

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
A GEOGRAPHICAL SURVEY OF THE  
NATURE AND PATTERNS OF REFUGEE  
MIGRATION IN AFRICA

By  
JOSHUA OTOR AKOL

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis describes and relates the problems associated with Africa's refugee migrations to those of other refugees in the world. Modern refugee problems in Africa are products of decolonization of African territories from European colonial powers in the 1960's. The causes of refugee migrations are discussed and the unevenness in their distribution with respect to both areas of origin and asylum considered.

The characteristics of refugees and nature of migration are examined. It reveals that most African refugees originate from rural extraction, are unskilled and have low levels of education. Refugee migrations are characterized by short distances and interchanges of populations between adjacent states, a feature which frequently resulted in border incidences.

The solutions to Africa's refugee problems are discussed. By and large, the solution to the refugee problem in Africa is through rural resettlement. Urban resettlement of refugees which was characteristic of postwar Europe, is limited. This study is only a first step toward an understanding of the nature and characteristics of Africa's refugee migrations.

To my Parents

Brothers and

Sisters

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

From earliest recorded history, people have been on the move, either individually or in groups, as nomads, pilgrims, exiles or emigrants, voluntarily seeking better lives or escaping from oppression and persecutions. Today, we call these people 'refugees' ...

Edmund E. Cummings, 1975.

When, in the early 1960's the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (U.N.H.C.R.) was winding up its activities in Europe, a series of new events, involving new groups of refugees, were taking shape in Asia and Africa. Since then, Africa has increasingly become the focal point for U.N.H.C.R. assistance. This change in geographical location of the world refugee problem from Europe to Africa, has necessitated a reassessment of the U.N.H.C.R.'s traditional role as well as its general treatment of the refugee problem. Apart from differences in their geographical setting, Africa's refugees also differ in their political, cultural, historical, economic, and social backgrounds from the traditional concept of refugees as generated in Europe, Asia, or Latin America. Whereas Europe's refugees were drawn primarily from urban industrialized societies, for example, African refugees are predominantly from rural agrarian societies.

The term 'refugee' as used in this study, refers to refugees falling under the mandate of the office of the U.N.H.C.R. These are legally called political refugees as distinct from other refugee groups

generated by natural causes or specific refugee groups, such as the Palestinians.

As early as 1964, the total number of refugees in Africa was less than half a million. At the close of the decade, the number had reached one million, the majority of which came from Portuguese Africa. Today, the official figure stands at 1.1 million<sup>1</sup>. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, the general increase in the number of refugees over the years was also accompanied by a corresponding increase in the U.N.H.C.R.'s financial allocation to Africa. In 1971, for example, US \$3,673,390 or 70% of a total global commitment of \$4,998,640 was for refugees in Africa<sup>2</sup>. However, with the completed repatriation of Sudanese refugees, and the current repatriation of large numbers of refugees from former Portuguese Africa, the U.N.H.C.R.'s financial assistance to Africa is gradually reduced. Also, refugee settlement schemes in various countries of asylum are becoming self-supporting and hence no longer require as much international assistance.

In spite of stabilization of some refugees, the problem facing most African countries of asylum is that they are not well endowed to provide aid to the refugees, since they are generally no better off in economic and social development than are the countries of origin of the refugees. Therefore, the need exists for continuing international charity as long as refugee problems persist.

