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Rethinking Refuge: Processes of Refuge Seeking in Africa; An Introduction

George N. Njung and Marcia C. Schenck

"Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person," explains Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian author. Eloquently articulating "the danger of the single story" in her homonymous TedTalk (2009), she cautions how *the* single story, created by power, not only stereotypes and flattens people's lived experiences, but emphasizes how those people are different from or are part of others. To understand the principle and role of *nkali* (an Igbo word, which she loosely translates as "power") in the telling of stories, we must consider how the stories are told, who tells them, when they are told, and how many of them are told. We have aimed in this special issue to have contemporary African refugee and migrant stories told and understood as multiple stories, rather than one single story. In so doing, we were attentive to how we wanted the stories to be told, who should be involved in telling them, how many of them should be told, and what the frames for them should be. This aim is reflected in the nature of the articles contained in this special issue, written by scholars from across continents, countries, institutions, and disciplines, all of whom remained conscious of the historical complexities of the stories they had set out to tell. Collectively, these articles demonstrate that rather than being an aberration, African migrant and refugee experiences are more embedded in global historical and contemporary events than the world has cared to admit.

This special issue, "Rethinking Refuge," therefore dives into the history of refuge seeking by Africans on the continent and beyond and, interestingly, of Europeans in Africa, precisely to offer counternarratives to the single-story mediatized depictions of African refugees to which we have become accustomed. In so doing, it adds complexity to refugee studies in three ways. First, Africa emerges as a producer of refugees but also as a sanctuary for people fleeing war and repression in Europe. Second, Africa emerges as an emancipatory site, where refugees emerging from the chaos of decolonization and the postindependence era are hosted by young, independent nations like Tanzania, but limits to pan-African solidarity become apparent as national politics trump commitments to refugees over time, not only in Tanzania, but also in other African countries. Third, refugees themselves emerge as diverse groups of

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people with multiple identities, one of which might for a time come to encompass that of a refugee, an asylum seeker, or a refuge seeker outside of official categories: refugees in the Africa of the 1960s were understood to comprise "refugee students" (meaning those seeking secondary or tertiary education), "urban or professional refugees" (meaning those possessing a professional background in blue- or white-collar professions), "rural refugees" (meaning those with agricultural backgrounds), and sometimes also "freedom fighters" (meaning those who took up weapons for the cause of independence). Over time, we have forgotten about white flight to Africa and pan-African commitments to liberation struggles from which emerged several refugees. We have thus reduced the refugee to a person in need of food, shelter, and protection. The fact is that a historical inquiry aids us in telling more diverse, complex, and ambiguous stories about refugees' history and experiences in Africa.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of March 2022, found in Africa about "30 million internally displaced persons, refugees[,] and asylum-seekers," almost one-third of the world's refugees. In 2021 alone, millions of new displacements occurred as conflict flared up in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Nigeria. Many more Africans are on the move within the continent than are trying to make their way to Europe, but Fortress Europe has been enacting physical barriers. This new iron curtain largely reflects the collapse of communism and socialism. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, has aptly remarked that with the collapse of socialism, the iron curtain moved southward, to the middle of the Mediterranean, where it seeks to divide Europe from Africa (1999, 24–25). Subsequently, African migrants have been demonized as a security threat and a burden on the welfare state. They must prove their refugee status in an atmosphere of suspicion. Europe's closure of its doors to migrants and refugees from the South costs lives and reduces their humanity to a sort of nothingness. Its attempts to prevent immigration from sub-Saharan Africa by building more walls and using other mechanisms of identification and prevention have led to further African deaths (Mbembe 2021).

Hostile responses to refugees from the South are perpetuated not least due to the nature of international media and public discourses in the Global North. Indeed, international public discourse—by which we mean the way in which politicians, policymakers, stakeholders, representatives of international institutions, media houses, and members of the civil society talk about migrant and refugee issues across borders—overwhelmingly stigmatizes and stereotypes Africa and Africans, effectively reducing their stories to a single story. Like much of the Global South, African refugees and migrants, whether staying within the continent or fleeing it, are usually rigidified and simplified into fitting the simplified narratives of either victims or perpetrators or deserving or undeserving migrants (Spohnholz 2021, 1). Discussions in the Global North often fail to recognize that most refugees from the South are indeed hosted in the South, placing the burden of refugee hosting on developing economies in the South.

