

Understanding Benefactor and Beneficiary: Protest Stories in Nakivale Camp

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This is a story of a protest in Nakivale Refugee Camp in southern Uganda in 1998. This is an exploration of how the protest was a controversial moment of resistance, as a significant population of the camp publicly disputed the policies of the team of authorities in charge of the camp. Yet the protests were also conventional, because no one ever took up the radical implications of some of the protesters' claims. At the heart of this analysis is an effort to critically examine the stories of these protests, so that we can explore this question: What is said and what remains silent about the relationship between the humanitarian aid project – which includes international aid organizations, its local branches, and host government participation – and the populations they are set up to assist? I will use two main strategies: One, looking closely not only at the stated claims of each "side," but also looking for the claims which are **not** stated, that is, the assumptions too "ordinary" to mention; two, examining these contemporary stories with an eye to the past, remembering the dynamics of power throughout the history of the relationship between the "global south" (the so-called "beneficiary," sometimes "partner") and the "global north" (the so-called "donor states"). With these strategies in mind, I argue that these

¹For the candor, sharp insight, and generosity of the residents and administrative officials of Nakivale Camp, I am very grateful. I also thank my research associates, Kaihura Moses and Ndahiriwe Jean de Dieu, for their indispensable role in making this research happen; the Fulbright Scholarship Board, for its crucial financial support; and Professor Barbara Harrell-Bond, for establishing and drawing me into a center of learning about refugees and forced migration at Makerere University.

²This draft, dated 1 July 2000, will be amended once all responses and criticisms have been gathered from the participants. This draft will not be submitted for publication, but will constitute the basis for my presentation at the *Conference on Conflict and Peace-Making in the Great Lakes Region*, 10-12 July 2000, Entebbe, Uganda.

stories suggest that we re-think our conception of "aid." Rather than envisioning aid as a unilateral flow of resources from the global north to global south, from aid organization to the refugee-beneficiary, we might instead explore the ways in which the global north and the humanitarian aid project have always been **dependent** on the south and its refugee-beneficiaries. What if these protest-stories are put to use, not to prove that refugees "have" power, but to explore how the humanitarian aid project is dependent on them **as** refugees? Perhaps, with this approach, we may draw a clearer picture of the dynamics of power, not only between the administration and refugees in Nakivale, but also between the global north and south.

I will begin with a brief narrative of the protest and a discussion of my approach. A more detailed explication of the claims advanced by refugees and officials in the protests will follow. This explication will highlight the words of those who, in effect, asked the question, "Who profits from whom in this camp?" The exploration of this question will involve the story of another protest in Nakivale Camp, initiated from within the Somali zone. I will then situate the analysis within the trajectory of current work on the relationship between the global south and north. The analysis will conclude with a discussion of three themes from the protest stories: the role of "coping mechanisms" and refugee ingenuity, the ambiguous status accorded to "educated" refugees, and the rhetoric of "equality." What role do these themes play in the stories about the protests? What can we learn, from their deployment in the narratives, about the relationship between "benefactor" and "beneficiary" in Nakivale Camp?

1998 began with a standoff between the administration and residents of Nakivale Camp. Unsure of the actual number of people in the camp, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began a camp-wide census and registration exercise.

Using a method which was new to Nakivale, officials registered nearly all of the arrivals from Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Somalia. When officials came to the arrivals from the former Zaire and the now-Democratic Republic of Congo, however, they found a population virtually united against the exercise. This new registration method, claimed the people from Congo, contradicts the commands and warnings of God, as written in the book of Revelation. Accepting this registration method would therefore be a serious sin. Unable to reach agreement with the UNHCR, a delegation of protesters appealed to the local government. At the request of the Resident District Commissioner of Mbarara, the UNHCR agreed to register and count the Congolese as they wished, using an alternate method.³

I do not intend to judge the merit or "correctness" of any party's claims in the protest, whether an aid worker's or a refugee's: sanctifying one "voice" and demonizing the other is rarely an accurate or productive strategy. Nor do I intend to draw a neat distinction between the two "sides": the stories showed that neither the aid organizations nor the refugees constitute a monolithic, internally consistent entity. Nor will I name one as aggressor and one as victim; power, as these stories will show, is not the monopoly of the aid organizations, even when the refugees "lose" the conflict. Rather, I will argue that the stories of this protest suggest different ways of thinking about the relationship between the humanitarian aid project and the populations they are set up to assist, including the host nations. Given the depth of the involvement of international humanitarian aid organizations in refugees' lives in Uganda, and given the scope of

³Interviews conducted with camp residents and administration of Nakivale Camp. At the risk of essentializing the narrative, I have chosen to include these basic outlines of the conflict, which represent details that virtually everyone – camp residents, staff, officials – seemed to agree upon. Even this basic outline can, however, hide the internal conflicts within and between the parties to the protests.

the organizations' institutional presence – which includes extensive development projects, administrative centers, and hundreds of refugee camps in the region – it is appropriate to assess their significance to the “refugee population” and to the populations which host them. Central to this study is the idea that it is as important and appropriate to assess the significance of “refugees” and “host nations” to the aid project and the “donor states.” I will not treat the structure and practice of the aid project as an inevitable response to the realities of massive human catastrophe. Such an approach is tantamount to granting humanitarian aid organizations a privileged status above critical analysis. Rather, I will treat the structure and practice of the aid project as a consequence of complex social, political, and economic relationships.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's recent study provides guidance for a responsible and critically engaged history-writing. Spivak tells a story of the Rani of Sirmur, who, with the blessing of British authority, assumed the position of local chief in colonial India. The Rani occupies no major or sustained role in the British colonial record, but it is her absence which interests Spivak:

...I do want to dwell on this all too familiar phenomenon to note the pattern of exclusions that makes the familiar function as such. As the historical record is made up, who is dropped out, when, and why?

That is, a critically engaged history can move away from the “narrative or intellectual analysis of great events”⁴ – those stories which are rendered important for their sheer **presence** in the historical record – and toward the hunt for stories deemed too “ordinary” to mention. The events in Nakivale Refugee Camp appeared to attract little sustained attention in the national and

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 237-238.

international media⁵; perhaps this is because the events involved what is regarded as a marginalized population in a remote area of the country, or perhaps because their resolution was "ordinary." What was more interesting to me, however, is that for many of the refugees and officials I spoke with, the protest of 1998 was not the most important part of their lived history thus far. Some of them asked why I was not studying more "important" things, such as the violence and corruption of the local police unit, the high child mortality rate, and the overcrowded primary school. At the time I cited my lack of qualification to conduct a public health or education study. To these reasons I now also add my ongoing hope that a close study of "ordinary" protest-stories will suggest that the extra-ordinarily difficult lived reality in Nakivale Camp may be, in some way, related to the way that "aid" is envisioned.

