

Anthropology's Relevance to Policies on Forced Migration

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Abstract

This article argues that the application of anthropological methods could help policy makers and practitioners to adapt policies to the local needs of refugees. Drawing from his own research in a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana, the author discusses the potential roles of biographical-narrative and mapping interviews in improving the communication between refugee camp administrators, and refugees, as well as for informing refugee repatriation efforts.

Introduction

This article will cite examples from my research in the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana to explain how anthropological methods could be helpful in improving policies to assist refugees. First, this article will introduce cultural anthropology. Second, it will introduce the reader to the situation in the Buduburam refugee camp. Third, some general considerations of the utility of anthropological methods for policy makers will be discussed. To demonstrate this utility, I will explain two methods, biographical-narrative and mapping interviews, as well as the possible contributions of anthropology for two problems in policy. These problems are the miscommunication between refugees and camp administrators, and the neglect of the societal dynamics of repatriation. Finally, I will address a few of the criticisms directed at the relationship between anthropological engagement and policy makers.

Background: The Cultural Anthropological Approach

Definitions of culture vary widely within cultural anthropology, and are heavily contested. This contestation has often focused on the discipline's neglect of the fluidity and interconnectedness of culture. Recent critics suggested that well respected definitions of culture, for example it being 'the customary ways that a particular population or society thinks and behaves' (Ember and Ember 2011:6), seem to suggest that cultures exist as distinct and discrete entities. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 34) state, anthropology has historically 'assumed isomorphism of space, place, and culture'. The global interconnectedness and mobility that define this contemporary age of 'globalisation' has thus compelled many anthropologists to argue that cultures no longer exist as bounded and territory based entities (for example, see Appadurai 1996; Hastrup and Olweg 1997).

Many anthropologists are therefore committed to what they call a 'holistic approach' (Ember and Ember 2011: 4), which conceives of cultures as interconnected systems, at both macro and micro scales. At the micro scale, while these researchers may focus on one aspect of a culture, such as religion, they also incorporate various other aspects of social life into their

analysis, for example gender roles and age-structures. In my view, cultural anthropology is thus characterised by tensions, as well as synergistic effects, between an emic and etic methodology. The emic perspective seeks to understand a culture from the ground up, based on definitions and points of view that are derived from the cultures that anthropologists work with. The etic approach necessitates collecting data based on a predetermined set of anthropological categories (Ember and Ember 2011). It is thus a question of balancing the attentiveness to the theoretical supposition that culture is not bounded, but rather only observable over diverse temporal and geographical scales, and remaining true to the empirical observations available within the societies in which anthropologists find themselves.

This more diffuse notion of culture does not, therefore, negate the utility of carrying out fieldwork, nor the difficulties associated with this. Rather than studying cultures from a distance, anthropologists participate in the rites and daily activities of the culture that they study to experience it in its immediacy (Russell 1995). This wish for intimacy must nonetheless be balanced with the need to maintain some distance from the cultures they study to enable empirical accuracy and to not too heavily distort the behaviour they wish to observe. Thus, anthropologists were historically compelled to refrain from ‘going native’, which would have indicated the surpassing of disciplinary boundaries of objectivity (Tresch 2011: 303). Most anthropologists have therefore historically based their analysis on qualitative methods. Even so, it is one of the strengths of anthropology that it can incorporate diverse methods, including quantitative ones (Russell 1995).

Buduburam Refugee Camp

Liberians arrived in Ghana when they fled the two Liberian civil wars, which ravaged their country from 1989 to 1996 and 1999 to 2003, respectively. In 1990, the Ghanaian government opened the camp in the Gomoa Buduburam area in order to accommodate the massive influx of refugees. In 1992 it was estimated that 8,000 refugees needed to be accommodated in the camp. In 2008, an estimated 45,000 refugees lived in basically the same area of property (Boamah-Gyau 2008).

In 2003, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (hereinafter UNHCR) ceased distributing refugee ID cards to Liberians. According to UNHCR, the ceasefire in Liberia and the subsequent departure of Charles Taylor indicated that a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’ no longer existed in Liberia, and thus refugee status could no longer be granted to incoming Liberians in accordance with the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereinafter Refugee Convention) (Omata 2001: 14).

Although UNHCR withdrew most of its services following the registration session in 2003, it took until 2012 to invoke the cessation clause. This officially terminates protection by the agency according to Article 1C(5) of the Refugee Convention. Its invocation means that by 30 June 2012, those refugees with an ID card were supposed to have returned to Liberia, locally integrated into Ghanaian society, or applied for exemption from this process based on

a continuing fear of persecution. If refugees opt for integration into Ghanaian society, they are officially entitled to all services that Ghanaian citizens receive. Those who return to Liberia receive a grant of \$300 for each adult and \$200 for each child. The maximum allowance for luggage for each refugee traveling to Liberia is 30 kilograms. Those without refugee identification cards are permitted to stay in the country for 90 days according to Economic Community of West Africa guidelines (UNHCR Ghana 2012).

Discussion: Anthropology and Forced Displacement

The situation in Buduburam is emblematic of a global problem. Worldwide approximately 42.5 million people have been forcibly displaced, both within and outside of their national borders (UNHCR 2011). Many of the policies that address forced migration are, however, formulated in terms of a global reach. Unfortunately, aid for refugees is therefore currently distributed without much regard for the cultures of the local beneficiaries (Cuny *et al.* 1992; Hammond 2004; Mackenzie *et al.* 2007; Voutira and Giorgia 2007). This section will provide some brief examples of research that demonstrates the intertwined nature of culture and processes of displacement, and subsequently how this inevitably affects policy.

The input of anthropologists would be helpful in efforts to improve policies and services in refugee camps globally. All too often popular and political discourses conceptualise refugee camps as transitory phenomena. Arguably, the perception of displacement as a fleeting phenomenon is reflected in ‘temporary protection’ programs that have been adopted by Western countries of asylum (Voutira and Giorgia 2007: 216). In reality, however, many situations of forced displacement are protracted. According to UNHCR, ‘protracted refugee situations’ exist when refugees have been trapped in a situation of exile for at least five years following their displacement (UNHCR EXCOM Conclusion 2009). Buduburam refugee camp, for instance, has existed for twenty two years. Despite such realities, images of the ‘tent city’ that are depicted in popular reporting on humanitarian catastrophes seem to shape public conceptions of forced displacement.

Displaced populations are therefore often compelled to adapt to new cultural contexts. This process of adaptation is, however, iterative. Not only do refugees adapt to their new surroundings, but they also impact on these contexts in a way that can be profoundly transformative in the other direction. For many displaced peoples, engaging with the culture of the host country and institutional policies of relief agencies challenges the utility of their cosmologies, exchange systems, and cultural values, leading to new cultural innovations, and changes to long held traditions (see Daley 2001; Hendrie 1992). For example, Ugandans from the North West of the country used to organise farming in reciprocal work groups. In their exile in Southern Sudan, they began organising farming in familial collectives. This shift reflected the general inability of refugees to re-establish commonly accepted moral codes and communal order in the new context of the refugee settlement (Allen 1996).

Knowledge of such changing cultural and societal dynamics is vital for policy-makers, as unintended consequences of policies for displaced populations exemplify. UNHCR mostly

operates its relief efforts based on norms of equality by giving the same services to all refugees, regardless of their position in societal hierarchies in their societies of origins, for example in regards to age and class. In some instances, it provides special assistance to women, for example to female headed households. Sometimes these policies achieve the intended outcomes, notably female empowerment. Southern Ethiopian refugee women who returned from exile in a refugee camp were, for example, more likely to participate in public debates than those who did not flee. They challenged the customs of widow inheritance and arranged marriages and became involved in commercial activities (Getachew 1996).