For far too long, studies of refugee history have been profoundly Eurocentric (Peterson 2017, 217)—a situation that has shaped the image of *the* refugee from outside Europe, especially concerning Africa. This focus seems to suggest that "refugee history can be continentally compartmentalized: that the history of refugees in Europe need not be informed by the history of refugees in the [African] colonies" (Shadle 2018, 168). As some papers in this special issue show, the histories of refuge seeking in Africa and Europe, especially during the colonial and the immediate postcolonial periods, are interwoven, with events in Europe causing refugees from there to arrive in Africa. The special issue therefore speaks to the contention that "we cannot understand refugee history through national or continental terms" only (Shadle 2018, 168).

Too often, politicians and policymakers ignore the historical processes that produce refugee crises and focus merely on crises at hand. This myopic understanding of a refuge-producing context simplifies a complex issue by implementing stopgap solutions that cannot sustainably address it. We broadly argue in this special issue that migrant and refuge seeking in the past several decades has been part of the global historical processes that preceded and extended well into the twentieth century. Some of these processes include nationalism and nation building, colonialism, decolonization, civil wars, wars of resistance and decolonization, international terrorism, racism and racial tensions, and identity politics and politics of belonging. Paying more attention to global injustices and the systems and historical processes that have given rise to migrant and refugee issues is imperative if we hope to find ways in which to shape the future in the acknowledgement that movement is a constant in human history. The absence, until recently, of historical scholarship in migrant and refugee studies has resulted in misconceptions and misunderstandings of African experiences.[1] Without a historical perspective, we cannot fully understand how the present African migrant and refugee experiment is part of a global experiment and how it comes to be that certain bodies are freer to trespass the globe than others.

Our emphasis on a historical approach to understanding Africa's migrant and refugee experiences responds to a historiographical and disciplinary shift in the field of refugee studies. Recently, two special issues have appeared on the subject. In 2020, the *African Studies Review* published a forum contribution titled "African Refugee History," edited by Christian Williams, consisting of articles focusing on Biafra, Namibian exile, Zimbabwe, Liberia, and the role of the supernatural among African refugees (Williams 2020). The *Canadian Journal of African Studies* followed up with the publication of a special issue of nine contributions in English and French edited by Meredith Terretta and Philip Janzen (2021). Titled "African Refuge / Refuge africain," it adopts a historical approach to present a comparative and transregional assessment of displaced populations in Africa. Despite this work, we are only beginning to scratch the surface of the unexplored vastness of refuge generating and seeking in Africa in ways that not only accommodate the internal and external forces of history

but showcase Africa as historically hosting refugees and migrants from Europe and the outside world. Aligning with these new interests on Africa's refugee experiences, therefore, this issue joins the aforementioned issues in expanding our understanding of refuge seeking in Africa through a mainly historical lens. Aiming to draw attention to the historical realities of refuge seeking in Africa, it focuses on displaced people in and from Africa and their cross-national, regional, and intercontinental migration trajectories. It thus subscribes to the proposition that we should rethink the history of refuge seeking in Africa more broadly and away from strict adherence to legal categories (Shadle 2019), which a historian must recognize as the product of a specific time and place.