In four weeks in Nakivale Camp, in February and March 2000, my research associates/translators and I interviewed twenty-eight residents of the camp. We conducted the most interviews with people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and with smaller numbers of people from Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Kenya.⁶ As a practice, we generally approached

⁵ There was a brief exchange between the editorial board of *The Monitor*, Uganda's independent daily newspaper, and the UNHCR, at the start of February 1998. *The Monitor* ran both a front-page news article and an editorial sympathetic to the refugees, in which the methods of the UNHCR's registration system were compared to the branding of Jews in Nazi concentration camps ["Refugees to be marked with indelible ink," by Luganda Ahmed Musoga, in *The Sunday Monitor* (1 February 1998): 1-2, and "It's wrong to brand refugees," in *The Sunday Monitor* (1 February 1998): 3.]. The UNHCR representative in Uganda, Hans Thoolen, responded in a letter that the comparison was "distasteful and utterly wrong" ["Refugees not 'branded,'" by Hans Thoolen, in *The Monitor* (5 February 1998): 4.] .

⁶ Nakivale Camp is divided into six major "zones" along the lines of nationality; these are referred to as the Rwandese, Kenyan, Ethiopian, Somali, Congolese, and Zairian zones. As regards the last two zones, an administrative distinction is drawn between those who fled the country before 1997, when Mobutu Sese Seko was president of "Zaire", and those who fled
(continued...)

community and church leaders first and then requested that they recommend others who might feel comfortable speaking with us, in individual or group sessions, about the protests.⁷ During these weeks and after, I also spoke with eight people in the camp and in Mbarara town who work with refugees in various capacities. This group included representatives of the Ugandan government, members of the national police force, the UNHCR, and the Uganda Red Cross, which, as "implementing partner" to the UNHCR in Nakivale Camp, is responsible for the day-to-day administration and maintains a significant daily presence there. All of these people will be referred to as "officials" in this analysis, in the interest of maintaining their anonymity.⁸

⁶ (...continued)

during and after 1998, since Laurent Kabila became president of the "Democratic Republic of Congo." Sometimes the "Zairian" zone is called the "Banyamulenge" zone, reflecting the supposed ethnic composition of the population who fled persecution in eastern Zaire before 1997. Sometimes the term "Congolese" encompassed both zones. Translators varied with the primary language of the interviewee. Within the Congolese, Rwandese, and Kenyan zones, translation from Kinyarwanda or Kiswahili was provided by either of two men from Rwanda, one of whom had resided briefly in Nakivale in 1990. The chairperson of the Ethiopian zone assisted in translation from Amharic when necessary, while a man from the Somali zone provided translation from Somali. When quoting from these interviews, I will identify the speaker according to the camp "zone" in which he or she lives, which usually simultaneously indicates his or her nationality, and the church denomination with which he or she identifies.

I did not anticipate the consequence of this approach: the majority of our interviewees were men. Perhaps I should have anticipated this, and the criticism that in failing to insist that the leaders introduce me to women, I gathered my research at the expense of women. For the purposes of this analysis, the reader should be aware that my interviews were mostly with men in leadership positions, both in the refugee population and in the aid organizations, and all of my translators were men. This might have limited the breadth of the data gathered, or it might constitute an adequate breadth of data within a particular social "category." One exception to this pattern was my interviews with people from Somalia. The man who translated these interviews consistently led me to women who, he said, would be interested and happy to talk about the protests.

³ This approach risks consolidating all of these very disparate parties under one giant category of "officials." However, since some organizations had only one available interviewee, it
(continued...)

My interest in speaking with both refugees and officials was not to gather "both sides" of the story, to compare versions and hone in on the one "true" version. Rather, my interest was in examining the stories as recorded expressions of the imagined relationship between "benefactor" and "beneficiary." The work of Lisa Malkki is relevant here. In her research, Malkki asked Burundi Hutu refugees in Tanzania: Who are you? And where did you come from? What emerged from their discussions is a "mythico-history" of Burundi Hutu identity which traces their past and present condition, and distinguishes the Hutu from the Tutsi:

...The Hutu mythico-history is not seen here as "oral history," in the sense of a historical "source" that can be used to reconstruct "what really happened" in the past. Again, such a utilization of the refugees' narratives would be possible. But the more challenging approach to such narratives, in my view, is not to sort out "true facts" from "distortions," but to examine what is taken to be the truth by different social groups, and why.⁹

That is, Malkki treats her discussions as an opportunity to understand the imagined "truths" about being Hutu/being Burundi, and how these "truths" shape and constrain the lived world of her discussants.

Malkki further argues that "events" alone have no intrinsic value or meaning to those who experience them. It is the narrative about these events — formed during and after, which may or may not reflect "factual" details of the events -- which frames the event as "truth" and makes it

⁹ (...continued)

seems better not to identify the person by organization or name and therefore preserve his or her anonymity. All of these interviews with officials were conducted in English.

⁷ Lisa Malkki, Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 104.

significant.¹⁰ In a similar way, in interviewing officials and refugees of Nakivale, I requested each person's version of events **not** in order to sift fact from fiction, but rather to understand how the events mattered to him or her. How does each person represent this experience to himself or herself? How does this person understand the relationship between the aid organizations and the refugee population, before and after? What is his or her investment in the progress and outcome of the protests? What is at stake in the telling? The emphasis was on discerning values, not facts; on **how** these events were narrated, not whether the narration is accurate. The interviews form a historical "record" which can be critically read for what is included and what is excluded, for what is deemed "noteworthy" and what is too "ordinary" to note. Such a reading will, I hope, serve to show how these narrative decisions can reveal important insights into the imagined relationship between "benefactor" and "beneficiary" in Nakivale Camp.

The Finality of the Number: Registration and Revelation

Even without a protest, a registration and counting exercise in Nakivale camp appears to be a charged event with long-term consequences for the quality of life of camp residents. One official described the high stakes of the registration:

One is aware during the registration exercise, 'I struggled to get a big number. I failed.' Or, 'I succeeded and got my ten people.' This is on the card... That's why they also put emphasis on this exercise. This is where you lose or gain. If you lose here, you have lost. If you gain, you have gained. Because after six months, even if you've got more people [on the card than actually exist in your household], no one has the right to come and say, 'You know? You cheated by two people, and we have to subtract

¹⁰Ibid., 107.

them.' No. ¹¹

That is, a registration exercise determines whose claims for assistance from the UNHCR are valid and whose are not. Each head of household presents to the UNHCR and Ugandan government representatives all the people – including spouses, children, and other relatives – he or she claims to be responsible to feed and care for. If the representatives agree with his or her claim, each family member is counted as a refugee residing in Nakivale Camp, registered with the UNHCR and Ugandan government, and added to the total number of rations to which the household is entitled each month. The total is recorded on a “ration card” issued to the head of household; this card is the only ticket to rations on monthly distribution days. Refugees and officials are aware that rations are valuable resources to eat or to sell. In describing the market where refugees’ ration foods and Ugandan nationals’ produce are bought and sold, one official said:

It would be unfair to say, ‘We have given you maize flour. You must eat the maize flour.’ That would be another violation of human rights. ¹²

In Nakivale, refugees are free to use the ration in a way that serves their own evaluation of their own needs. As this story progresses, we will see how this freedom to act on one’s own self-evaluation has limits within the humanitarian aid project.

It was a particular suspicion of the people from Congo, said one official, which, in part, led to the scheduling of a registration and counting exercise in January 1998:

At the end of 1997, I observed some trying to cheat by registering

¹¹Interview, Official, 27 April 2000.

¹²Interview, Official, 27 April 2000.

twice... On the ground, there were few people, but on paper, there were many...I got reports that these Congolese people are not straightforward.

Then this same official heard "a rumor that the Congolese, especially the Adventists, were not interested in being registered."¹³ Looking back, a Catholic man from the Congolese zone countered, "We never refused to be counted. But we told them to count us differently."¹⁴ The dispute arose over a new method of registration and a new plastic ration card that would be issued: a dispute which pitted claims of an impending apocalypse against strategies of accurate registration.

A Seventh Day Adventist man from the Congolese zone heard disturbing news of the new registration method from the newest arrivals to Nakivale, people who had been refugees under the UNHCR in Tanzania. He said, "We were told there would be some number which would be given to us." The arrivals from Tanzania advised him to examine closely the new ration card, which bore the numbers one to thirty-six consecutively. He then discovered the following:

When we added up one to thirty-six, we found that the total is 666. And when we read in the bible, in Revelation [chapter] thirteen, we saw that number... Everyone in our community got out their pens and started adding it up... When I added up that number, I said to myself, I will not get that card, because it's the number in the bible.¹⁵

Many people claimed to have based their decision to protest or not protest upon their interpretation of this same passage in Revelation, in which the figure of a powerful and deadly

¹³ Interview, Official, 24 March 2000.

¹⁴ Interview, Catholic man, Congolese zone, 13 March 2000.

¹⁵ Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 8 March 2000.

“beast” is introduced:

He [the beast] causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666.¹⁶

To “receive” the number 666 was described in varying degrees of offense, ranging from dangerous to deathly. A Pentecostal woman from the Rwandese zone said that coding the number into the food-ticket for refugees is a particularly effective way for Satan to reach and condemn many people at once:

People were saying the number will come in food... I thought, when I accept that number, [it shows] my beliefs are useless. [If I accepted,] I could not differentiate myself from those who got the number.

She further observed that the danger of the number had already been demonstrated in the forced migration of Rwandese refugees from Tanzania:

Tanzania forced them to go out. [People said.] ‘Do you know what happened to anyone who accepted the number in Tanzania? Didn't you know they accepted the number?’...Satan is following them.¹⁷

One of these new Rwandese arrivals from Tanzania, of the Seventh-Day Adventist Reformed Church, said, “I don't know exactly what would happen to me if I took the card...but I knew that number was bad.” He said he had refused the same card for three years in Tanzania,

¹⁶ Revelation 13:16-18, The Holy Bible, New King James Version, copyright 1990 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

¹⁷ Interview, Pentecostal woman, Rwandese zone, 21 March 2000.

thus cutting himself off from rations. During this time he worked for Tanzanians for food.¹⁸ One Pentecostal church leader from the Zairian zone said that receiving the "666" could send one to hell:

Whoever accepts that number -- (it) will show you have denied the Lord in front of all people... There are two ways: one to heaven, one to hell. If you accept the number, you have denied the Lord. But if you refuse the number, you have obeyed the Lord, and you are still on the right track.¹⁹

Of those who "accepted" the number, one Adventist man from the Congolese zone said, "We can't judge them. That's for the Lord."²⁰ Some of the specific punishments in store for those people, however, were listed by another Adventist man from the Congolese zone, reading from Revelation, chapter sixteen; the sinners will suffer from painful sores, be forced to drink water turned to blood, be burned by the sun's heat, and will gnaw their own tongues.²¹

The new ration card was not the only ominous aspect to the registration exercise. The UNHCR was also introducing to Nakivale the use of indelible ink, to be applied on the arm or leg of each person who had been counted, and wristbands. A Pentecostal woman from the Zairian zone described how others in the camp were counted:

They put that thing which resembles a watch on every person. Then they brought out the ink and smeared it. They brought a small machine which resembled a torch and shone the light where they smeared that ink. What we came to know is that it is a computer, [exposing] those people who wanted to be

¹⁸ Interview, Seventh Day Adventist Reformed, man, Rwandese zone, 2 March 2000.

¹⁹ Interview, Pentecostal man, Zairian zone 8 March 2000.

²⁰ Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 26 March 2000.

²¹ Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 8 March 2000.

counted a second time.²²

The woman was aware that inking each refugee was, from a certain point of view, a way to make sure he or she was counted only once, as **one** member of **one** household. But nonetheless it was disturbing to her:

We refused the ink. We just know that these are signs God doesn't want...Can you imagine, [long] after being applied with that ink, they could still identify you? Can you tell me how, if someone spends a month bathing, they can still identify you? We thought it went up into our blood.²³

Others also spoke of the supposed duration or permanence of the invisible "mark," "ink," or "spray":

When they finished smearing the ink on the skin, they flashed that torch. When we compared that to scripture, Revelation thirteen, verse seventeen, we saw that ink was a sign and that machine would make the ink go into the blood.²⁴

A Pentecostal church leader from the Zairian zone distinguished these objectionable methods from the assistance provided by the aid organizations:

No, I don't fear the food. If it was poisoned, I would have died by now. What we objected to most is that bracelet and spray. We believe they can come after one year and can still identify you...I don't know what they saw when they flashed torches on the arms. I don't know what they saw. We just saw this at a distance...Even one who has been sprayed doesn't know what's inside.²⁵

²²Interview, Pentecostal woman, Zairian zone, 9 March 2000.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 26 March 2000.

²⁵Interview, Pentecostal man, Zairian zone, 8 March 2000.

As an argument against the wristbands, one Adventist leader from the Congolese zone compared the refugees' flight to the Israelites' flight from Egypt:

Putting on those bracelets goes against what we read in the Bible. During those times when people were going to Israel, from Egypt to Canaan, Aaron removed all the rings from the children of Israel. Then they melted [the jewelry] to make a god and praise it. And when Moses came from Mount Sinai, he discovered that god there...He told them, the people of Israel should not put on such things. Since that time we see that, as Christians, we should not put on such things.²⁶

This particular connection with Israel was not widely cited to me, however: most others only listed the wristband among the methods they had refused.

Some people situated the introduction of these new registration methods within the larger narrative of an impending apocalypse. A Pentecostal church leader from the Zairian zone said,

When the world is going to end, signs start coming up, like people start hating each other. And when they start hating each other, that is when war starts. Racism crops up. Governments going and fighting other governments. Even people in the same house: man and woman can't agree. These are all signs...You see there is nowhere in Africa where there is no war. From every nation people are fleeing. What we think is that people will have nowhere to flee from. Because where they are going, there are wars, and where they are coming from, wars...We used to wonder how such things would happen. Now we can see...When we were still young, we were taught there will be a time when the number will come out and it has come.²⁷

An Adventist leader from the Congolese zone made a similar observation:

Even if wars happened long ago, in the early days, it came to an end and people started living much like before. In early days, when people met, you could see love in them. They loved each

²⁶Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 8 March 2000.

²⁷Interview, Pentecostal man, Zairian zone, 8 March 2000.

other. These days love is getting cold...People start killing each other, getting swords and hacking each other to death. For example, in Congo, we fled because love is getting cold.²⁸

Other signs of the end of the world were cited, including the introduction of a common currency in Europe, the unification of world governments as manifested in the United Nations, the development of a common global market, and the spreading of Christianity throughout the world.²⁹

Some of those who refused the ink, wristband, and card suggested an alternative to the UNHCR: "We saw there is no reason to do such methods when they could simply write down our names."³⁰ Congolese and Zairian leaders compiled a list of the people in their zones, in hopes that the UNHCR would use it as a basis for the registration.³¹ One official described the negotiations which ensued after the Congolese made a stand:

We called the elders. We talked and it came to nothing. Then I think, somewhere, we made some compromises. Like, 'We don't put the ink and we don't wristband, but you take the card.' They said, 'No. We can't take the card.' Then we said, 'Okay, leave the card. But let's wristband you and put ink so that you don't cheat us.' They said, 'No way. For us, we shall not cheat. But we don't want all this.' But unfortunately we were at a very serious risk. Because if we changed the method for these people, then our approach would be in jeopardy in the future, for maybe the whole region.³²

²⁸Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 8 March 2000.

²⁹Interviews, Ibid., and Pentecostal man, Zairian zone, 8 March 2000.

³⁰Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 8 March 2000.

³¹Interview, Pentecostal woman, Zairian zone, 9 March 2000.

³²Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

As negotiations turned into a deadlock, the representative of the Prime Minister of Uganda told the assembly a parable, which several people repeated to me:

The lion was drinking from the source of a stream. The lamb came and started drinking from the lower section. The lion asked the lamb, why are you dirtying my water? Then the lamb replied, since you are drinking from the source, you are the one dirtying the water, and I am drinking dirty water. Does not the water move from the source?...The lion heard that, jumped, and ate the lamb. We also felt that [the representative] could jump and kill us. That's when we got scared.³³

Then the stakes rose higher, as described by a Baptist man from the Congolese zone:

[The UNHCR representative] said, 'If you are not counted, you must go back to your home countries and get out of the camp.' We said, 'If you want to count us by force, we will leave.' We asked him to take us back. Then he said no and gave us twenty-four hours to vacate, without UNHCR help.³⁴

Both the parable and the departure notice were apparently taken as serious threats by the protesters: "Most of us started packing up."³⁵ But the former was a bizarre miscommunication, according to the government representative; the lamb was meant to symbolize his **own** frustrated position vis a vis the lion(-protesters), "but of course they interpreted it the other way around."³⁶ (Interview, Bafaki/Official, 26 April 2000.) And the latter, according to the UNHCR

³³Interview, Pentecostal woman, Zairian zone, 9 March 2000.

³⁴Interview, Baptist man, Congolese zone, 13 March 2000.

³⁵Interview, Pentecostal woman, Zairian zone, 9 March 2000.

³⁶Ibid.

representative, might have been merely a vague recommendation along the lines of “if you don't want to be registered, then you're not a refugee. so you could maybe leave.”³⁷

Again, the point here is not to nail down the exact words uttered in 1998, but to look closely at how this event matters in the story now. To several officials, at this point the strategy changed from negotiations to a waiting game:

The registration went on for all the rest of the people. We finished, and it was towards the end of the month. And after the registration, there would be food distribution. And we thought, if we were going towards food distribution, these people would compromise, and—for the sake of food, for even their children, at least. But these people... We finished, came out, and went and distributed food to those people who had got the card. These people (protesters) said ‘No. We won't give in.’... (We) said, ‘Either accept the format, which is internationally used throughout the whole world of UNHCR, or you don't get food.’”³⁸

This hard line reflected several concerns: the UNHCR's need to gather accurate numbers of refugees, in order to be accountable to its donors and to plan its assistance programs now and in the future; the Ugandan government's need for information on all refugees on its soil, as a matter of law and national security; and the fear that making an exception for the Congolese would set a precedent the officials would regret later.³⁹ The officials' response also reflected their doubts about the motives of some or most of the protesters, who, officials said, were undoubtedly aware that this new method would minimize cheating:

³⁷ Interview, Official, 2 May 2000.

³⁸ Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

³⁹ For a critical analysis of the supposed requirement to count refugees, see Barbara Harrell-Bond, Eftihia Voutira, and Mark Leopold, “Counting the Refugees: Gifts, Givers, Patrons, and Clients,” in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3/4 (1992), pp. 205-225.)

These smart leaders of theirs were able to extract those verses in the bible and read them to the people -- even though the leaders may have had their own intentions, maybe of cheating. But now they had a way of justifying later, since they have now the words, properly extractable from the what? The bible.⁴⁰

Furthermore, a standoff over counting is nothing new: "All over the world, refugees don't want to be counted. They have their reasons," said one official. He recalled that in 1994, a group of Rwandese in Nakivale went without food rations from the UNHCR for three months before finally submitting to a counting exercise. "They said they didn't want to be counted," he said. "At least these Congolese were a little bit clever. They used the bible, not like these Rwandese." The counting exercise in 1994, he said, revealed that the actual population of Nakivale was about 4000, not the 12,000 that were on the books before counting.⁴¹

There is "nothing sinister" in this new method, explained this same official. The use of wristbands and ink was devised as a way to minimize the global phenomenon of cheating. Each person's elbow is first checked for invisible ink using a kind of flashlight; if there is no ink, he or she is eligible to be counted. After being registered, the person's elbow is sprayed with the invisible ink, which, according to this official, washes off after two days. As each member of a particular household is counted, the wristbands are distributed in numerical order; this sequence helps to confirm who is and is not part of the household. Lastly, the new plastic ration cards were more durable than the old manila ones, and would entitle the recipient to rations for three

⁴⁰Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

⁴¹Interview, Official, 2 May 2000.

years.⁴² All of the officials acknowledged, however, in varying degrees of sympathy to the Congolese, that this method could frighten some who follow the bible. One official said the protesters' claims, given their biblical backing and given the hardships of camp life, were valid. He wishes now that the "militaristic approach" of the UNHCR had not prevailed to cause a standoff:

From the beginning, my perception was that we shall not succeed, since religion is involved in this matter. If other colleagues had also the same perception, I think we wouldn't have even wasted a lot of time: two weeks. We would have just resolved it in the first, two, one day. Because if they quote you a verse, that's all... These people are deprived on earth. Their only hope is that when they die, probably they will see happiness and live happily and forever. So they strongly believe that much as they're suffering here, somewhere it will be okay... Those people, the disadvantaged – they are suffering in Nakivale. Really, they have no hope. The place is barren. He can't get rich. Remember, the houses they are staying in are just makeshift shelters. There is no hope of building a smart house there. And at home, people are fighting. He can not achieve – rather, get back his properties or their properties. Probably they have lost loved ones. So there is nothing left, except, probably, that [which] they can't see – which they are promised. And in the absence of any other alternative, that's all they look to. And in the process, if you come to block that one also, then they are bound to be riotous. You are not even providing them any alternative, remember... You can't even give them food. But on top of that, you even want to stop them from going to heaven? That's more serious. So they were right, actually, to behave the way they did. Me, I was not surprised. In the whole drama I just watched, and they say... 'Come and talk.' I go there and talk, but I know: as much as I am talking, we are tlogging a dead horse. It will not help.⁴³

This official's words are quoted at length to discount the idea that the team of authorities which administer the aid project in Nakivale are an internally consistent, harmonious entity; rather, this

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

official narrates how his own sympathetic response to the Congolese was crowded out by the wishes of the "collective" and by the demand for efficient administration.

To many Congolese and Zairian protesters, the failed negotiations raised talk of only two possible choices: stay and die of hunger, or leave and die in war-torn Congo. It appears that no one actually left the camp. Regarding the apparent exclusivity and unity of the people from the Congolese and Zairian zones in this protest, a number of explanations were advanced. "I have observed that the Banyamulenge and Congolese love to pray to God so much," said a Catholic man from the Kenyan zone,⁴⁴ a sentiment echoed by many protesters themselves. Others noted that all the protesters were of the same "tribe."⁴⁵ The role of education levels of the protesters also emerged as an explanation, but in varying and contradictory forms. For example, one official, over the course of one interview, made the following perplexing claims: The Congolese are relatively well-educated and therefore predisposed to protest against authority, they are illiterate and poor and therefore predisposed to a religious protest, and they are less educated than the Kenyans and Ethiopians, whose superior education predisposed them **not** to protest (unlike the Somalis, whose superior education sparked a major protest).⁴⁶ What role has education come to play in this story of the protests? For now it is worth noting that education is variously described as a destabilizing and a stabilizing force within the social world of the camp.

In the aftermath of the failed negotiations, the "weak" were weeded out from the "strong," as the perceived threats of involuntary repatriation and hunger, according to the

⁴⁴Interview, Catholic man, Kenyan zone, 17 March 2000.

⁴⁵Interview, Catholic man, Ugandan national, 20 March 2000.

⁴⁶Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

protesters, caused many Rwandese holdouts to give in: "Most Rwandese feared going back, because there was still war, and [many] feared starvation."⁴⁷ Others said they accepted the UNHCR's methods because they were satisfied with the explanation they received at the meeting. One Pentecostal church leader from the Rwandese zone was convinced when the officials explained that the numbers one to thirty-six were meant to represent the monthly ration distribution for three years.

We asked the UNHCR people, because our beliefs tell us we shouldn't accept such things, what should we do? And they explained. Those numbers [on the card] indicate the expiry of three years. [And] it would take time to issue new cards. Some of us accepted the explanation, and found it is not connected with the bible.⁴⁸

Another Pentecostal leader from the Rwandese zone pointed out that it is clear from Revelation that all people, not just refugees, will be targets for "666" at the end, and so these numbers on the ration cards were incidental and harmless. This leader tried to demystify the methods as well:

I told my church followers to listen to me. I told them that spray on their arm is used to prevent a second counting. Some didn't listen... [I said] that spray they use is what they use in the hospital when you have wounds. It does not go into your blood. And if you have been counted, that does not change the way you believe [in God]... The bracelet during counting is just paper.

He added that some protesters called him and his followers "pagans" for agreeing to these counting methods.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Interview, Pentecostal woman, Rwandese zone, 21 March 2000.

⁴⁸Interview, Pentecostal man, Rwandese zone, 10 March 2000.

⁴⁹Interview, Pentecostal man, Rwandese zone, 9 March 2000.

The actual time span between these failed negotiations and the eventual resolution of the conflict remains an open question. Camp residents and officials reported the duration as ranging anywhere between a few days to four months.⁵⁰ Testimony on the extent of physical toll on the protesters also varied. One official, consulting his diary, noted that food had last been distributed around December 25, 1997; on January 22, 1998, the entire camp was supposed to be counted and receive food a few days later. Due to the protest, the Congolese were counted and received food in early or mid-February.

The refugees suffered. Two months elapsed without food... Some moved to neighboring villages to work for food. Those who had money could sell things for survival. That's how they were surviving — but in a hard way, of course. People died, but not many. It was attributed to malnutrition...People were starving. You could see it in their faces.⁵¹

A leader in the Zairian zone said the standoff lasted no more than a week, but a week without replenished food rations was devastating:

We lost about four people because of hunger...Hunger was rampant during those days. [If a] person was going without food for one week, it could be very bad.⁵²

A woman from the Rwandese zone said it was one and a half months before resolution:

I used to go looking for food in Kibingo. There are many Banyankole there. We used to dig (work in their fields) and they gave us matoke. We fetched water for them, and they gave us sweet potatoes, cassava.

⁵⁰ These discrepancies may be due, in part, to some people reporting the number of days food distribution was delayed by the protest (which tended to be short, under two weeks), and others reporting the number of days since the previous food distribution (which tended to be more than a month).

⁵¹ Interview, Official, 24 March 2000.

⁵² Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Zairian zone, 6 March 2000.

The woman said, at times, such an excess of hungry refugees brought water to the nationals that some could not get a food payment.⁵³ A woman from the Zairian zone described her life during two months without food rations:

I don't know how to dig or to collect firewood...At times I could get two hundred shillings. I would buy a bun and eat. And sleep. That's how I lived.⁵⁴

A leader from the Congolese zone thought that the standoff caused the camp administration to take pre-emptive steps against violence:

The police were here because they thought we would riot, because we were hungry. But we could not have rioted because we were weak... We were faced with a hard life. At times we lived on water. People boiled water to drink.⁵⁵

Lastly, on this question, I compare the stories of two officials, who each reported a relatively short duration of the standoff, yet gave very different assessments of the impact on public health. One said that it was very doubtful that in two short weeks there could be any appreciable impact on the protesters' health, since most households store some leftover food, and since refugees have excellent "coping mechanisms."⁵⁶ The other, who said was present in the camp throughout the conflict, said,

My main concern was how long they would take without getting food. I was worried especially about those who could have been following, just following, [the] head of family... And when I visited them, I saw some innocent young children were

⁵³ Interview, Pentecostal woman, Rwandese zone, 21 March 2000.