UNHCR's policy emphasis on gender equality can, however, have paradoxical effects, as exemplified by gender relations among Burundian refugees in Tanzania (Turner 1999). Refugee men believed that refugee women considered UNHCR to be akin to a better husband (Turner 1999:2). It was UNHCR, after all, which provided for schooling, feeding, and other services. Not being able to provide for their families humiliated the men. In theory, UNHCR's equality-focused policy-approach should have created more equal relationships between men and women in the refugee camp. In practice, however, men began feeling that their masculinity was threatened and thus started looking for alternative ways to assert their authority. They sought meaning by running for the public office of street leader, for example, whilst women were afforded few opportunities to do so. The avenues men pursued to reassert authority may therefore have had a negative impact back upon women.

In sum, not knowing about the cultures of displaced populations may adversely affect policy outcomes. As this paper argues, anthropological methods are ideally suited for generating valid data on the changing cultural contexts of displacement. In the following, I will discuss two of these methods: biographical-mapping and narrative interviews.

Methods: Biographical-Narrative and Mapping Interviews

One of the weaknesses of formalised interviews is that there is often an asymmetrical power relationship between the 'interviewer,' who determines the course of a conversation, and the 'interviewee', who dutifully responds to questions formulated by the interviewer (Flick *et al.* 2004: 205). Biographical-narrative interviews are designed to reduce these power asymmetries by giving the interviewee the autonomy to narrate her own life history rather than responding to a predetermined set of questions. Of course, even though biographical-narrative interviews can reduce power asymmetries, they do not nullify them; they are inevitably going to exist to some extent between a researcher from the global North, who may be white, affluent and Western educated, and a refugee in a developing country. In addition, there will be some degree of confusion over the aims of interviews as well as uncertainties surrounding to what ends the information they disclose might be used, with implications for what refugees may choose to divulge.

It is additionally difficult for short term researchers to learn about the genuine perspectives of refugees, regardless of the methodology. For example, when the Ghana Refugee Board interviewers were conducting exemption procedures in the country following the invocation

of the cessation clause, these interviews had an estimated maximum duration of 1.5 to 2 hours to elicit a huge breadth of information from interviewees.⁵⁷ Moreover, many organisations rely on formalised interviews, even though refugees are apprehensive about such a process. Some of the most difficult experiences in the lives of refugees have happened in settings in which they were asked questions against the backdrop of highly unequal power asymmetries (Pernice 1994). In the past they may have been questioned by combatants who persecuted them and by investigators in hearings that determined whether they would receive international assistance or asylum. Thus, research has shown that some refugees may adopt particular strategic narratives as they respond to questions in highly formalised interview situations (Eastmond 2007). In part because of the strategic use of information by refugees, asylum interviewers exhibit a ‘culture of distrust’ in regards to the accounts of asylum seekers.

Anthropologists therefore aim to supplement formalised interviews by developing knowledge from living and interacting with refugees on a day to day basis. In this process of ‘participatory observation,’ they hope to gain a nuanced and practical understanding of the complexities of refugees’ living conditions. When anthropologists do conduct interviews, they often do so in a semi-structured or unstructured fashion, as the example of biographical-interviews exemplifies. Despite such approaches, there are still power asymmetries between researchers in professional capacities and refugees. The impact of these power-asymmetries on the data that is generated must be acknowledged.

Biographical-narrative interviews are more like conversations. During my previous research in the Buduburam camp in Ghana in the winter of 2010 and the summer of 2011, I found that Liberian refugees openly talked about their displacement history. I was, for example, particularly interested in the sizable number of Pentecostal churches in the camp, and what had attracted many displaced Liberians to join a Pentecostal makeshift church. The most illuminating observations concerning this topic in retrospect stemmed from biographical-narrative interviews.

Like biographical-narrative interviews, mapping interviews seek to reduce the power asymmetry between the interviewer and interviewee. With this method, anthropologists map the physical environments of the people whose lives they explore. In so doing, anthropologists try to learn from the interviewees about how they conceptualise their environment and how this relates to their biographies, social relationships, subsistence patterns, cosmologies, and indigenous knowledge (Chapin *et al.* 2001). In some instances, facilitating opportunities that enable indigenous groups to map what they perceive as their territories enables them to challenge externally imposed boundaries (D’Antona *et al.* 2008).