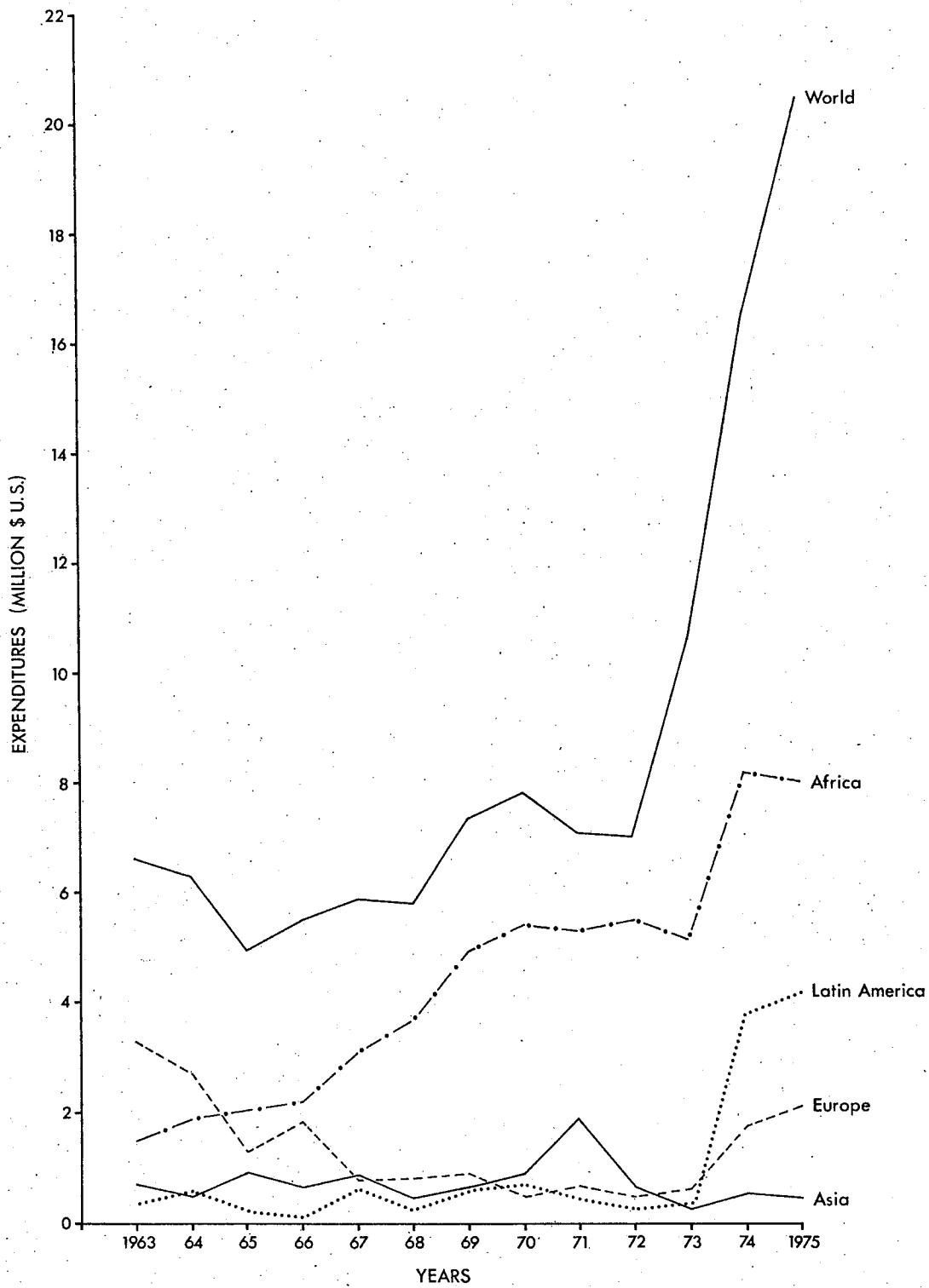
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<sup>1</sup>Estimates show that the number of refugees in Africa constitutes one-third of a total of 3.5 million recognized refugees in the world and that one out of every 300 Africans is a refugee. See P. Enahoro, "African Refugees", Africa Magazine, No. 57, (May 1976), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>S. Aga-Khan, "The One Million Refugees in Africa", Migration News, No. 4 (July-August, 1971), p. 3.

Figure 1.1

UNHCR EXPENDITURES 1963-1975



Source: U.N.H.C.R.

### Objectives of The Study

This study has three objectives. Firstly, it examines the causes of the current refugee migration in Africa and compares this to postwar refugee movements in Europe and other parts of the world. Emphasis is placed on differences in the political, economic and social backgrounds of African refugees and the impact of these variations on the definition of political refugees in the African context.

Secondly, the thesis discusses characteristics and the nature of movement of African refugees. It is generally observed that refugee movements in Africa are of a short distance due to the fact that most refugees come from rural backgrounds with little or no education and skills.

Finally, the study examines the various solutions to the problem of refugees in Africa, namely, repatriation and urban or rural resettlement. Distinction is also made between the solutions adopted with respect to Africa's refugees, vis a vis other refugee groups such as postwar European refugees.