The special issue responds to Maria Grosz-Ngaté's appeal and advocacy for epistemically decolonizing knowledge production about Africa, which includes realizing publications in mainstream publishing outlets in the North that result from collaboration between North-based and Africa-based scholars.[2] Evoking V. Y. Mudimbe on the relationship between knowledge and power, she has observed how the dominant Western epistemological order uses Western discourses and images of African societies and peoples without taking account of Africa-based epistemologies, resulting in the construction of Africa as "a paradigm of difference" and otherness (2020, 691). A similar observation can be made for refugee studies, which, being rather Eurocentric, have contributed to constructing refugees as Others. The publication of this special issue is therefore intentional, but how well does it accomplish this objective? First, one of the guest editors is a Europe-based scholar and of European origin, while the other is an Africa-based scholar of African origin. The former comes at this project with a scholarly interest. The latter had once been a refugee / asylum seeker in the United States, and he remembers that as a legally admitted asylee/refugee in the United States, he could not obtain a passport because the embassy of his country of origin in Washington, DC, had determined that by asking for refuge and protection in another country, he had disgraced his country and forfeited his right to its passport. Whereas his chapter is on child refugees during the Nigerian civil war, his personal experiences inform how he views and analyzes African refugee experiences. Second, of the eight contributors, three are Europe-based scholars of European origin, four are Africa-based scholars of African origin, and one is both an Africa- and North America–based scholar of African origin. And very importantly, two of the African authors are engaging with research to which their personal stories and experiences are central.[3] To dispossess a people, says Mourid Barghouti, a Palestinian poet, the simplest way is to tell their story and, according to Adichie, "to start it in a particular way." But Adichie adds that a people can rectify their history and change their story into a complete story by telling it themselves (2009). By having African refugee authors who are telling the stories of the environments in which they find themselves firsthand, this special issue contributes to centralizing different forms of African agency in the emerging diverse African refugee histories. The challenges faced by refugees and migrants

are real. So, too, is the agency they possess, including their skills, talents, resilience, resourcefulness, and achievements. Together, these account for multiple stories and experiences of refugees, as individuals and as a collective group of people.

The road to this special issue began with an academic workshop in Berlin on June 6–7, 2019, organized by Marcia C. Schenck and sponsored by the Forum Transregionale Studien and the Max Weber Stiftung. It brought together fourteen scholars from across continents and institutions, who intensely debated each other's preliminary ideas, leading not only to this special issue, but also to the publication of a blog series titled *Histories of Refuge*, edited by Madina Thiam on *Africa Is a Country*, and an H-Net network, African Refugee Crossroads.[4] Six of the contributors here trace their origins to the workshop, while the other two—Gerawork Teferra and Muna Omar—were brought in to enrich the issue with stories that revolve around research inspired by their personal experiences in East Africa and the Middle East. Thus, the themes of this special issue extend from colonial times to decolonization, nation building, and nation governing in the postcolonial period. The articles tend to build from or coalesce around the themes that preoccupied discussions at the workshop.

Structure and Themes

The articles are grouped in a way that they speak to each other and explore issues that attest to the diversity and complexity of migrant and refugee experiences. By way of chronology and geography, two of the authors (Jochen Lingelbach and Lazlo Passemiers) focus on white refugees in Africa during the late colonial and decolonization periods; three (Rose Jaji, George Njung, and Marcia Schenck) take a comparative view of the history of refuge hosting across colonial and postcolonial African states in the early independence period; while the remaining three (Omar, Teferra, and Magnus Treiber) focus on the East African context from the second half of the twentieth century until the present through life histories and oral-history interviews, combined with participant-observation approaches and the integration of personal life experiences. In the ensuing pages, we have grouped the articles in conversation with one another according to some specifically selected themes. Our readers should be aware that the articles cover several other themes that cut across the entire issue and address issues that have not been captured in this introduction.

Historical Context: Colonialism, Decolonization, Racism, and the International Refugee Regime

Recent historical scholarship on modern African refugee experiences has begun to articulate how European presence in Africa not only constituted the roots of modern migrant and refugee movements on the continent, but also

brought European refuge seekers to Africa (Njung 2021). Issues of colonial and imperial racism and the politics of the International Refugee Regime (IRR) combined to determine how Europeans sought refuge in Africa. About twenty thousand Polish refugees were hosted in British colonial Africa during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. Lingelbach queries the Eurocentric historiography of the IRR after 1945, and its functioning in the logic of what he calls the "imperial order of things." He argues how, whereas the regime could recognize, treat, and accord an international refugee status to European refugees in any part of the globe, it never extended the same measure to African refugees. International refugee bodies, such as the United Nations Refugee Organization and the International Refugee Organization, placed Polish refugees in Africa within their mandates while refusing to extend the same status to Africans and Asians around the same time. Maintaining that such double standards could be explained by imperial practices and racism, Lingelbach complicates the issue by looking to the politics of the IRR, which emerged in a largely imperial world, signified by a tripartition into citizen, subject, and (European) refugee. In other words, the IRR, Lingelbach shows, was a brainchild and a tool of imperialism. Like imperial rule itself, which differentiated between European citizens and colonized *subjects*, the IRR conveniently differentiated between *refugees* and national *citizens* (of Europe). For example, Ethiopians in Kenya had been considered refugees by the British (Shadle 2018), and yet, as Lingelbach shows, "the colonial administration did not take its experiences with them as guidelines for the Poles" who arrived later (25). Often, people fleeing from colonial domination were rather perceived as deserters.

Polish refugees were not the only Europeans seeking refuge in Africa. About one thousand Hungarian refugees were welcomed in South Africa and the Central African Federation in the 1950s. Moreover, South Africa became a haven to whites from other parts of the African continent fleeing decolonization. This is well illustrated by Lazlo Passemiers's contribution, which foregrounds how race and racism were decisive in white South African responses to white refugee imperialists fleeing the tumultuously decolonizing Belgian Congo. In a show of white solidarity, the white-dominated South African state not only willingly accepted white refugees from the Congo, but effectively encouraged them to enter South Africa and make it their home. The degree of racial solidarity and preferential treatment was such that, even though most of the Belgians fleeing the Congo did not technically qualify as refugees under the UN 1951 Convention (because they were Belgian nationals), they were welcomed as refugees. Their treatment contrasts sharply with that of Africans who did not have a home country to which to return but were not welcome as refugees.

Wars, Regional and Global Connectivity, and Refugees in Africa

As part of global historical processes, refuge seeking in Africa has emerged predominantly in the context of wars, including postcolonial civil wars.

Individuals' choices to move under such circumstances have been determined by several factors, including available regional and global connectivity at the time of their decisions. Treiber shows how, in the context of ensuing wars in the Horn of Africa from the 1960s until as recently as 2016, individuals forced out of the region in different periods made decisions as to where to go that were informed by the regional and global connectivity available at different points in time. So too does Jaji, who builds on the context of armed political conflicts, including those emerging from the process of decolonization, to examine the ensuing refuge-seeking and refugee-hosting experiences in Kenya and Tanzania for an extended period since the 1960s. Similarly, Njung's article focuses on a refugee crisis that emerged in the context of the Nigerian civil war, especially as it affected thousands of children, some of whom were evacuated to neighboring African countries and repatriated back to Nigeria only after the end of the war, in 1970. Together, these articles reveal the extent to which civil wars have been decisive in accounting for explosive refugee crises in postcolonial Africa, but they also reveal the role that regional and global connectivity has played in refuge seeking and refugee hosting on the continent and beyond.

Pure Humanitarianism versus Political, Economic, and Other Interests?

African states have both generated and hosted their own refugees in myriad ways. In so doing, their decisions have depended on a multiplicity of interests beyond a moral compulsion and humanitarian motivation. Humanitarianism is often tied up with political and other interests. Countries that help refugees do so not only to respond to a humanitarian emergency, but also because doing so aligns with other strategic interests in the short and medium term. In the words of an editorial in *Die Burger*, the South African National Party's mouthpiece, quoted in Passemiers: "these people need us, and we need them" (48). The Cold War politics of refugee acceptance from the East in the West is one example. The acceptance of self-identified refugees fleeing decolonizing territories back into the fold of colonial motherlands is another. Yet another is the support of freedom fighters, refugee students, and other political refugees from countries struggling for their independence by countries that made an active involvement in African decolonization part of their own political agendas.

Schenck's examination of the discourse about refugee higher education in the late 1960s demonstrates the nexus between humanitarian and political interests leading to a hybrid form of humanitarian developmentalism. Arguing that refugee higher education was best understood in the development framework of human-capital theory in the name of pan-Africanist continental development, she engages the discourses of delegates and experts in connection with the 1967 Conference on the Legal, Economic, and Social Aspects of African Refugee Problems. She thus sheds light on the tensions between national policies of labor-market protection and supranational ideas about establishing a force of skilled refugee expats. According to the ideas of

a refugee manpower plan, returning refugee students were to contribute to the dismantling of colonial and racial hierarchies on the continent.

When it comes to instrumentalizing refugees for nonhumanitarian interests, not even children have been spared. Njung delineates how during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), political, economic, and personal interests remained decisive for individual politicians and countries in France, Gabon, and Côte d'Ivoire that supported the evacuation of about five thousand Biafran-Nigerian child refugees out of Nigeria to Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire. These nonhumanitarian interests were less obvious during the process of evacuation in 1968, but they revealed themselves sharply upon repatriation when the war ended in January 1970.

Adding to the conversation about the circumstances under which African countries have opted to host African refugees and their changing interests for doing so, Jaji explores the historical complexities and transformation of refugee policies in Kenya and Tanzania. Rationalizing refugee hosting beyond the humanitarian nexus, she argues that countries' policies and willingness to host refugees emerge from an interplay of morphing domestic interests, political philosophy, and foreign policy. She shows how economic, social, and political forces intertwine and intersect to create inconsistencies and contradictions in how countries react to refugees coming from various political and national backgrounds. Thus, at various points in the history of their hosting experiences, Tanzania and Kenya either disregarded or complied with international law by successively embracing, begrudgingly hosting, rejecting, and even deporting selected refugee communities. Time and context, especially economic and political context, are crucial to countries' reactions toward refugees.

Whereas newly independent African countries started off with excitement and willingness to host refugees from their neighbors, such excitement and willingness waned over time, on account of new economic and political challenges confronting the host countries. Is it possible that countries simply get tired of hosting refugees? Jaji engages this point as does Passemiers, who evokes Sreeram Chaulia (2003) to observe that despite the show of solidarity of South African white populations in hosting their fellow whites from the Congo, "hosting fatigue" soon set in. This factor appears to be understudied. We want to theorize that this state of affairs may be explained by the host countries' reading of most refugee phenomena as temporary; once the imagined temporariness starts revealing itself as continuous and permanent, the host country's turnabout is to be expected. The question of transience and permanence in refugee-hosting contexts is examined by Teferra's contribution to this issue. He studies how the struggle of making a living, often for decades, in a camp designed as transient results in a life marked by pseudopermanence, broken and false hopes, and dreams of resettlement. Studying the competing dynamics through the lens of lived experiences of inhabitants of Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, he argues that although the camp has grown over the past three decades and in part resembles an urban space, life for its dwellers remains precarious. Kenya continues periodically to threaten the closure of its camps—which underlines the precarity of camp lives.

Just how much forced migrants are at the mercy of host states and international organizations shines through in Omar's contribution. She traces the migrations of East Africans to Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula more generally from original motivations to leave home in the Horn through violent, often gendered, experiences during their migration and upon arrival, thereby shining an uncomfortable light on the ways the international refugee regime and its regional and local pendants fall short of protecting (forced) migrants and refugees when they are most vulnerable.