⁵⁴ Interview, Pentecostal woman, Zairian zone, 9 March 2000.

⁵⁵ Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Congolese zone, 8 March 2000.

⁵⁶ Interview, Official, 2 May 2000.

hungry. But the father was sticking on one thing.

He added that newspapers erroneously reported that some Congolese had died of hunger, which generated sympathy for their cause:

We were reading some surprising news. Yeah. I think it quoted about two, about four [deaths]. That was part of a campaign which would help the refugees. It called for quick attention because people in different positions started inquiring, 'What is happening here?' So you would not [be able to] convince someone in Kampala who has read the paper that people did not die.⁵⁷

Several leaders described their appeal to the Ugandan government in Mbarara as a last-ditch effort before leaving the camp for good. A leader from the Zairian zone said,

Because we didn't have transport to Mbarara, we collected from each of us two hundred Ugandan shillings to get to Mbarara, and the Congolese did the same. Six of us went to Mbarara... We explained everything to the RDC (Resident District Commissioner) and the RDC said, 'You have the right to refuse such things if they conflict with your beliefs.'...As we were with people who know the bible also, they got the calculator and added up the numbers.⁵⁸

One official described the intervention of the RDC, who contacted him after meeting with the delegation:

We talked and she said... 'I'm not a religious fanatic, but don't you think this approach of ours will fail? Isn't there any other alternative to this standoff? Because children are about to die, to start dying, and some of you will be held responsible.'⁵⁹

At the RDC's request, the officials reluctantly gave in to the protesters. The Congolese were counted in Nakivale a few days later without ink, wristbands, or plastic cards. A leader

⁵⁷ Interview, Official, 27 April 2000.

⁵⁸ Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Zairian zone, 6 March 2000.

⁵⁹ Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

from the Zairian zone said that he and his companions were immensely relieved: "Our hearts settled because we were counted the way we wanted to be counted." He noted that the new plastic cards that were eventually issued to them omitted the numbers thirty-five and thirty-six; the number "666" was no longer a threat.⁶⁰ One official recalled this resolution:

[We] said, okay. Fine. Let's do this: Give them these manila cards, herd them in one grass, and register them. So finally, we registered them, and they defeated us, and went away with it. They got their food.⁶¹

Another official believes that the RDC's intervention had less to do with sympathy for their cause than with "geopolitical reasons"; the Ugandan government, he said, could not allow a protest by ethnic Tutsis to escalate. Noting that making an exception for the Congolese contradicted the UNHCR's policy on equal treatment for all refugees, he said, "There was no reason why this group should be treated differently. But we had to succumb."⁶² As we prepare to review these stories, I ask, to what use has the rhetoric of "equality" and refugees' effective "coping mechanisms" been put in this narrative? What role does it play in explaining the position of the humanitarian aid project in this protest?

When asked how they felt now about the various authorities who run the camp, several protesters contrasted the role of the Ugandan government in resolving the conflict with the hardened position of the UNHCR:

The government told the UNHCR we were refugees on Ugandan soil. It is the government that stopped UNHCR from enforcing those cards.

⁶⁰Interview, Seventh Day Adventist man, Zairian zone, 6 March 2000.

⁶¹Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

⁶²Interview, Official, 25 April 2000.

The government told us we have a right to refuse everything we don't want...The government told UNHCR officials to carry out the census by writing our names. There we at last had a peaceful resolution.⁶³

One woman spoke of the protest as a moment of disillusionment with the UNHCR and a moment of seeing herself as the aid organizations seemed to see her:

I asked myself and others asked themselves, [as] we didn't know what was the intention of the UNHCR. [We] know people are clever in the UN. Maybe we are clever. Why are they giving us that number of Satan? They could not defend themselves — giving that number to people they consider [to be] not knowledgeable. Maybe they thought we are very stupid [and] could not add up those numbers and find the total...They also read the bible and knew it was evil. Don't they read the bible? I know the bible even though I am not well educated. How about they who are well educated?

These questions led this woman to wonder whether she knew the whole story about the UNHCR's project:

If it was you, wouldn't you feel bad? I felt bad about them. I saw them as very bad because they forced us and wanted to give us that number. I came to think they wanted to profit from it...because someone can't do something without profit. Can you do something without profit? If it's money, or something else — I don't know the end goal.⁶⁴

The possibility that the UNHCR's actions were guided by profit-seeking motives was raised by others as well. One man from the Zairian zone said,

If we see [that] we are forced to get those numbers, we see the UNHCR has a profit behind it...There is no reason why the UNHCR would starve refugees to death when they don't have a

⁶³ Interview, Pentecostal man, Zairian zone, 3 March 2000.

⁶⁴ Interview, Pentecostal woman, Rwandese zone, 21 March 2000.

profit behind it.⁶⁵

A woman from the Zairian zone went further and speculated on the actual economy in which the UNHCR operates:

I thought the UNHCR wanted to send me to hell... We know people from the UNHCR can accept lots of money to destroy us, because we are refugees. To give [us] to Satan... I believe they want to sell us.⁶⁶

The point in highlighting such testimony is not to suggest its widespread prevalence in the camp; in fact, only a few people raised these suspicions, and many contradicted them. Nor is the point to explore the accuracy of these particular accusations, nor to suggest that "profit" has no place in the humanitarian aid project. Lastly, the point is not to single out the UNHCR as a single entity which has, through its interactions with refugees, solely inspired these accusations. The point in highlighting this issue is, rather, to note that several people went out of their way to comment, unsolicited, on the idea that they, as refugees, constituted an opportunity for profit by other people. Being a refugee, to them, involved being both the refugee-as-beneficiary and the refugee-as-capital. It is, I argue, an idea worth taking up and examining closely. To reinforce the point that this idea is not specific to the UNHCR, I note two other contexts in which this idea came up: in the story of another protest in Nakivale, initiated from within the Somali zone, and in a conversation with community leaders about my own project.

Six months after the resolution of the Congolese protest, a second conflict spilled over the boundaries of the camp. The people from Somalia walked over forty kilometers from the camp to Mbarara town, in protest of, among other things, the decision to switch their monthly food

⁶⁵ Interview, Pentecostal man, Zairian zone, 3 March 2000.

⁶⁶ Interview, Pentecostal woman, Zairian zone, 9 March 2000.

ration from wheat flour to maize flour. The Somalis rejected the explanation that there were insufficient funds to continue supplying them with wheat, and that they should accept the same maize that other zones were already receiving; but they failed to convince the Resident District Commissioner in Mbarara. When they announced their intention to continue marching to Kampala, riot police arrived on the scene to halt this "breach of peace." The people were stopped, forced onto lorries, and dropped off on the road to Nakivale, where they began the long walk back. Refugees and officials alike acknowledged that the march was halted with violence. One official said,

Naturally, you don't say, 'You turn away.' No... These anti-riot policemen — for them, they don't negotiate. Their language is, I think, beating.⁶⁷

A Somali woman remembered the police intervention this way:

At six PM the police started beating us. The head of Red Cross and Uganda local government were on a hill and saw... People who were hurt were beaten too much... Those who collapsed, fifteen people, were put in police vehicles.⁶⁸

Today, everyone in the camp receives a monthly ration of maize from the World Food Program.

In the wake of what was generally described as a defeat for the Somalis, one man made the following comments about the relationship between refugees and the humanitarian aid project: "The government of Uganda is making Somali people stay here because it profits from them. We're like hostages." He said he suspected that the Ugandan government wanted the

⁶⁷ Interview, Official, 2 May 2000.

⁶⁸ Interview, woman, Somali zone, 14 March 2000.

Somalis and Tutsis in Mbarara district to intermarry and produce children who would support the current regime. His suspicions of ulterior motives were not limited to the government, however:

The UNHCR, Save the Children, and so on, are in the world for political, not humanitarian, reasons...What they do, they gain from it. I have spent ten years in east Africa. I learned a Kiswahili proverb: *Hakuna kitu yabule kuandunia*, there's nothing for free in this world...For the Red Cross, if there is no problem, no war, that means all international Red Crosses will be closed all over the world. So they want the problems, [so they] will be lasting forever.⁶⁹

Finally, it is worth noting the following exchange and acknowledging the complicity of this researcher. As I was being introduced to the community leaders of the Rwandese zone at the start of my project, one community leader remarked that it was all too common for students to show up in Nakivale. These students, he said, always wanted to do research on refugees in order to make "high marks" in school.⁷⁰

Would the beneficiary please stand up?

In this final section I will explore three themes of these protest stories: "coping mechanisms" and refugee ingenuity, the principle of equality, and the role of education in the protests. A close examination of these themes will suggest that their narration has much to do with the survival of the humanitarian aid project as with the survival of refugees. These themes may help to expose certain "ordinary truths" about refugees upon which the humanitarian aid project depends. As the neat categories of "benefactor" and "beneficiary" become blurry, it may be worth asking, who is dependent on whom in Nakivale Camp?

⁶⁹Interview, man, Somali zone, 14 March 2000.

⁷⁰Conversation with man, Rwandese zone, 20 February 2000.

To frame the discussion which follows, I again turn to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who traces links between the "civilizing mission" of the colonial project and the development and aid projects of today. Spivak argues that, in the same way that England justified its takeover of India on the grounds that India and Indians would "naturally" benefit from such intervention, the development and aid mission of today justifies itself by imagining the southern state as endlessly "in need" of its intervention. The fact that today's development and aid projects distinguish themselves from colonial projects by emphasizing their own "goodwill" is not enough, and, unfortunately, is nothing new:

My generation in India, born before Independence, realizes only too well that many of the functionaries of the civilizing mission of imperialism were well-meaning. The point here is not personal accusations. And in fact what these functionaries gave was often what I call an enabling violation — a rape that produces a healthy child, whose existence cannot be advanced as a justification for the rape. Imperialism cannot be justified by the fact that India has railways and I speak English well. Many of the functionaries of the civilizing mission were well-meaning; but alas, you can do good with contempt or paternal-maternal-sororal benevolence in your heart. And today, you can knife the poor nation in the back and offer band-aids for a photo opportunity. Scapegoating colonialism in the direst possible way shields the new imperialism of exploitation as development.⁷¹

The implications of Spivak's argument are far-reaching. Today's development and aid projects, sponsored by northern states, criticize the colonial past and attempt to distance themselves from it. At the same time, perhaps many of these projects could **not** exist in their current form without the support of the same certain "truths" of the "colonial project."⁷² As a primary example, the

⁷¹Spivak, p. 371.

⁷² Spivak repeatedly cautions the post-colonial critic against "consolidating" colonialism.
(continued...)

current discourse on “aid” largely imagines the flow of resources and power running unilaterally from north to south. “Aid” imagined as a north-to-south process shuts out the perspective that southern states have been supplying “assistance” to the north from the very beginning of the relationship between the two:

...As the North continues ostensibly to “aid” the South — as formerly imperialism “civilized” the New World — the South’s crucial assistance to the North in keeping up its resource-hungry lifestyle is forever foreclosed.⁷³

For this analysis, Spivak’s observations suggest that we rethink the relationship between the humanitarian aid project and refugees in their southern nations. Perhaps we can move away from the idea of wealthy, “benevolent” states sending life-saving aid to the poor south, to seeing a process in which resources have **always** flowed south to north **and** north to south. We could be asking: Are there ways in which the humanitarian aid project depends, for its creation and continuation, upon a certain understanding of the global south and of refugees in particular?

To explain how several hundred people survived a standoff in which no rations were distributed, officials and refugees both described a variety of activities which might fall under the category of “coping mechanisms”: digging in Ugandan nationals’ fields, fetching water, and paring down one’s intake to boiled water only. To explain how thousands of people continue to

(...continued)

neo-colonialism, and imperialism as simple, internally consistent categories: “[T]o stop at accusing the equally self-consolidating essentialized Colonizer or Imperialist is to legitimize colonialism/imperialism by reversal” (Spivak, p. 95, footnote 131.). My use of the term “colonial project” would likely fall under such criticism, as it may posit a monolithic, unified European “culture” against the essentialized “colonized” populations. With that caution in mind, my intention in these passages is only to point to the links between the historical justification for colonization and the contemporary discourse on aid and development.

⁷³Spivak, p. 6.

survive when this ration, universally acknowledged as meager, is in fact distributed, a similar variety of activities is again described. One official recalled comforting a visitor to Nakivale, who was dismayed to see his donation of clothing to the residents end up in the market within minutes: “[I told him,] ‘the priorities set by us are not their priorities. This shouldn’t stop you from bringing more clothes.’”⁷⁴ According to the officials at Nakivale, such enterprise is encouraged as a way to survive on a ration that provides only the “bare minimum to sustain life”: “Ingenuity is left to the caseload.”⁷⁵ This encouragement to evaluate and act creatively upon one’s own needs — this successful ingenuity — not only helps refugees to survive, but also provides an ongoing justification for the humanitarian aid project’s minimalist rations.

But this encouragement has its limits. Registering oneself as two people and taking home two rations per month is not ingenuity: it is criminality. A church leader said that witnessing the suffering of his followers on their twelve-kilogram rations causes him to feel “confusion,” but that he still could not condone registering twice: “I don’t agree with that, because the bible doesn’t support it.”⁷⁶ An official described the impact of a “successful” registration on the enterprise of one camp resident:

We found she was bringing people to my office as new arrivals, when none even existed. She would go and pick a lady with children. I heard she had about thirty people who were ‘ghosts’ [names of non-existent people listed on her ration card]. She had a business... She had started buying cows. After registration, her business

⁷⁴Interview, Official, 2 May 2000.

