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Pineteh, Ernest Angu

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NARRATIVES OF HOMELESSNESS AND DISPLACEMENT: LIFE TESTIMONIES OF CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS IN JOHANNESBURG

ERNEST ANGU PINETEH

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis is based on an analysis of the life testimonies about homelessness and displacement told by the Cameroonian refugee community in Johannesburg. It seeks to understand not only the experiences and the conditions of migrancy within a specific group of involuntarily displaced persons in an African city but also how these experiences are constructed and reconstructed 'in the telling'. The main thrust of the thesis is a discourse analysis of the oral narratives and stories that Cameroonian asylum seekers and refugees living in the city of Johannesburg tell about themselves, their past, present and future, their journey to exile and their aspirations, memories of home and sense of identity as forced migrants in a global era.

The data for this study was gleaned from a series of interviews with twenty Cameroonian forced migrants and the interviews are used in this thesis as my primary texts. The analysis focuses primarily on the narrative construction of migrant experiences, exploring how Cameroonian forced migrants use varied narrative strategies and patterns to articulate broader exilic discourses such as the construction of memory, identity and spaces. Therefore, through the testimonies collected and recorded from my informants, I was able to access individual lives as well as the subjective and collective experiences of Cameroonian forced migrants, and explore how they interpret and construct these experiences. Also, the testimonies provided a platform from which to examine how Cameroonian forced migrants narrativise exilic experiences, construct identities, remember the past and represent diasporic spaces.

The study has produced a number of significant outcomes. Firstly, the testimonies tend to represent exile as a place that provides solutions for the predicaments of displaced persons. Secondly, the study also reveals that migrant narratives can be multi-dimensional and multi-functional if individual experiences and element of time are taken into account. This is evident from the multiple, shifting and somewhat contesting narratives produced by different respondents.

Thirdly, because of these narrative features, the testimonies are often affected by the logic of ambivalence, emerging from the constant subversion and undermining of the same narratives using different narrative patterns, metaphors, images and symbols. Finally, the multiplicity, subversion and the shifts of the narratives therefore draw our attention to the fact that testimonies from the same refugee community have the potentials of generating different interpretations of shared experiences of displacement.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university

Sign----------

----------day of ----------2006

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my mum Lucy Nah and my dad Samuel Penn

Acknowledgements

The years spent on this research were my most challenging years, years that I had to depend on others for both financial and intellectual support. However, despite the countless and nerve wracking challenges that come with doing a PhD, I was extremely fortunate to have people with great insight who were always ready to lend me a hand of support and this is my chance to thank them. First and most important, I am deeply indebted to my supervisors Professor Isabel Hofmeyr, Professor Jon Hyslop and Dr. Michelle Adler for their immense intellectual support and from whom I have learned my most valuable academic lessons over the past years. Without their continuous academic guidance, I would have taken forever to complete this thesis. I am especially thankful to Dr. Michelle Adler for sparking off my enthusiasm and encouraging me to undertake this study in the first place.

The data for this study was gleaned from multiple interviews with twenty Cameroonian forced migrants. Their great deal of kindness and willingness to share their experiences with me made the field work less of a daunting task. At very odd hours, they were ready to sacrifice their most valuable hours to chat with me. Without their interviews, this research would never have seen the light of day. I therefore extend my sincere gratitude to my insightful and eloquent informants for their generosity and hospitality.

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Finally, sections of this thesis have been presented at different conferences and seminars in South Africa as well as overseas, and a chapter was published last year in the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. I would therefore like to extend my thanks to the conference organisers and participants for giving me the opportunity to present my work in progress and for their invaluable suggestions.

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List of Abbreviations

AAC	All Anglophone Conference
ACAS	Association of Cameroonians in South Africa
AESCA	Association of English Speaking Cameroonians in South Africa
ANC	African National Congress
BACUDA	Bali Cultural and Development Association
CAM	Cameroon Anglophone Movement
CPDM	Cameroon People's Democratic Movement
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
PIFAMSA	Pinyin Family Meeting in South Africa
SCNC	Southern Cameroon National Council
SDF	Social Democratic Front
TAC	Teachers Association of Cameroon
SWESA	South West Elites in South Africa
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees