

## **Between War and City : Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps**

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Eds

## Between war and city

Towards an urban anthropology of refugee camps

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**translated by Richard Nice and Loïc Wacquant**

**ABSTRACT** ■ Two elements constitute a new category of world population, that of 50 million displaced persons and refugees: on the one hand, so-called ‘dirty’ or ‘low-intensity’ wars, with the endless exoduses, suffering and multiple losses they provoke; on the other, the humanitarian response that accompanies them very closely. The camps are both the emblem of the social condition created by the coupling of war with

humanitarian action, the site where it is constructed in the most elaborate manner, as a life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world, and the experimentation of the large-scale segregations that are being established on a planetary scale. Created in a situation of emergency as a protective device intended to provide for the physical, food and health safety of all kinds of survivors and fugitives from wars, refugee camps agglomerate tens of thousands of inhabitants for periods that generally last far beyond the duration of the emergency. In this article, we describe and analyse camps as an urban ethnographic case. Social and cultural complexities emerge with the formation of the novel sociospatial form of 'city-camps' in which new identities crystallize and subjectivation takes root.

**KEY WORDS** ■ refugees, war, city, humanitarian agencies, camps, identity, Africa, urban anthropology

The perfect simultaneity between a military offensive, claiming to be supremely swift, 'surgical' and effective, and a humanitarian intervention – the establishment of refugee camps, airdrops of food kits and medical supplies – in aid of the civilian populations directly or indirectly affected by that very offensive does not merely illustrate one of the new forms of warfare or the will of the world's only military superpower to manifest its humanist compassion across the international media. It also displays, in the clearest possible way, the two elements that constitute a new category of world population, that of *displaced persons and refugees*: on the one hand, so-called 'dirty' or 'low-intensity' wars, with the endless exoduses, suffering and multiple losses they provoke; on the other, the humanitarian response that accompanies them very closely. Despite the purportedly provisional character of each situation, there is something perennial about this new component of the human condition.

### City-camps and war

Fifty million people are currently defined as 'victims of forced displacement' by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Of this number, between 13 and 18 million, depending on the year, are refugees in the strict sense, i.e. living outside their own country. Massively concentrated in Asia (over six million) and in Africa (seven to eight million), they have to be added to the three million Palestinians who took refuge between 1940 and 1960 in various Middle-Eastern countries. In addition, just over three million refugees are considered by the UNHCR

### Camps in the heart of wars

Refugee camps very often find it hard to maintain their integrity, in other words to ensure the protection and neutrality of the spaces they demarcate. They can be turned into training camps for routed armies or the haunts of arms traffickers and suffer internal control by exiled ethnic or religious powers, violent incursion by armies from their countries of origin or strategies of forced return on the part of the national authorities. According to Jean-Christophe Rufin (1996: 28), camps can be transformed into 'humanitarian sanctuaries': within this framework, a camp is 'a rear base open to guerrilla forces, protected not only by a border but, above all, by the presence of a mass of civilian refugees, looked after by the international community', and the refugees may become successively the shields and targets of localized military operations, even when the great majority of them remain composed of civilian populations playing no part in the conflicts.

In addition, while some want to protect refugees, others want to protect themselves against refugees, and this can have opposite effects. This was true, for example, of the Zairian government vis-à-vis the Hutu refugees from Rwanda from mid-1994 to November 1996, and of the Turkish government vis-à-vis the Iraqi Kurds between 1988 and 1993. While being forced by the pressure of events or the international authorities to shelter them on their territory, these states endeavoured – for domestic political reasons or to protect their frontiers – to concentrate, to simply abandon or even to organize the forced return of these neighbours who, even after their arrival and settlement, remained undesirable (Cigerli, 1998; Godding, 1997).

Aside from camps, the UNHCR has tried other solutions to ensure the protection of civilians in wars. 'Security zones' are delimited areas or buildings designated for the sheltering of the most vulnerable sections of the population – children, the elderly, pregnant women and the sick; 'neutralized zones' are larger areas, marked out within the regions of combat, wherein the whole population, which takes no part in the fighting, is considered as needing protection; lastly, 'undefended localities' are deliberately disarmed zones which, as such, should not be attacked. Some NGOs, in Colombia or the Philippines for example, have tried to set up the same kind of neutral zones, in particular for internally displaced persons, without managing to provide real protection for the population. This is true of the 'Peace Communities' in Colombia, which have turned into a dramatic failure. In the absence of protection by the army, the displaced people who are gathered together in these localities in the heart of the conflict, without weapons (on the grounds of their neutrality), have proved powerless in the face of the violence of guerrilla forces and paramilitaries.

as being 'in the process of repatriation'. Finally, an estimated 25 to 30 million people have suffered forced displacement in their own countries as a result of internal violence and wars (800,000 in Burundi, a million in Sri Lanka, Angola and Afghanistan, two million in Colombia, over three million in Sudan, etc.).<sup>1</sup> These figures are, of course, approximations and are sometimes disputed. Moreover, they do not include a considerable (but uncountable precisely) number of refugees who are not declared as such and thus regarded as clandestine: Afghan refugees, described as 'invisible' at the time of the American attack of October–November 2001;<sup>2</sup> exiles from Black Africa or the Middle East who are treated as 'illegal immigrants' and caught as they cross European borders; Somali, Ethiopian or Rwandan refugees, described as 'self-settled', some because they prefer to take their chance in illegality and the informal economy rather than be enclosed in camps, others wandering for lack of official recognition of their refugee status.

Officially designated camps are reported to contain altogether 87.6 percent of the refugees assisted by the UNHCR.<sup>3</sup> This form of treatment, which is obviously unstable, depending as it does on the evolution of armed conflicts, is unequally distributed around the globe. It is much more common in Africa and Asia (where camps house 83.2 percent and 95.9 percent respectively of the refugees officially assisted by the UNHCR) than in Europe (14.3 percent), and it turns out to be a 'speciality of poor countries' (Cambrézy, 2001: 72).<sup>4</sup>

The dominant, even massive, use of the camp formula in the most dispossessed regions of the world suggests the first of the two hypotheses guiding the research of which some findings are reported here: that of the *formation of a global space for the 'humanitarian' management of the most unthinkable and undesirable populations of the planet*. The camps are both the emblem of the social condition created by the coupling of war with humanitarian action, the site where it is constructed in the most elaborate manner, as a life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world, and the experimentation of the large-scale segregations that are being established on a planetary scale.

A second hypothesis follows directly from the first, and gives it more complexity by refining it. It is that of the *formation of the novel sociospatial form of 'city-camps'*. Created in a situation of emergency as a protective device intended to provide for the physical, food and health safety of all kinds of survivors and fugitives from wars, at a minimum level and at a distance from the existing socio-economic areas, refugee camps agglomerate tens of thousands of inhabitants for periods that generally last far beyond the duration of the emergency. The precise length of time is moreover difficult to determine even for the officials of the humanitarian organizations themselves. Although no one may be 'on the spot' in the hours or days immediately following a massacre, a ransacking, an air raid and a mass departure into

exile, everyone observes that once the camps have been set up, more or less quickly, a certain duration ensues, for reasons both internal and external. The continuation of hostilities prevents the refugees from returning home, but the humanitarian aid mechanism also generates its own effects, especially in terms of access to food and the employment market. Not only have the last two decades seen the development of a whole new area of professional specialization, including large numbers of experts and planning specialists (to assess health, food and economic needs, etc.), scientific research programmes (in medicine and the social sciences) on wars, exoduses and suffering, as well as academic or more popular journals devoted to humanitarian issues, but more than 500 NGOs now work worldwide under contract with the UNHCR to intervene on the ground and organize humanitarian assistance in all its forms. Finally, in each camp, the NGOs are in turn employers for the local population and – informally at least – for many refugees, as will be seen below. At every level, then, for all the ‘emergency’ action and discourse, contemporary humanitarian intervention displays a marked tendency to implant itself and take root in the places where it operates and to transform



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**Figure 1** On every block of shelters, huts are lined up along rough dirt roads.

the initially empty spaces where the camps are constructed; the camps gradually become the sites of an enduring organization of space, social life and system of power that exist nowhere else.

These are paradoxical devices, hybrids that, for lack of an appropriate term, I shall call city-camps (*camps-villes*). On the one hand, the individuals brought together in these spaces are so solely because they have the recognized status of victims. This justification of their presence and of the existence of the camps makes them, from a humanitarian standpoint, *nameless*, in the sense that no identity referent is supposed to affect the support provided to the physical maintenance of the victims (security, health, food); this care is aimed at persons belonging indifferently to factions, regions or states which may be friendly or hostile. Thus the humanitarian system induces the social and political non-existence of the recipients of its aid. Recognizing in principle only 'victims', refugee camps are spaces that produce a *problématique* of identity, in the sense in which, as Michael Pollak observed about the experience of residents of Nazi concentration camps,

identity becomes a preoccupation and, indirectly, an object of analysis only where it is no longer taken-for-granted, when common sense is no longer given in advance and when the actors involved can no longer agree on the meaning of the situation and the roles they are supposed to be playing in it. (Pollak, 2000 [1990]: 10)

It is the fact of finding oneself in a strange, unpredictable predicament, for which one has not been prepared, that provokes the questioning of one's own threatened, traumatized identity.

On the other hand, this survival system that is the camp, its organization and above all the fact that it constitutes a 'relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals',<sup>5</sup> creates opportunities for encounters, exchanges and reworkings of identity among all who live there. In this sense, the humanitarian device of the camps *produces cities*, '*de la ville*', if one considers the city from the point of view of its essential complexity. 'The very being of the city', Bernard Lepetit stresses, is a heterogeneous ensemble of identity resources whose confrontation defines 'the space of action of city-dwellers' and determines 'the transformative capacities of the urban' (1996: 32). It is by virtue of its 'extraordinary complication', he also notes, that the city has succeeded in becoming a subject of history.

Can the refugee camp become a city in the sense of a space of urban sociability, an *urbs*, and indeed in the sense of a political space, a *polis*? Or why does it not manage to do so? Can it or can it not break free from its initial constraint of enclosure and oppression, as have, in other historical contexts, the townships of apartheid or the African encampments of colonial cities, which were other crippled forms of construction of the urban?<sup>6</sup>

Are they experiments in global segregation, sketches or embryos of cities? This built-in ambivalence provides the starting point of my ethnography of refugee camps, seeking to detect the tensions it can generate. The camp is erected, by its very principle, as an authentic *desert*: Hannah Arendt borrowed Nietzsche's phrase, 'the desert is growing', to express her concern at the 'extension of the desert' where the mediating space between humans disappears which in her view constituted the 'world', that is, the ensemble of social relationships wherein politics is born. The desert is the antinomy of the social and political exchange that links all humans, that simultaneously brings together and distinguishes them (Arendt, 1993). For Marc Augé (1992), exoduses and camps – like, at the opposite extreme, motorways, airports and shopping malls – are extended forms of an excessive, relatively mimetic modernity dominated by the model of '*non lieux*', '*non-places*'<sup>7</sup> which characterizes places that are indeed various but which have all lost the memory, the relationships and the identity ideally attached to 'anthropological places'. Even more, it should be emphasized, the camps are '*hors-lieux*', outside of the places and outside of the time of a common, ordinary, predictable world, which itself tends to shrink as the spaces and situations that deny it expand, in other words when 'the desert grows'. Other spaces occupied by the 'undesirables' – an exclusionary label with effects more violent than that of the 'useless to the world' of the medieval period, which was still integrationist – are, to some degree, comparable to refugee camps, not in their apparent causality (pertaining to security, ethics or identity) but as the testing-out of a massively reproduced segregation, on the basis of which life has to redefine itself within wholly unprecedented and unknown contexts. Prisons, concentration camps and the Nazi death camps are other possible paradigms for this same hypothesis.<sup>8</sup>

Fieldwork was initially carried out in the camps of Dadaab in northeast Kenya, during the months of June and July 2000.<sup>9</sup> This study, and those that will follow in the same context, build on and extend research carried out since 1998 in Colombia (Cali and Bogotá) among the *desplazados* (the internally displaced persons of the *violencia*), on their arrival and settlement in the city and on their political activity (Agier, 2000, 2001). These two parallel field research projects are the basis of a broader, transversal reflection on the formation, by war and exodus, of new social, 'urban' and identity-bestowing devices among displaced persons and refugees (Agier, 2002). In the Dadaab camps, my local insertion was made through the agency of the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, Belgian section), which provides all the medical assistance in the three camps. I slept in the MSF compound and every morning was taken to the camps, a dozen kilometres away, in the vehicles of that NGO, travelling as part of the 'humanitarian convoy' escorted by the Kenyan police. For security reasons I had to leave the camps in the evening, as did all the Kenyan and expatriate 'humanitarian



personnel'. This did not prevent me, after a few days, from being able to move around the various sectors of the camps, having asked to be accompanied by a refugee employed by MSF, who guided me and provided Somali-English translation of the conversations as required. This NGO and its employees (local and expatriate staff, refugees) are well trusted by the refugees, on account of the kind of service they provide, generously and unreservedly, and this greatly facilitated my presence and contacts with the refugees. Nonetheless, my point of view is limited, first, by the short duration of this first sojourn and, second and more significantly, by the fact that this was exclusively daytime ethnography, coterminous with the physical presence of the humanitarian organizations in the camps (from 7:30 am to 6:00 pm). I am not yet in a position to assess how much my information falls short of what would be gained from fieldwork that also covered the nocturnal life of the camps, even if a number of 'problems' associated with it (in particular, those related to violence) come to light fairly rapidly in daytime interviews, meetings and discussions.

### Sketches of a city

This first sojourn enabled me to uncover three sketches for a probable form of urban life – sketches of a symbolic of space, social differentiation and identify change. I shall outline them here in broad strokes, without claiming to give a complete description. My aim is above all to open up paths for ethnographic investigation into one of these new spaces of life which no one imagined, only a few decades ago, would figure among the legitimate field sites and topics of anthropology.

Although they harbour as many people as the whole of the rest of the district of Garissa in which they are located, the three UNHCR sites around Dadaab do not appear on current maps of Kenya. The Ifo camp (45,000 inhabitants for 10,000 shelters) was opened in September 1991; that of Dagahaley (34,000 living in about 7000 shelters) in March 1992; and that of Hagadera (45,000 inhabitants) in June 1992. They lie within a radius of 15 kilometres on either side of the village of Dadaab, where the compound of the UN and humanitarian organizations running the camps is located. Over 90 percent of the population is of Somali origin; there are also a few southern Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ugandan refugees. Food rations from the UN World Food Programme are distributed every fortnight from the depots run by the Canadian NGO CARE, which also provides some of the schooling<sup>10</sup> and supports several social and craft activities. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Belgian section) runs several health centres, three bush hospitals and several mobile health teams. Finally, the security of the refugees and the humanitarian agents is the responsibility of 250 members

of the Kenyan police, coordinated by the UNHCR, which also provides their uniforms and their vehicles.

The UNHCR has erected fences of thorns and barbed wire, several kilometres long, to mark the perimeters of the camps and, within them, to enclose the 'blocks'. The blocks are areas of two to three hectares containing 100 to 150 shelters housing 300 to 600 refugees on average. The refugees have been grouped in the various blocks according to their place of origin, ethnicity and sometimes their clan of origin, and are generally referred to in broad ethnic terms (Somalis) or in terms of nationality (Ethiopians, Sudanese). Upon arrival, they were each given the same UNHCR blue-and-white plastic tarp, a mattress and some kitchen utensils. They collected wood from around the camp to make their shelter. As the years have gone by, dwellings have become denser and rather more solid: mud huts alternate with more traditional Somali huts made of branches, all covered with the UNHCR canvas; materials used to transport international aid have been recycled, in particular the sheet metal of food canisters and drums, which



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**Figure 2** Somali refugees find shelter in their habitual round huts (aqallo) made of a frame of bent wooden sticks that usually support leafing; in the camps, these are covered with the white-and-blue plastic sheets handed out by the HCR.

has been flattened to make tiles, doors, windows, tables and hen coops. Consequently the letters 'USA', 'EEC', 'Japan', 'WFP', 'UNHCR' and the flags of the donor countries or organizations are scattered all over the built environment.

The immediate surroundings of the shelters are made up of blocks and sections (clusters of 10 to 15 adjacent blocks), the edges of which have been drawn in geometric fashion to leave a clear passage for the vehicles of the police, health and infrastructure services. This broad setting is notably differentiated according to ethnic group: a sparse habitat with family enclosures roughly delimited by a few small spiky plants, with frequent overflowing of the limits of the blocks in the case of the Somalis; by contrast, the Ethiopian 'neighbourhood' in the Ifo camp (two adjacent blocks), is characterized by a high population density, narrow alleys, high fences and the presence of numerous stores – 'coffee shops', 'video shops', 'hairdressers' salons', 'photo studios', etc. – summarily assembled under canvas, in sheds made of boards, boxes or metal.

For some people, especially those who belong to minorities within the camps (Ethiopians, Sudanese, 'Somali Bantuu refugees', Ugandans), the multiple enclosures of space express many behaviours of fear, rejection, withdrawal and self-defence. Thus, in Dagahaley there is a group of shelters



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**Figure 3** Medical check-up in a refugee's hut by a nurse from Médecins sans Frontières-Belgium, who like the refugees she's tending to, is a Soomaali (but of Kenyan and not Somali nationality).

### On rape and camp security

Rapes occur commonly in and around the camps at a rate which exceeded 10 a month during the first semester (six months) of 2000 according to the records of meetings of the camp police, a number generally acknowledged to be well below reality. The victims are women who leave the camp to fetch firewood for cooking. Some NGOs (CARE, the Ted Turner Foundation, the National Council of Churches of Kenya) run information and prevention programmes on 'gender relations', 'reproductive health' and 'sexual violence'. But, above all, rape is a recurrent theme in discussions between the health services of the UNHCR, the Kenyan police and the representatives of the refugees, mainly Somalis. Here are my notes on a 'security meeting' held at the Ifo camp (28 June 2000) during which some 80 refugees (35 women and 45 men) met with 10 other people that included two Kenyan policemen, three UNHCR security officials, three social workers from CARE and myself.

*The main topic on the agenda is 'mobilizing the young to provide an escort for women fetching wood from the bush' (about three kilometres from the edge of the camp). The Somali representatives refuse to accept that men should fetch wood; some Somali refugees are even suspected, more discreetly, of being the authors or accomplices of rapes, whereas others, in particular the southern Sudanese men, go fetch wood in place of their women – which they pointed out emphatically during the meeting. The Somali men are reproached for failing to provide an escort to defend their women. The refugees complain that the Kenyan police do not escort the women, and the policemen retort that if anything happened they would themselves be accused of rape. Above all the refugees complain that they are given no weapons to protect their women in the bush.*

*'Unarmed escorts, they're useless', insists one Somali woman, 'the rapists of the bush, they, they are armed and they come also with weapons into the blocks, if you shout for help they kill you, and the police are all around the camp, they won't come into the blocks'. Under these conditions, a Somali representative points out, 'you ask the young people to escort the women, it will only add massacres to the rapes. . . . We, the refugees, we can't leave the camp'. More generally, all the refugees who spoke up at the meeting asked for more security measures; some of these requests were agreed to (more policemen, strengthening of the 'chainly fences') whereas others were rejected (weapons for the refugees who would escort the women, the possibility of establishing radio communication to sound the alarm in the event of an incident in a block).*

housing some 600 Sudanese, most of them coming from the towns of southern Sudan, more than two-thirds of them young men. Just over two years after their arrival in the Ifo camp, this group were relocated to



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**Figure 4** The GTZ, a German organization for technical cooperation, supplies wood by trucks as fuel for heating to avoid the harvesting of woods around the camp.

Dagahaley, where they constructed a remarkable space, different from that of the Somali refugees but also from that of the Sudanese in the other two camps. The habitat is organized in rows of small mud houses, well aligned on either side of a perfectly straight main street, 50 metres long, at the end of which a mud church has been built, with a distinct sense of architectural perspective. A nursery, a row of shower and toilet facilities and a small volleyball field round off what seems to be a modern southern Sudanese village or, at least, a neighbourhood in a miniature town. The distinct space is surrounded by a hedge of thorns and barbed wire along which, every night, 12 men take turns, in groups of three, to guard the perimeter of the block. As in other blocks, the main gate is closed at 6 pm for the entire night. There, the night-time enemy is one's immediate neighbour: 'They are Somali Bantuus', the young leaders of the Sudanese quarter explain, 'who want blood paid for with money' (meaning that, as soon as any problem arises, for example a scuffle between children from the different groups, the neighbours immediately come and demand cash compensation). On the gate of recycled metal are the hand-carved words 'Equatoria Gate', in memory of the district of southern Sudan from which they come and which they fled in 1994–95.

Other spaces are more open and can be used even by those – Somalis, Ethiopians or southern Sudanese – whose own habitat seems to be closed in

on their ethnic or clan group. This is the case, in Ifo, of the 'coffee shops' held by the Ethiopians or, in all three camps, the 'video shops' run by young people, Ethiopian as well as Sudanese and even Somali (the latter in the face of the moralistic reproaches of their Muslim elders). For 10 Kenyan shillings (0.15 euro), in a dingy shed made of planks and branches one can watch one of the two daily video shows during which Indian films and, occasionally, soccer matches are shown.

All these activities presuppose uses that transform the everyday vision that the refugees have of space in their daily lives. They are accompanied by the beginnings of a symbolics of place, as seen for example in the fact that certain anonymous spaces have been given names by the inhabitants. In the Hagadera camp, in particular, the market area at the entrance to the camp has become 'the town', or '*magalo*' in Somali. There, alongside two little streets of sand bordered with stalls, refugees and some locals sell food rations and basic commodities, serve coffee or offer video sessions. Similarly, the most travelled street in the market is the 'main street' of the camp. Finally, a substantial stretch of sand (some 50 metres wide and a kilometre-and-a-half long) running from this space, which the refugees walk up and down to reach the main set of shelter blocks, is called, in English, 'highway'.

These 'inventions of the everyday', comparable to those which, according to Michel de Certeau (1980), mark the resistance of city-dwellers to the extension of non-places, to the individualization and anonymity of urban spaces, are accompanied by a second type of city sketch, that pertaining to social differentiation. However, the problem of idleness dominates life in the camps. This problem, closely correlated to the feeling of abandonment, affects everyone, but more directly those who had a recognized, more or less official, job before the exodus, and therefore more the men and the former town-dwellers.<sup>11</sup> The moral suffering and even the psychological pathologies linked to the lack of occupational activity assume an important place in the texture of individual daily life. Whether they are Somalis who were previously employed in commerce, the service sector or the civil service in Mogadiscio and who now do not know what to do with themselves, or idle Sudanese youth who spend their days in their block, 'pushing time', as they say, or former Ethiopian civil servants who, after nine years of exile and camp living, consider themselves as 'physically and mentally imprisoned, homeless and hopeless' (as they repeat over and over) and who commonly talk of suicide, the refugees endlessly express above all feelings of powerlessness and uselessness.

There is no official employment market in the camps, and, outside them, as an UNHCR official stressed, 'those who work outside the camps are illegal', being regarded as foreigners and lacking work permits. But some more or less recognized or tolerated businesses nonetheless exist and are directly visible as one walks through the camps: resale of food rations,

buying and selling of vegetables or staple foods (brought from Garissa, the main town of the district) on the market stalls; goat-keeping on the edges of the camps; small handcrafts (basket-weaving, tailoring, carpentry, metal-work, shoemaking, building) in and around the huts and cabins; shops offering services, coffee, tea, hairdressing, etc.

In order for this embryonic economy to keep running, some capital, networks and institutions are crucial. On the one hand, the Somali traders and pastoralists play an important role. For the members of the Somali clan of the Ogaadeen, the largest group present, the camp lies in an ecological and cultural area that is the extension of their own, located just across from the Somali border. They circulate easily throughout the region and sometimes benefit from the assistance of their hosts, in towns or villages, in their efforts to achieve financial autonomy (a job, a loan of money, etc.) (Gomes, 2001). A Kenyan identity card or driver's licence, or a regularly renewed temporary work permit, obtained by bribing the officials who issue or check these documents outside the camps, enable them to carry out their business deals. These may lead them to settle secretly in Garissa, or in the suburbs of Nairobi, or yet to make return journeys to Somalia. Similarly, some refugees living in the camps regularly receive the aid of brothers or sons who circulate around the country and work there without being declared either as foreigners or as refugees. Both groups of settlers also receive financial assistance sent from abroad by relatives who have taken refuge in other countries (Europe, Canada, USA, etc.), or by relatives living in Somalia or elsewhere in Kenya. The financial operations are carried out through parallel banks using networks of trust in the places from which the funds originate. Two such banks exist in Dadaab close to the camps; 11 others are located in Garissa and another four in the Somali quarter of the Kenyan capital, Nairobi (Gomes, 2001). These funds enable the refugees not only to supplement their WFP rations but also to undertake some small business ventures on the markets inside the camps.

Trading and craft activities are also supported by the international NGOs, because they help to occupy the refugees and also provide educational and social benefits. Indeed, this type of assistance is designed to valorize the social position of some categories regarded as 'vulnerable' – young orphans, the physically handicapped, and widowed, divorced or raped women. It is also aimed at minority groups that have low status in the context of the camp (e.g. the Somali castes and clans regarded as inferior or servile). In June 2000, with the aid of loans of 5000 Kenyan shillings (about 75 euros), sometimes more, some 250 groups of four to five people were working on projects entailing so-called 'income-generating activities'. In fact, their strictly economic profitability is dubious and does not seem to be the main motivation of the financing organizations. Thus, the basket-weaving products of women's groups are sold for a derisory price (50 to 100 shillings per basket, depending on size, or the price of a bus journey from

one camp to another) and yet unsold baskets pile up in the craftswomen's huts. Charitable events provide the only opportunity to sell a few at a bulk rate, as when ambassadors or representatives of the UN come to the camps for an official visit. It is as if, for the funders as for the beneficiaries, the point was to keep up an appearance of economic life in which regular working activities are the tangible proof of social usefulness.

Finally, the NGOs operating in the camps employ and pay some 1500 refugees from the three camps as 'voluntary community workers' (400 by MSF, over 600 by CARE, others by the UNHCR, the WFP, GTZ [German Technical Co-operation] etc.). These employees receive unofficial wages<sup>12</sup> ranging from 2500 to 4000 Kenyan shillings a month (38 to 60 euros). This income not only enables them to supplement their food ration but sometimes also to pay other people to build dwellings more solid than the basic UNHCR tent, or to employ others to provide services for them (cooking, maintenance), to invest in small business activities (selling vegetables from market stalls) or to help them run various profitable services ('photo studios' or 'video shops') held by friends, e.g. making video copies of broadcasts of sports events received live via satellite on the TV sets of the NGOs within the compound of the humanitarian organizations in order to sell them in the video shops the next day.

These few activities and resources bring to light a social differentiation within the camps, even if it appears only in outline against a common background stamped mainly by overwhelming destitution and idleness. Four levels of social hierarchy can be distinguished. At the top is a small group of Somali 'notables' – traders, pastoralists and heads of clans of high status. Their incomes are difficult to assess (some 5000 Kenyan shillings, or 75 euros, a month or more), as is their number,<sup>13</sup> but their position is also measured by their membership in the higher clans of the Darood clan confederation, which gives them a legitimate priority in performing functions of representation, as 'elders' in the blocks and sections of the camps.<sup>14</sup> The 'voluntary community workers' represent a second locally dominant social category. This group is fairly close to the former as regards income, but less significant in volume (they comprise under 2 percent of the camp population) and a competitor in ideological terms. Their position of propinquity to the representatives of the UN and humanitarian organizations gives the 'community workers' prestige and power in the internal relationships at the camp. Indeed, some of them are or have been block 'leaders' rivalling the 'elders'.

The group made up of the small traders, occasional craftsmen and unofficial employees forms a third category, dependent on the two previous groups but dependent also on aid and the 'follow-up' action of NGOs. For example, the wives or daughters of the NGO voluntary workers are among the traders in the market of the camps; but, among the craftsmen supported



by the humanitarian organizations, one also finds groups that are marginalized within the ethnic relations internal to the camps (non-Somali minorities or lower-caste Somalis).<sup>15</sup> A fourth hierarchical level is made up of the recipients of basic minimum aid (food, health care, water, firewood, shelter), in some cases supplemented by intermittent assistance from the categories above them and from relatives living outside the camps. This destitute group, which has no resources of its own, is by far the largest.<sup>16</sup>

As can be seen from this outline of social classification, the tensions pertaining to ethnic provenance continually criss-cross the social positionings that arise out of the specific context of the camps. But just as the social hierarchy presents an original configuration in its constituent elements as well as its structure, so a specific ethnic chessboard is being set up in the camps, which makes it possible to relativize this realm of group membership, even when it presents itself as the primary truth of collective and individual identities. On the contrary, the contacts and conflicts that arise in the camps abruptly challenge some of the refugees' certainties about identity.

### A new ethnic chessboard

From the standpoint of identity changes, it can be tempting to contrast the city and the camp. This is what anthropologist Liisa Malkki (1995a) has done, very explicitly, based on fieldwork carried out in the second half of the 1980s on Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania, by comparing those living in camps (in Mishamo) with others who were 'self-settled' in a town (Kigoma). According to her, the attachments of the exiles to the places they came from were of varying strength and the effects of detachment also depended on their place of relocation. Within this framework, Liisa Malkki considers that the camp has become a referent that is both spatial and symbolic: within it, a specific moral and political community has been reconstituted among the Burundian Hutu refugees, among whom the memory and myths of origin are maintained. In the context of the camp, she notes, Hutu identity is reinforced. By contrast, the refugees who settle individually in towns produce more 'cosmopolitan' forms of identity and their ethnic attachment loses its mythico-historical roots; at best it can be manipulated in this or that particular context. The ethnonationalism of the camp-dwellers thus contrasts with the cosmopolitanism of the city-dwellers (Malkki, 1995a, 1995b). The latter then find their place, as Arjun Appadurai (1996) suggested even more explicitly, among the actors and creators of a 'post-national order'.<sup>17</sup>

Based on research on Eritrean refugees in Sudan, Gaim Kibreab (1999: 398) criticizes the notion of a deterritorialization of identities. He stresses in particular that if refugees self-settled at the periphery of towns seem more

'cosmopolitan' than those in camps, as Liisa Malkki suggests, it is because they must hide behind 'fictitious identities'. Finding themselves without protection, they have the wrong ethnic group membership in the wrong place and so they pass themselves off as others. In Sudan, he continues, some Eritrean refugees have changed their names, their language, their dress and even their religion, with Christian men and women declaring themselves Muslims and taking up Islam, for the sole purpose of passing unnoticed. Some men, while remaining Christian 'in their private world', even made the pilgrimage to Mecca so as to become 'fictitious *El Haj*'. But all this, Kibreab concludes, does not prevent them from being active in Eritrean political circles and, being able to move around more freely, to be more adept than others in skirting legal restrictions in Sudan in order to organize the political resistance of the dispersed refugees. Thus we have here a case not of identity but of a 'strategy of invisibility'.

The experience of the Dadaab camps in Kenya enables us to contribute additional elements to this discussion. It makes it possible to start to describe and interpret refugee camps in a different way. To sum it up in a general way, it shows that *camps create identity*, both ethnic and non-ethnic, even more so than they reproduce, maintain or reinforce ethnicity. From this point of view, camps are just as relational and dynamic an experiment on and with identity as that which marks the fate of refugees who are not 'processed' by humanitarian agencies but self-settled on the edges of urban centres. This proposition can be spelled out and nuanced in several ways: the *bricolage* of novel identities, the strengthening of particularisms, anti-ethnic behaviours and inter-ethnic exchanges. I shall enumerate them summarily in turn.

A first configuration is that of the *bricolage of new identities* grafted, as it were, on to the old ones. Thus, in the Sudanese refugee block, behind the 'Equatoria Gate' described above, a few metres from the Catholic Church and the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses, stands another place of worship also built as a large mud house. It belongs to a quite new 'United Church of Christ', invented by the refugees a few years ago. It brings together followers of the Anglican, Pentecostal and Orthodox churches and of the African Inland Church, who, separately, were not sufficiently numerous to constitute a church. This pragmatic accommodation to constraints of space and number leads to a coming together and, at the very least, the formation of a new religious label.

Another innovation lies in the fact that, in the camp, the nationalities become ethnicities in the relational sense. For example, the Ifo camp contains refugees from Ethiopia and belonging to a dozen different tribes, and even some Eritreans, but all of them are identified locally simply as 'Ethiopians'. Whereas the stories of war and flight are marked by 'tribal' oppositions and violence, and whereas reference to the nation has been

severely shaken in the ethnic conflicts, the term 'Ethiopian' – like 'Sudanese' – refers, as it were, to a local nation. These ethnonyms do not erase former affiliations but become quite real, operational identity terms, for as long as the camp lasts. Thus, in the configuration of an ethnic 'chessboard' specific to the camp, each affiliation takes on its meaning and position in relation to the other 'pieces' on the board – competing, antagonistic or allied.

A second figure of identity within the camps is that of *strengthened particularisms*, as shown by the following conflict. Those who, in the Dadaab camps, are called Somali Bantus are outcasts, in other words stigmatized minorities of non-Somali origin, immigrant farmers regarded as serfs or slaves of the superior groups, including the Darood-Ogaadeen, of whom there are many in the region and in the camps, and some of whose representatives display towards them arrogant, disdainful and domineering attitudes that can go as far as violence. For centuries, the lower groups identified themselves by reference to the so-called 'noble' clans to which they were attached (Bader, 1999; Mohamed-Abdi, 2000). Now, on the ethnic chessboard of the camp as a whole, they have gradually achieved autonomous recognition, as apparently separate from the Somali grouping. The official designation is given simply by the letters SBR (Somali Bantu refugees) and they speak to the camp authorities as a 'minority' having as much entitlement as the others (Somalis, Sudanese, Ethiopians, etc.) to loans for craft activities or to employment as volunteers for the NGOs. The camp thus enables them to shed a devalued and devaluing intra-ethnic position. Moreover, this context fosters a search for ancestry that separates them even more radically from the Somalis and takes them closer to the lands of Tanzania and Mozambique, from which they say they departed several centuries ago. The representatives of the SBRs have asked the camp authorities for collective resettlement in those two countries. The latter have not acceded to their request, but an answer has come from the US. Having committed itself at the UN to receive its share of refugees, the US government has taken an interest in these Africans who are attached to their lands of origin and display great ethnic unity, seemingly congruent with the domestic conception of ethnic identity (as predicated on descent) operative in the US. As of mid-2000, 'screening' procedures<sup>18</sup> were announced to prepare the reception of 10,000 SBRs in the US.