⁷⁵Ibid., 25 April 2000.

⁷⁶Interview, Catholic man, Ugandan national, 20 March 2000.

collapsed.⁷⁷

This woman would probably dispute the words of another official:

I see nothing wrong with accepting whatever kind of registration.
Especially if it is for your own good.⁷⁸

This distinction between "allowable" coping mechanisms and "illegal" manipulations, I argue, speaks as much for the needs of an internationally accountable humanitarian aid project as it does for the program of encouraging honest and sustainable "enterprise" in refugees. The encouragement to evaluate and act creatively on one's own needs halts at the threshold of financial constraints and international accountability. The point here is neither to condemn the idea of global accountability, nor to deny the reality of financial constraints; rather, the point is to mark where the "encouraging" rhetoric stops, and how the operation of the humanitarian aid project depends on maintaining this boundary. The standoff between the humanitarian aid project and the Congolese protesters was an expression of that dependence.

It is also useful to note how the principle of equality surfaced in conjunction with this discourse on "coping mechanisms." As I have quoted before, one official spoke of giving in to the Congolese protesters' demands this way:

We serve refugees equally regardless of religious beliefs.
Therefore we treat them all the same...There is no reason why
this group should be treated differently. But we had to succumb.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Interview, Official, 24 March 2000.

⁷⁸Interview, Official, 25 April 2000.

⁷⁹Interview, Official, 25 April 2000.

He was certain that the refugees' "coping mechanisms" saw them safely through the standoffs, both in the Congolese protest of 1998, and in 1994, when the Rwandese held out without rations for three months. In this version of the story, the official can take credit simultaneously for implementing "equality" — through insisting on uniform registration methods — and for acknowledging the power of the refugees — by envisioning them as creative, self-reliant survivors. It is a version, I argue, which puts the rhetoric of "empowerment" and "equality" to use in obscuring the real violence of the standoff: the violence of potential or actual harm to the physical well-being of the protesters.⁸⁰

The issue of education figured prominently in the stories of both the Congolese and Somali protests. At times, education was imagined as a stabilizing force within the social life of the camp. One official explained why the Kenyans did not join the Congolese: "The majority of them are educated. And, after all, they want food, and that's all."⁸¹ Education seems to be imagined as fostering a sort of modernity in the refugees, a modernity which makes the refugees' relationship with the humanitarian aid project easier. One official spoke of the "new age" in Africa, in which the act of counting is no longer universally seen as a bad omen:

People like Kenyans, they may have gone to a point that they cannot go back to think like that... We went to school, where we start with counting. P-1, you start with counting. Until you finish school, you will be counting objects, people, and so on... This wristband may carry no meaning to me, but when someone —

⁸⁰ For a critical study of the humanist principles which guide the practice of the UNHCR's humanitarian aid project, see Jennifer M. Hyndman, Geographies of Displacement: Gender, Culture, and Power in UNHCR Refugee Camps, Kenya. Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, Department of Geography, The University of British Columbia (1996).

⁸¹ Interview, Official, 26 April 2000.

especially if he's instigated, or he's warned -- he can take it very serious.⁸²

In this view, education can help to pave the way for the aid project, framing the administrative practices of the refugee camp as "normal" and not mysterious.

But education also emerged in the stories as a destabilizing and potentially dangerous force in the camp. One official noted that the presence of a few educated people in the Congolese zone encouraged the protesters to make strong demands:

Congolese, they feel they have the right of asylum, and you will not disturb them...And I think they are even more enlightened. [There] are more educated people among them.

Among the Somalis, this tendency was imagined to be even stronger, with "very complicated intellectuals in the camp...Professors, doctors, and what else."⁸³ By August 1998, the Somali zone had marched out of the camp twice; both times, they were forcibly halted and saw no positive response on their demands for wheat flour rations. Several people in the Somali zone denied they would ever stage another protest, for fear of being beaten again by the police, or worse. The camp environment had become intolerable for those who were seen as instigators; one woman from the Somali zone said, "So people who were educated within the camp started getting out of the camp. One by one."⁸⁴ Several officials noted the difference made by their absence:

I think it was after that incident [in August 1998], that this intellectual group left the camp. And since then we don't have

⁸²Interview, Official, 27 April 2000.

⁸³Interview Official 26 April 2000.

⁸⁴Interview, woman, Somali zone, 14 March 2000.

a lot of problems with them.⁸⁵

The problem of the Somalis has improved greatly... The few who remained, we can live with them.⁸⁶

Their behavior is quite different now. They are now disciplined... They wanted at first to be very special... Last distribution, there were no problems, though maize grain was given out. They are fearing. They are law abiding.⁸⁷

The role of education emerges in these stories as a contradiction. Education is both the vital link which enables refugees to co-exist peacefully with the humanitarian aid project, **and** the force which could undermine that relationship entirely. I do not aim to judge whether education, in its various forms, is or is not inherently compatible with “camp life.” Rather, I point out these narratives which suggest that camp life is much easier in the absence of disruptive intellectuals — and the implication that the smooth administration of the camp is dependent on a certain kind of docility on the part of its residents. Rather, I point out what these narratives suggest: that camp life is much easier in the absence of disruptive intellectuals, and the implication that the smooth administration of the camp is dependent on a certain kind of docility on the part of its residents.

In conclusion, these “ordinary” stories could be studied as open-and-shut cases of conflict resolution in a refugee camp. Such an approach, I argue, would assume that the resources and significant constraints of the humanitarian aid project are an inevitable reality. The notion of an inevitable reality allows these resources and constraints to appear “normal,” and allows their

⁸⁵ Interview, Official, 2 May 2000

⁸⁶ Interview, Official, 24 March 2000.

⁸⁷ Interview, Official, 25 March 2000.

implementation in history to appear self-evidently correct. This approach would miss a crucial opportunity to examine the complex relationships and history which have produced the current humanitarian aid project. In this analysis I have examined these stories of protests not in order to show that refugees have "power." The project of demonstrating refugee self-determination is not best served, I argue, by putting the "burden of proof," so to speak, on refugees. Rather, I have examined these stories of protests as recorded expressions of the relationship between the humanitarian aid project and refugees. These stories suggest that the categories of "benefactor" and "beneficiary" in Nakivale Camp may be more complicated than our usual conception of "aid" may assume. Spivak alerts us to the importance of questioning these categories on a global scale as well. As international humanitarian aid organizations "write" today's "truths" about the global south to the media, donors and the northern public, we might well ask: What is "aid" imagined to be in this story, and whom is it for?



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