In my case, applying such methods meant walking with the refugees through environments that are important in their life histories or current circumstances, and asking them to point out how pivotal places are embedded in their life histories. I conducted such interviews with my research assistant; we walked through the camp and conversed about its institutions and norms. In the process, I gained some of my most valuable insights into social life in the camp,

⁵⁷ This estimate is drawn from a personal conversation in 2013 with an intern from UNHCR Ghana.

for example in regards to the relationship between the Ghanaian camp administrators and refugees.

It would, of course, be unfeasible to fly in anthropologists, who would mostly be trained in Western countries, any time aid workers are confronted with problems. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that aid workers could be trained in applying anthropological methods. In a similar vein, it may not be feasible for refugee aid administrators to give up on standardised interviews. Perhaps it would be more possible to complement standardised interviews with anthropological methods. In the following, I will discuss how doing so may improve policy responses in two ways: to alleviate some of the miscommunication between refugees and camp administrators; and to better inform repatriation efforts.

Domains of Application: Communication in the Camp

Applying anthropological methods could help to minimise communicative dilemmas that exist between refugees and those tasked with assisting refugees. Anthropological, qualitative methods, such as biographical-narrative interviews, can be facilitators of constructive communication. Anthropology has a long history of participatory research projects that facilitate conversations that enable managers of aid projects to learn about the perspectives of the stakeholders (Ervin 2005).

Buduburam's recent history, for example, is mired in miscommunication and hostility between the camp administrators and refugees. In many ways, a sign that reads 'Refugee Camp' epitomises these tensions (see below).⁵⁸ First, the Liberian organisation Joint Liberian Refugee Committees in Ghana (hereinafter JOLRECG) put up the sign. JOLRECG has allegedly been behind refugee protests for more comprehensive resettlement packages, even though many Liberians reportedly disagree with the organisation's strategies (Shout Africa 2011). After JOLRECG put up the sign, the camp management took it down again. Then, JOLRECG put it back up. It was apparently taken down again. The mostly Ghanaian camp management preferred to refer simply to Buduburam and omit the term 'camp.' The Liberian refugees insisted on calling the locality a 'refugee camp'. The Ghanaian authorities were hesitant to use the terminology 'refugee camp' because a 'refugee camp' compels humanitarian aid and resettlement. This vignette of the sign does not only illustrate the relationship between the camp management and the refugees, it also demonstrates how actors involved in local power struggles appropriate terminologies from international discourses.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Hauser made me aware of the sign in a personal conversation in July 2010. Subsequently, I conducted interviews with refugees about it. Divergent terminologies for Buduburam are also mentioned in Holzer 2012:276.



Image 1: Sign ‘Liberian Refugee Camp,’ which prompted a local power struggle

Hauser (2012) identifies insufficient communication mechanisms as a main factor for tensions between refugees and camp administrators in Buduburam. One of the reasons for refugee protests in 2008 was that UNHCR maintained communication with representatives according to demographic markers (for example gender and age) instead of political positions that were relevant for refugees. More specifically, Hauser asserts that UNHCR had a ‘lack of adequate channels of communication’ (Hauser 2012: 274). Information was mostly communicated via public bulletin boards, writings from embassies, and stories that were told in the population of the camp. For these reasons, UNHCR falsely accepted the pretences of more conservative refugees, according to whom the protests were not representative of the majority of the population in the settlement, thus occluding the voices of all those without direct pathways of communication with UNHCR (Hauser 2012: 272).

Of course, anthropological methods would not have solved all the communicative impasses between refugees and administrators. In the final analysis, much of the strife is a consequence of UNHCR not having sufficient resources to resettle, adequately integrate or repatriate refugees. Nonetheless, application of anthropological methods might have bolstered the capabilities of authorities to resolve conflicts through an appreciation of the complexities on the ground, for instance of the significance of political cleavages among refugees.