Such a strategy of emancipation from previous domination and of ethnic separatism in the new context of the camp is not an isolated case. It is comparable, for example, to the fate of the Twa pygmy group in the Rwandan Hutu refugee camps at Goma (former Zaire) in 1994–96. In the camps, this group, despised by the rest of the population in Rwanda, was able, for the first time, to win official recognition distinct from that of the Hutus and Tutsis. This is what Jean-Pierre Godding says about them in his introduction to a collection of documents about and testimonies from Rwandan

refugees: the 5000 Twa present in the camps (out of a total of 700,000 refugees)

were, as in Rwanda, the poorest and most marginalized, scorned by the others and often excluded from aid. They have been able to develop their own associations and to gain recognition as such for the [aid and services] distributions; their representatives have sat on the committees of some camps and won a level of recognition that they had never achieved in Rwanda. The UNHCR and some NGOs have made a special effort on their behalf. (Godding, 1997: 36)

As we can see from these two examples, the strategy of strengthening ethnic particularisms is potentially a challenge to existing ethnic dominations. This ambivalence makes possible the *critique or transcendence of ethnicity* that one can detect at the very heart of intra-ethnic relations in a third type of identity-shaping process. Among the Somali groups regarded as being of lower status and made up of a set of minority clans called 'tool-bearers' (*Waable*), the dynamic is not so much ethnicizing, as in the previous case, as socio-economic. As members of the craft castes, a set of craftsmen (blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters) fulfilled the requirements of humanitarian NGOs seeking to maintain a semblance of productive activity within the camps and therefore to support 'revenue-generating projects'. All of this did not occur without violence. Some craftsmen receiving NGO backing were reminded of their status as inferiors and were systematically 'taxed' by the elders or chiefs of the higher-status Somali clans; others had their workshops ransacked and were even physically attacked by gangs instigated and sent by the elders.

In this case, the camp does not reinforce ethnicity but, on the contrary, clashes with it by putting it in the context of relativizing alternatives. The chessboard, of which we are reconstructing both the pieces and the framework, is no longer strictly ethnic in its rules, but more broadly *relational*. Thus, as we noted above, when describing the levels of the social hierarchy internal to the camps, what distinguishes the two higher 'classes' of the Dadaab camps – the 'traders' and the voluntary workers of the NGOs – is the different weight they give to the ethnic legitimacy of their status: it is imposing and decisive among the Somali notables and traders, but secondary and even criticized among the NGO employees. The intricacies of the causes and consequences of changing relations between 'leaders', elders and NGOs merit more detailed study here. Whatever their immediate outcomes, the competitions that these relations set in motion tend towards an opening-up of identity and, again, a degree of cosmopolitization of the situation.

A fourth configuration of identity deserves mention that is admittedly embryonic but decidedly urban in its principles. It tends to undo the pattern of 'identity squares' on the chessboard and to modify the appearance and

role of the 'pieces' themselves. It is composed of an ensemble of situations of contact which can sometimes be marked by aggressivity and even serious physical violence. These situations nonetheless stage new exchanges, learning processes and linguistic and cultural translations that call into question the ethnic boundaries established at the outset. For example, although UNHCR policy is to separate persons according to their ethnic provenance, this really applies only for the distribution of shelters and much less in the refugees' daily lives. At the market, around the well, at the food distribution outlet and the health centre, interactions take place which before the camp would have been unthinkable inter-ethnic encounters. The Somali elders would like to close down the camp's 'video shops' and 'coffee shops' but they have not managed to do so, and young people from their own ethnic group patronize them in large numbers. Some of the Ethiopian refugees, mainly young men who arrived alone, find wives among the Somali women. These women are then rejected by their peers. Somali gangs may even enter the Ethiopian 'quarter' to forcibly take back the women of their group, leaving the husband with the couple's children, whom they regard as illegitimate (since they are non-Somali by virtue of patrilineal descent). But the marriages go on nonetheless.

### The camp as naked city

The situations that have been examined do no more than nuance the opposition on which, despite their other divergences, Gaim Kibreab and Liisa Malkki, whose views are summarized above, seem to agree. Both counterpose *closed ethnicizing spaces* (places of origin for the one, refugee camps for the other) to *open spaces*, cities with their boroughs and outskirts, where identities are 'fictitious' for the one and 'cosmopolitan' for the other. The Dadaab case shows that in this domain the camp is a new setting *sui generis* and to some extent an *innovating* framework, even if the social and identity changes are predicated on collective suffering and interpersonal conflicts that are in no way specific to this context. The camp engenders experiences of *hybrid socialization* that are not only multi-ethnic but also plural, in which clan strategies criss-cross ethnic strategies, and the latter overlap with the strategies of the humanitarian organizations of the 'global' sphere.

The camp, then, is comparable to the city, and yet it cannot 'reach it'. An economy that could exist since people show they are willing to work (and, for many of them, to remain where they are), a social division which adapts to the plurality of constraints, an occupation of space which, however precarious, gives meaning to an originally deserts place – everything is potential but nothing develops, in contrast to the townships of South-African apartheid or the native encampments of the colonial cities, these other

models with which the refugee camp shares an incomplete, unfinished, form of urbanity. Even when stabilized, the camp remains a stunted city-to-be-made, by definition naked. Why does it not manage to turn into a genuine space of urban sociability, an *urbs*, and from there to realize itself as a political space, a *polis*?