Writing Refugee Histories: Refugee and Nonrefugee Voices

Peter Gatrell and colleagues (2021) have highlighted the need for refugee history to center refugee voices to appreciate their polyphonous contributions to and engagement with the refugee regime. This is a call to center the contours and rooms of possibilities and constraints of the agency of refugees and forced migrants in refugee history. Kate Reed and Marcia C. Schenck (2023) invite their readers to be open to redefining what being a historian means and to include the possibility that historians reside in refugee camps, base their work on oral histories, and have nontraditional training. We need therefore to consider voices from camps not simply as authentic refugee voices, but as historians, scholars in their own right. This special issue features voices that reflect on power and knowledge production and the question of positionality. Our contributors not only are a combination of those from and based in the North and those from and based in Africa but include people who own the story they are writing about. Teferra, for example, writes and reflects from Kakuma refugee camp, where he is still waiting after more than ten years for official recognition of his refugee status. His painful "experience of being in waiting" since 2011 has motivated him to write his article (186), reflecting on the terminologies used by refugees in Kakuma camp to move through stages of the aspired resettlement process. Similarly, Omar has lived the realities of refugees from the Horn of Africa to Yemen, about which she is writing herself, and reflects: "Since I am an East African who has witnessed their struggles and lived among them, I was entrusted with their stories and felt I had a mandate to document them and share them with a wider audience" (194). She reminds us of the complexity of working with testimonies: "Most survivors' stories share some common elements, yet each had a unique experience: each had overcome unique obstacles and suffered unique heartaches and was harboring unique hopes" (194). Through the voices in Omar's piece, we learn about how refuge seekers tell and create their histories, how they call out injustices, and what roles different forms of migrancy play in their narratives. Njung's experiences mostly inform his work in a philosophical way, but for Teferra and Omar, involvement in the environments that they research and in which they continue to live informs their work directly. Meanwhile, others, like Schenck, Lingelbach, and Treiber, approach the topic with more distance from another continent and with no direct flight experience themselves.

Individual refugee voices gathered through oral-history interviews inform Omar's account of migrant abuse en route to and in Yemen, as well as Teferra's exploration of pseudopermanence in Kakuma refugee camp. Such ethnographic orality equally informs Treiber's comparative work on three life histories of Eritrean refugees from the 1960s to the present, and, to a lesser degree, Passemiers's study of white flight from the Congo to South Africa. Jaji bases her study on ethnographic research conducted with refugees from various East African countries based in Kenya and Zimbabwe, which informs her analysis of Kenya's and Tanzania's history of hosting political refugees. This offers insight into how refuge seekers have negotiated the opportunities and constraints to their agency in various circumstances, illustrating that these stories cannot be captured appropriately by a victim narrative or a somewhat naive celebration of African refugee agency. While most of the authors identify as historians, we have those trained in other disciplines, such as anthropology (Treiber), sociology/anthropology (Jaji), and geography (Lingelbach), all of whom work historically on the issue of Africa's refugee experiences. Together, these authors draw not only from oral-history interviews, participant-observation, their own life experiences, and ethnographic approaches, but also from a wide range of African and European archives and newspapers, as well as from archives of international organizations, to unearth refuge-seeking and refugee-hosting histories in Africa and beyond. We hope, therefore, to demonstrate with this special issue that telling complex African refugee histories is an endeavor that must draw from a multiplicity of sources, disciplines, and authors, to avoid reducing African migrant and refugee stories into a single story.

NOTES

1. For works that query the lack of historical scholarship on refugee studies or contribute historical perspectives, see, for example, Elie 2014, forthcoming; Kushner 2006; Malkki 1996; Marfleet 2007, 2013; Njung 2021; Shadle 2019.
2. Grosz-Ngaté eloquently articulated this during her November 2019 African Studies Association Presidential address in Boston, Massachusetts, and subsequently published in the association's flagship journal in 2020 (Grosz-Ngaté 2020; see Wiley 2022).
3. Teferra and Omar have published their work elsewhere, thereby contributing to the metadiscussion about decolonizing knowledge production about Africa (Abdalla et al. 2021). Further, their research will appear shortly in an edited volume that seeks to problematize the tendency of refugee studies to write about refugees, rather than take refugees in camps and remote locations outside of the academic space seriously as nontraditional scholars in their own right (Reed and Schenck, forthcoming).
4. The blog series *Histories of Refuge* brings together nine entries from workshop participants, featuring historical approaches to refuge seeking from around the continent. It can be accessed at https://africasacountry.com/series/histories-of-refuge. The H-Net Crossnetwork is open for scholars working on African refugee history broadly defined and for the interested public; more information can be found at https://networks.h-net.org/african-refugees-crossroads.

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