### Sources of Data

The only reliable and voluminous source of data on refugees is the office of the U.N.H.C.R. Data from other sources are limited and scattered. However, the research relies mainly upon:

- (a) Published Materials. Published materials on refugees include general studies on migratory movements and postwar refugee migration in Europe and other parts of the world as well as articles on specific aspects of refugee migration in Africa.

- (b) United Nations Documents, Publications and Reports. The United Nations Publications are the main source of information, especially the U.N.H.C.R. reports and publications dealing directly with refugee problems in various parts of the world, and the U.N.H.C.R. special reports to the General Assembly.
- (c) Other Sources. Other sources consulted include publications by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) which deal with the problem of population movement and migration of refugees, and occasional annual papers published by the Secretariat for Migration of the World Council of Churches.

#### Limitations of The Study

The study of refugee migration is complex and the problems are diverse. These complexities are directly related to the nature of refugee classification; to the discontinuous and periodic nature of refugee migration; to the non-uniformity and incomparability of refugee statistical data and to the changing concept of refugees in time and space; and to the inconsistencies in the temporal limitations of refugee status from one country to another. The limitations which the above place upon the study can be summarized as follows: --

- (a) Classification of Refugees. In legal terms, persons qualifying for a political refugee status must have left their country of origin due to political circumstances<sup>3</sup>. However, this simple

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<sup>3</sup>J. Vernant, The Refugee in the Postwar World (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953), p. 4.



classification does not always provide a clear-cut distinction between political and non-political forces. Multiple factors, both political and non-political, may be responsible in generating refugee migrations. For example, the flight of an estimated 100,000 Malien Tuareg to neighbouring countries since 1968 was in part due to successive years of drought conditions in the area, but also due to political difficulties between the Tuareg and the ruling party, The Union Sudanaise<sup>4</sup>.

- (b) The Nature of Refugee Movements. Unlike free migration, refugee movements are discontinuous and periodic flows, depending on the prevailing conditions in source areas. Typical examples in Africa are Burundi, Rwanda and Ethiopia, where intermittent internal instability and armed conflict have periodically caused thousands of refugees to flee to neighbouring countries. Since the renewed outbreak of fighting in early 1975 between the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Ethiopian army, for example, over 40,000 refugees had sought asylum in the Sudan in addition to 62,500 registered refugees already in the country. Statistical data on refugees therefore vary considerably in both time and space,

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<sup>4</sup>The Tuareg are predominately nomadic people. Since independence, they were not actively involved in governing the new nation. The ruling party was under the control of the Bambara ethnic group who are considered by the Tuareg as one of their traditional enemies. Hence, the party meant little to them. Also, differences in historical, cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds are further divisive factors between the Tuareg and the government. See V.D. DuBois, "The Drought in Niger, Part III: The Flight of the Malien Tuareg", Fieldstaff Reports, West Africa Series, Vol. 15, No. 6 (December, 1974), p. 2.

because of the intermittent inflows of refugees as mentioned above; because of return movement of refugees to their country of origin, such as was the case with the Sudanese refugees; or due to out-migration of refugees to a third country.

- (c) Non-Uniformity in Statistical Data. Statistics on refugees are affected by many factors including the general difficulty in obtaining data and the fact that refugee migrations are discontinuous and periodic. Most data on refugees are based upon estimates by the countries of asylum. However, these data are often no more than approximations and subject to considerable under-or over-estimation. Since international assistance is based upon the number of refugees, countries of asylum frequently inflate their statistics. In contrast, countries of dispersion generally under-estimate the number of persons fleeing their country, as for example in the case with respect to Guineans in neighbouring countries<sup>5</sup>.

Apart from under or over-estimation of refugee populations, the varying definitions of refugees, at national, regional or international levels, also affect the data. These include the definitions by the U.N.R.W.A. for Palestinian refugees; the convention of the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.); and the general United Nations Refugee Convention. Therefore,

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<sup>5</sup>Official estimates show that there could be as many as one million Guineans in various countries of asylum roughly distributed as follows: Senegal 300,000; various parts of West Africa, particularly Ivory Coast 300,000; and Europe 400,000. See P. Enahoro, Loc. cit.

reduction or increase in data of a given refugee population are also attributed to changes in definitions or coverage rather than in actual numbers of refugees.