The shift from the management of camps in the name of emergency towards the political recognition of their enduring reality does not take place.<sup>19</sup> To the suffering of exodus is then added the frustration of an impossible resocialization. Only the erection of segregation on a planetary scale gives meaning to this repeated destitution. Refugee camps constitute one paradigm of this, reproducing a massive population of undesirables, kept in existence in spaces remote from everything. The city is in the camp but always only in the form of sketches that are perpetually aborted. A parallel tension divides the international organizations that set up and manage camps. Some want to encourage dialogue, integration, inter-ethnic encounters, and cultural learning, while others seek to avoid contacts, perceived as sources of conflict. When conflicts arise, they are stopped in their tracks by forced return or transfers to other camps. Paid activities remain illegal even as they are sometimes tolerated, but the few craft products made in the camps have little or no consumer market. The policing of emergency makes the camps spaces of pure waiting without a subject, to which are opposed the sketches of subjectivation that appear in initiatives aimed at recreating work, in movements, meetings, even in the conflicts themselves. Being human, winning back this minimum of identity, of being-in-the-world, which war and exodus endanger, therefore consists for each refugee in redefining his or her place by taking advantage of the ambivalence of the life of the camps, between emergency and duration, the here-and-now and the long term, the sentiment of physical or social death and the recommencement of life.

It is the liminality of all situations of exodus that gives a frustrated, unfinished character to this type of 'urbanization', much more than its precarious, improvised, always incomplete material aspects that one finds also in urban peripheries of poor countries. This liminality is shared by displaced persons and refugees, those in the camps and those on the city outskirts, even if there are subtle differences between these conditions. It is the very foundation of both the camp as a waiting zone outside of society and the 'self-settled' sites of displaced persons and refugees, in the sense that they remain in peripheral zones provisionally or illegally occupied. Nothing can ever be brought to completion in these contexts; the incompleteness of the processes of integration is consubstantial with them; quarantine is their horizon.

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## Notes

- 1 See, in particular, the two most recent publications of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1997, 2000).
- 2 The UNHCR had identified 130,000 'invisible' refugees in Pakistan at 3 November 2001, that is, just under a month after the start of the American military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and while the border was closed, preventing the influx and enrolment of refugees in the camps. Before this war, Pakistan was already sheltering in excess of two million Afghan refugees (*Le Monde*, 4 November 2001).
- 3 The others are placed in agricultural sites or handled individually as urban refugees. Needless to say, these percentages do not cover self-settled, 'invisible' and clandestine refugees.
- 4 These percentages relate only to refugees assisted by the UNHCR. There are no reliable and exhaustive data concerning the total number of refugees in all camps.
- 5 This is the minimalist sociological definition that Louis Wirth (1979 [1938]: 258) gave of 'urbanism as a way of life' in the 1930s as part of his platform for a sociology of the city.
- 6 On the dynamics of African settlements in and around colonial cities, see Balandier (1985 [1955]); on the townships of apartheid in South Africa, see Smith (1992); diverse examples of urban segregations and of their practical overcoming are presented and discussed in Agier (1999).
- 7 (Trans.) The French *non-lieu* carries a broader connotation since it also has the legal meaning of a criminal affair in which charges were dropped by the authorities, and from which they are therefore averting their gaze.
- 8 From the fast-growing literature on these subjects I would point in particular, within the French-language area, to the works by Michael Pollak (1990) and Loïc Wacquant (1999).

- 9 Fieldwork in Dadaab is supported by the IRD (Institut de recherche pour le développement, research unit on 'Globalization and the Construction of Identity', led by M.-J. Jolivet) and by Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF-Belgian section (Erwin van der Borght in Brussels and Joke van Peteghem in Nairobi). I am grateful to all of them. I particularly thank Günter Boussey and the whole MSF-B team at Dadaab for their welcome and friendly cooperation.
- 10 Koranic education is provided by a Libyan NGO, Al Haremein.
- 11 In a different way, as will be seen below, part of the aid provided in the camps is given to those who were in the more fragile situations before the exodus.
- 12 They remain unofficial no matter how regular the activity because Kenyan law does not authorize refugees to work.
- 13 Five thousand Kenyan shillings is the income level for the group regarded as 'wealthiest' within the camps set by the Save the Children Fund in their 1999 study of the health and food economy at Dadaab (Cou tts et al., 1999). The same organization estimated this so-called 'wealthy' category at between 5 percent and 15 percent of the camp population, but other data and observation suggest that this range is very exaggerated. I would put the figure at under 5 percent.
- 14 Dominant under the Siad Barre regime until 1991, the Darood clan confederation suffered extensive persecution and rampant violence after its fall, and its members fled from Mogadiscio and Somalia in large numbers. The Darood, and especially its Ogaadeen clans, make up the majority of the Soomalis in the Dadaab camps.
- 15 About 30–35 percent according to the figures of the Save the Children Fund study (Cou tts et al., 1999), which includes in this 'middle' category the workers employed by the NGOs, who, it seems to me, are more properly considered separately, for reasons related more to questions of status and political weight within the life of the camps.
- 16 They comprise about 60 percent of the camp population, according to the same source.
- 17 See, however, Friedman (2000) for an effective critique of this transnational and 'diasporic' approach. On identity changes among the displaced persons of southern Sudan in camps and in improvised neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Khartoum, see the stimulating article of Marc Lavergne (1999).
- 18 'Screening' is an informal individual examination that must be undergone by candidates for resettlement in a third country. It involves checking the refugee's state of health and also sometimes concerns educational level and occupational or linguistic skills. Sex and age can also interfere with the selection of candidates for resettlement.
- 19 And towards recognition of an existential community of refugees, in particular through testimony and political participation (this point is developed in Agier [2002]).



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