and Christianised blacks. And third, the blacks themselves would achieve freedom and opportunity by going to Africa. The idea was not to build a material empire, but the colony was justified on grounds that it would extend American ideals to Africa.

Certainly the history of the region that is now Liberia long predates American interests in the area. In 1817 when two members of the ACS, Mills and Burgess, came to stake out land for the new American colony, they met a sub region in which systems of political and social organisation were already well defined. Well-

established patterns of trade with routes, coastal ports and inland posts and a profitable commerce in slaves and commodities had existed for at least two centuries, and relations with Europeans were entrenched (Sawyer, 1992:69).

Fearing that an American colony would grow strong and rule their people, the coastal chiefs ruling the land that is now part of Liberia flatly refused to co-operate with Mill and Burgess by signing a deed to the land. However, the ACS was not dissuaded and took a successful report to Congress, which subsequently delegated responsibility for the colony to President Monroe.

In 1821 the ACS acting in a private capacity forcibly seized Liberia ushering in the beginning of American influence upon the population (in Liebenow, 1969:4; Sanneh, 1999:203-210). President Monroe gave Lieutenant Stockton unlimited power to purchase land and sent him to negotiate with King Peter, the most powerful of the coastal chiefs. After the King refused to meet with Stockton and his colleague Ayres, they pursued him to his village and threatened him at gunpoint. Understandably, on 15 December 1821 King Peter and five of his subordinate chiefs arrived promptly at a designated meeting place to cede Cape Mesurado, not surprisingly to Stockton and Ayres personally. As payment for their land, the chiefs received muskets, beads, tobacco, gunpowder, clothing, a looking glass, food, rum and other items valued at $300. Since it was a private settlement scheme, and not federal, the new colony was not entitled to US government financial subsidy or military protection.[12] Here in lay the seeds of a relationship between the US and Liberia that connected Liberia to the US but allowed the US the convenience of having no real responsibility in the affairs of the state.

The settler community arrived a "beleaguered huddle of unwanted blacks who left America where their race conflicted with their freedom to find refuge in Africa where their freedom conflicted with their security" (Sanneh, 1999:210). The primary problem behind the successful implementation of the colonisation plan was that the formers of the plan and the freed slaves themselves completely lacked any understanding of the situation to which the emigrants were going (Sawyer, 1992:38). The ACS assumed that freed slaves would prefer deportation to remaining in the United States, but many African American groups criticised the colony as a way "to take away America's black rejects to the remote continent of their origin" (Sanneh, 1999:215). In addition, given the great cost of repatriation and the rapid birth rate of the black population in the US,[13] the resettlement plan was destined to be an ineffective strategy for erasing America's 'moral problem'.[14]

> Despite the enthusiasm of the white founders of the ACS, the efforts at emigration or repatriation had affected only a small number of the free

[12] When President Monroe introduced the prospect of an African colony to his cabinet, they vetoed the idea. As a result, Monroe's role in the Liberia project was not officially authorised. In addition, when King Peter signed the deed to the land that would become Liberia, the documents were written up in the name of Lieutenant Stockton, Monroe's representative and not in the name of the US government thus making Liberia a private enterprise and not a US federal responsibility (Sanneh, 1999:203-210). However, because of Monroe's initial involvement in the ACS scheme, the capital city of Liberia was named Monrovia in his honour.

[13] In the twelve years of ACS's activities, some 2,500 blacks were transported to Liberia while in the same period 700,000 blacks were born in the US (Sanneh, 1999:218).

[14] Ironically, some of the settlers of Liberia became perpetuators of the 'moral problem' of slavery by becoming slave traders themselves (Sanneh, 1999:220).