Domains of Application: Repatriation Policies

As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres (2009: [6]) reminds the

refugee aid community, movements of repatriated refugees:

represent both a developmental opportunity and a developmental risk. If addressed appropriately, in a coherent and comprehensive manner, large-scale repatriation movements provide national and international actors with an important opportunity to establish new livelihoods, reconstruct shattered infrastructure and improve social relations amongst different groups of citizens which at the same time helps consolidate peace and strengthen the foundation for democratic government.

On the other hand, returnees do not always constructively contribute to the rebuilding of the nation of origin. Instead, they may spur instability, as in the cases of the Khmer Rouge returnees from Thailand (Rogge 1992), and the Nicaraguan Contras in the Central American region (Basok 1990). After all, refugee movements, whether to host countries or back to countries of origin, may lead to a 'regionalization of conflicts' (Milner 2008: 12), even though little ethnographic (or other) data is available to evaluate when conditions in exile may lead to such a dynamic. UNHCR announced that repatriation is the 'most desirable' outcome of a refugee crisis. United Nations resolutions thus repeatedly call for repatriations. Allen and Turton (1996) argue that the history of European nationalism informs perceptions according to which the complex emergency of prolonged displacement is resolved once refugees returned into their nation of origin. As a consequence of this bias, insufficient attention and resources are directed towards the complex dynamics that transpire once refugees have been repatriated. UNHCR delegates responsibility to the country of origin's government and the International Organisation for Migration to facilitate individual returns.

Cultural factors during repatriation and in exile are intertwined, which means return programmes must take the cultures in exile into account to understand the cultural context of repatriation. While an emic approach is prioritised for understanding displacement, exile, and repatriation from the perspective of refugees, the etic approach is instructive for guiding the researcher towards putting empirical phenomena into a conversation with emergent cultural anthropological theories that problematise the nexus between the local and the global.

In regards to cultural change among refugees, it is important to note that forced displacement represents an experience of rupture in their lives. In a sense, many '[r]efugees are in the midst of the story they are telling, and uncertainty and liminality, rather than progression and conclusion, are the order of the day' (Eastmond 2007: 251).⁵⁹

My biographical-narrative and mapping research suggests that Pentecostal churches, which convert numerous refugees in Buduburam, have become very popular in large part because they help individuals cope with the rupture that is caused by the experience of displacement. Pentecostals in the camp (as elsewhere) attempt to make 'a break with the past' (Meyer

⁵⁹ It should be noted that this point should not be over-determined. Some refugees, such as Mozambicans in South Africa, find opportunities in displacement and migration, for example in the establishment of businesses and romantic relationships in countries of asylum (Lubkeman 2002).

1998:316). In doing so, they repudiate certain traditional Liberian practices, which they blame for the atrocities of the Liberian civil wars. In this way, they construct a narrative that assigns meaning to their pasts. From the perspective of Pentecostal converts in the refugee camp, their experiences of the Liberian Civil Wars can be explained by reference to collective deviations from Christian values and practices.

Thus Pentecostalism helps many believers to come to terms with their past. Furthermore, Pentecostalism enables many refugees to manage expectations for the future and cope with their harsh everyday lives. Instead of a syncretic belief system that blends Christianity with traditionalism, it became apparent during research that many Liberian converts embrace an ideology of transnationalism and connect to global, Evangelical networks. This is partly in an effort to overcome their marginal status, which is marked by a lack of mobility and political and economic rights.

The Pentecostal culture in the camp affects its ethnic relations. I did not openly ask about the ethnic affiliations of my interviewees until the end of my research stage. It appeared that different ethnic groups were present in Buduburam refugee camp. According to my interviews, there is an absence of ethnic violence in the refugee camp, even though ethnic animosities precipitated the Liberian civil wars (Boamah-Gyau 2008). When I did not ask, respondents mostly did not mention the topic of ethnicity in the interviews. When the topic of ethnicity came up in conversations, respondents' answers seemed to generally indicate that ethnicity was no longer an important topic in the camp. Refugees mentioned that ethnicity partly became a less salient societal force because of the presence of the churches in the camp. In the words of a believer in the camp, '[a]nother good aspect of the church is that it breaks the spirit of tribalism. I may not know your tribe, but I come to church and serve God with you'. According to some respondents, the work of churches has been an important source of reconciliation between different ethnic groups that live in the camp. As a pastor told me:

“[a]nd lastly, once we ask for reconciliation...we should learn to reconcile our differences and live as one people. Once that is done and we shift our position back to God, he can restore our nation. Because he said in his word, “Out of the arches of violence, I will restore a nation. And that nation could be our nation. Can you give us a better future and hope for our nation.””

Overall, the themes of faith based forgiveness and reconciliation were prominent in my interviews and discussions. Knowledge of ethnic dynamics and reconciliation of refugees in exile could prove vital for societies such as Liberia, which struggle to rebuild themselves after interethnic wars and yet are attempting to consolidate ethnic reconciliation against the backdrop of the influx of 'returnees'. Situations of exile do not automatically lead to a reduction of ethnic affiliations, as Malkki's (1995) ethnography of the Hutu 'mythico-nationalism' of Burundian refugees in Tanzania exemplifies.

There are, however, no reports that Liberian returnees upset the process of ethnic

reconciliation in Liberia. Nonetheless, data drawn from anthropological research could help when making predictions about the effects of a large influx of returnees on the country of origin, particularly in regards to ethnic reconciliation. By drawing from ethnographic research conducted in situations of asylum (see Allen and Turton 1996, Kibreab 1996), the ‘development risks’ of repatriation, to which the current UN High Commissioner for Refugees refers, may be predicted and perhaps even mitigated.

Because of the historical bias that takes as axiomatic that refugee crises are resolved once refugees have been returned into their nation of origin, there is ‘a scarcity of academic research into the long-term process of post-return integration’ (Hammond 2004: 207). The absence of academic research is mirrored in the lack of resources and policies that address post return integration. Such policies would have to integrate research in settings of exile, for example refugee camps, and in societies in which returnees would be reintegrated.

Insights into dynamics that lead to repatriation could help international agencies in constructively responding to large scale repatriation movements. Communication patterns within refugee communities about conditions in the country of origin compared to those encountered in exile are complex long term processes. How information is promulgated and the nature of knowledge, and how people use it once they obtain it, is necessarily idiosyncratic and highly context specific. It is, therefore, very difficult to adequately capture the knowledge that flows in the process of repatriation. Even so, compared to highly standardised interviews, qualitative methods such as participatory observation and unstandardised or semi-standardised interviews can be helpful for understanding how the knowledge in repatriation processes is constituted and used to some, although perhaps modest, extent.

According to Cuny *et al.*’s (1992: 21) model, refugees in exile send ‘scouts’ into countries of origin to determine whether the economic, political and military situation has improved. Refugees in Buduburam also waited for the reports of such ‘scouts’ to conclude whether repatriation would enhance their livelihoods, but they did not have a formalised organisational structure to organise the repatriation. In contrast, Ethiopian Tigrayan refugees in Sudan organised repatriations through the grassroots Relief Society of Tigray (hereinafter REST) (Hendrie 1992). Many refugees expressed wishes to return when there were reports of a rainy season in Ethiopia, even though hostilities had not ended. When it became clear that most international agencies would actively discourage the repatriation, REST changed its strategy – only heads of households were encouraged to repatriate. They would prepare domestic farm economies so that the rest of the household could follow. Aid workers knew little about these self-support networks and economic resilience strategies. Knowledge of relief operations is hierarchised and, unfortunately, the knowledge of refugees themselves seems to oftentimes be grossly undervalued. In the words of an aid worker, who was involved in the Tigray operation:

It was an amazing time. Here are a people who have lived in that part of the world for centuries. They make a decision to go home, and we say, “Hey,

maybe you better think about that.” It reflects a real shortcoming of how we think about refugee situations, if we are in control. In fact, people will do what they do, and we really have very little to say about it (Hendrie 1992: 366).

Since a refugee crisis is not resolved once refugees have returned to their country of origin, but rather when the protective relationship between state and citizen is effectively re-established, research should also address post repatriation. Following calls for more investigations of post repatriation integration (Hammond 2004), my future research will investigate whether Liberian refugee returnees, who spent time in exile in Ghana, obtain ‘territory-anchored rights’ assigned on criterion of membership in a group that belongs to a territory (Kibreabb 1999: 187). In my past research, I realised that for refugees, achieving basic political and economic rights and territoriality are inextricably linked. Liberian refugees in Ghana do not enjoy ‘territorially-anchored rights’. They were neither part of a Ghanaian ethnic group, and therefore under protection and patronage of one of the country’s chiefs, nor citizens of the Ghanaian state. The inhabitants of Buduburam could not vote in elections. They claimed that they were discriminated in the provision of public services such as primary school education, sanitation, and healthcare. They asserted that the Ghanaian police mistreated them. At the same time, they lacked efficient means for redress in cases of maltreatment and discrimination.

In significant ways, the extent to which these returnees reassert their ‘territory- anchored rights’ will depend on their ability to reintegrate into Liberian society. In this respect, their Pentecostal religiosity, to which they converted in exile in Ghana, plays a pivotal role. Many born again Christians in Buduburam sought for discontinuity and repudiation in regards to unchristian and occult aspects of their cultural pasts. From the perspective of converts in the camp, adherence to what is occult invariably leads to societal disintegration. The bloodshed of the civil wars seems to have been an example of such disintegration.

In the beginning of my research, I assumed that the respondents either had no religion or were animists in their pre-conversion life as they narrated religious and spiritual changes in their lives and told me that they had not been Christian before becoming born again. In time, though, I learned that they meant to express that they were, indeed, Christian, for example Baptist, before coming to Ghana, but that their Christian faith had lacked commitment before it was tested in Buduburam and that they became born again as the result of the challenges respondents experienced in exile. A focus of Christianity as it was practiced in Buduburam was that it officially did not tolerate the syncretism between Christian and non-Christian beliefs that was allegedly permissible in much of Liberian history.

Some of my informants considered Ghanaians as more complicit with traditional, non-Christian and occult practices. It is possible that the Liberian returnees will be confronted with belief systems that they once repudiated upon their return to Liberia. On the one hand, reintegrating into familial networks may require re-identifying with belief systems that were once rejected. On the other hand, the religious revival that transpired in Buduburam did not happen in a vacuum, but is in some respect epitomic for larger trends in religiosity in the

West African region. In my future research, I will explore how religious experiences and cosmologies in Liberia compare to those that I observed in Buduburam. In so doing, I hope to identify what threats or opportunities arise to the sustainability and efficacy of the return as a consequence of Liberians having become born again.

Against the backdrop of these challenges, it is important to remain mindful of Allen's (1996: 260) contention that:

[a]nother reason why research is so important, particularly in relief work, is that viable community life cannot be assumed. Returnees may be coming home, but they may have little previous contact with people they find to be neighbours. In social upheaval, local-level mutuality is something grappled with, sometimes violently. Relief workers need to know who the losers are in order to provide assistance effectively, and development projects which call for community participation are unlikely to succeed unless considerable efforts are made to establish community which might participate.

Frequently who these 'losers' turn out to be is foreshadowed in exile. As other anthropologists (Hampshire *et al.* 2008) have noted, changing age relations produced winners and losers in Buduburam. The elderly were venerated in Liberia. In the refugee camp, on the other hand, the elderly have few opportunities to make their voices heard. Marginalisation of the elderly is a consequence of both the mobilisation of youth in the Liberian civil wars as well as the elderly's inability to generate income. Perhaps the main source of income is remittances from relatives that have been settled into the United States. To receive remittances, Liberians who stayed in Ghana need to cultivate contact and negotiations with relatives who have been resettled abroad. Doing so is a task for younger refugees since the elderly do not know how to work with computers and the Internet.