- (d) Temporal Limitation of Refugee Status. The temporal dimensions of how long to regard persons as refugees are variable in different parts of the world and as well as from one refugee group to the other. The criteria normally employed by the United Nations are that refugees cease to be refugees when they earn a living in the country of resettlement, have found a permanent place of residence, or when they have acquired a new nationality<sup>6</sup>. Such was the case with the Hungarians, Czechoslovakians, Chileans, Ugandan Asians, and recently the Vietnamese refugees, who were resettled in Europe and North America. However, the residence period required to qualify for a new citizenship ranges from five years in Europe and North America to an indefinite time limit in the case of most African countries. In Africa, for example, refugees are not generally encouraged to acquire new citizenship of their host countries. This is in part due to the negative attitudes of the governments of countries of asylum to naturalize populations which may be a liability rather than an asset to their economic and social development. Also, a reluctance exists among most refugees to abandon their original homelands.

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<sup>6</sup>L.W. Holborn, "Refugees -- World Problems", International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 13, 1968, p. 362.

## Existing Literature on Refugees in Africa

Literature on refugees is limited and scattered. This is particularly so in the case of Africa where methods of data compilation are generally unsophisticated. Although refugees are part of migrant population, social scientists in general and geographers in particular, have contributed very little in this field, which deserves to be more widely understood.

Apart from few contributions by geographers, including M.J. Proudfoot,<sup>7</sup> most studies on refugees since World War II, were predominantly conducted by non-geographers, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and political scientists<sup>8</sup>. Their concern was mainly with the sociological aspects of refugee migration; the impact of the new environment on the mental health of refugees; or the political implications of refugee exodus on both areas of refugee origin and destination.

Most of the existing literature on refugees in Africa is that provided by the United Nations sources. Independent research is limited. Some of the contributions in this area include the two sets of symposium papers edited by S. Hamrell and H.C. Brooks and

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<sup>7</sup>M.J. Proudfoot, European Refugees, 1939-1952: A Study of Forced Population Movement, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1956).

<sup>8</sup>H.B.M. Murphy (ed.), Flight and Resettlement, (Paris: U.N.E.S.C.O., 1955); K.C. Cirtautus, The Refugee -- A Psychological Study, (Boston, Massachusetts: Meador Publishing Company, 1957); S.L. Keller, Uprooting and Social Change -- The Role of Refugees in Development, (Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1975).

Y. El-Ayouty,<sup>9</sup> which deal with the legal, economic, political, social and historical aspects of refugees. An important recent contribution is the comprehensive study of the work of the U.N.H.C.R. by L.W. Holborn<sup>10</sup>.

Also, there exist a few studies of African refugees in a general context, as well as individual case studies of particular refugee groups. Such studies include those of R. Yeld (1965, 1968); R.O. Matthews (1972); N. Rubin (1974); W.T.S. Gould (1974); P. Enahoro (1976); and C. Potholm (1976)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>S. Hamrell (ed.), Refugee Problems in Africa, (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1967); H.C. Brooks and Y. El-Ayouty, (eds.), Refugees South of the Sahara -- An African Dilemma, (Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

<sup>10</sup>L.W. Holborn, Refugees -- A Problem of Our Time; The Work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951-72, 2 volumes (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975).

<sup>11</sup>R. Yeld, "Implications of Experience with Refugee Settlement", Conference Papers, (Kampala: East African Institute of Social Research, 1965) pp. 1-13; and "The Resettlement of Refugees", in R. Apthorpe (ed.), Land Settlement and Rural Development in Eastern Africa, Nkanga Editions (Kampala, 1968), pp. 33-7; R.O. Matthews, "Refugees and Stability in Africa", International Organization, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1972, pp. 62-83; N. Rubin, "Africa and Refugees", African Affairs, Vol. 73, No. 292, 1974, pp. 290-311; W.T.S. Gould, "Refugees in Tropical Africa", The International Migration Review, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1974, pp. 413-30; P. Enahoro, op. cit., pp. 34-7; C. Potholm, "Refugees -- Africa's Persistent Problem", Africa Report, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1976, pp. 12-14, 54.