What I would add to previous research on age relationships in Buduburam is that the elderly may use churches to regain some influence. Some Pentecostal churches have official positions for church elders. A young informant informed me that learning from the wisdom of the elders is one of the advantages of attending church. In his words, '[t]he elderly encourage us young ones to deal with our problems out there. Some of my friends are smoking because of the stress...They receive no good advice. There are good elders we have in church, so we don't go wayward'. Overall, most of the churches seem to still be dominated by attendees and volunteers of younger generations, though my findings on the nexus between age and church participation remain preliminary and tentative. As mentioned in the theoretical section above, it is, however, important to analyse the intersection between different cultural facets, such as age, gender and religion, to more fully understand the impact of these dynamics on the processes of forced displacement and return that I have referred to.

If the elderly turn out to be losers as a consequence of repatriation, then assistance providers must make special provisions for this demographic. Anthropological methods are useful for identifying exactly how elderly people experience 'vulnerability' to certain factors, and how

they seek to overcome these in the camp and during the repatriation process. In my research, I used biographical-narrative interviews as well as focus groups to discuss age relations. Even though I did not address age relations in the context of biographical-mapping interviews, they could also capture age relations. Age relations in the camp have spatial dimensions. Some of the areas in the camp, for example, were dominated by the youth.

Limits to the Potentials of Anthropological Engagement

At first sight, the ways through which anthropological researchers and policy practitioners attain information appear to be polar opposites. Anthropologists seek to provide holistic and ‘thick descriptions’ of a social context (Geertz 1973:3:30). For this reason, they make notes of a vast array of information in order to provide a holistic depiction of the communities that they study. In contrast, practitioners need concise information, which they can operationalise for policies. Opinions on whether scholars should become engaged with policy, for instance for development organisations that aim to relieve poverty, differ within anthropology. Scholars and practitioners such as Nolan (2001) have long argued that anthropology and development policies must become more mutually relevant to become more efficient. To make this happen, anthropologists need to convey their findings in a way that is accessible to policy makers.

Contrary to such views, Escobar (1991) cautions against anthropological engagement with development policies. Following Escobar’s line of argument, development organisations’ focus on poverty alleviation implicitly serves the purpose of diffusing societal and political conflicts that would undermine current societal arrangements that are inimical to the poor. Consequently, anthropologists’ uncritical acceptance of ‘development’ paradigms makes them part of the problem, rather than the solution. Instead of working within the development framework, anthropologists should focus on grassroots generated and realistic alternatives. Similarly, anthropologist Ferguson (1994) asserts that the World Bank’s policies towards Lesotho were based on analysis that did not reflect social reality but rather innate bureaucratic logics, which, in the final analysis, de-politicise the process of ‘development’.

Similar debates are held in the interdisciplinary field of ‘refugee studies’. Many refugee scholars profess that their research should have policy relevance (for example see, Hugman *et al.* 2011; Mackenzie *et al.* 2007; Limbu 2009). On the other hand, Bakewell (2008) cautions against exclusively applying categories that are intelligible for policy makers. By focusing on policy relevant questions and terminologies, researchers may ignore wider societal dynamics that are not affected by aid programmes. Paradoxically, research that may be more helpful for policies that could improve the lives of those forcefully displaced may emerge from research that does not profess to be policy relevant, such as in depth anthropological studies. For instance, if researchers only focus on officially designated refugees, as determined by the Refugee Convention, they may ignore the huge number of self-settled and unassisted refugees, whom provide clues as to the most sustainable and relevant durable solutions for refugees themselves.

Conclusion

Anthropological methods cannot solve all the conundrums practitioners in refugee assistance face on a daily basis. They also do not absolve anthropologists and other social scientists from ethical conundrums associated with engaging with institutions that are embedded in the problematic ideologies that Ferguson and Escobar rightly point out. Nonetheless, as I have hoped to demonstrate, the application of anthropological methods such as biographical-narrative interviews and biographical-mapping methods may help policy makers in appreciating the complexity of contexts of forced displacement. This will invariably affect policies that change the lives of refugees, for better or worse, for example in regards to communication between administrators and refugees and the effects of religion and age relations on repatriation processes.

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