



The Myth of Self-Reliance: Economic Lives Inside a Liberian Refugee Camp

Naohiko Omata, (2017), 179 Pages, Berghahn

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Abstract

*Debunking the myth held by United Nations organisations, government workers, international researchers and local citizens that Liberian refugees in Ghana are self-reliant, Naohiko Omata's introductory chapter opens with one of the most troubling accounts of the refugee experience in Ghana. In 2008, Liberian refugees in Ghana protested against the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) local integration package, rejecting a \$5 per person repatriation cash grant to repatriate to Liberia as a durable solution to their protracted displacement. As someone who lived in Ghana and partly in Buduburam Refugee Camp for almost a decade, I can attest to the fact that survival as a refugee is mainly predicated on remittances and the good will of friends and family in Ghana and abroad. Omata's *The Myth of Self-Reliance* raises difficult questions, implores sombre reflection, and stimulates critical learning about what is a genuine "durable solution" to protracted displacement in the context of Liberian refugees in Ghana.*

Keywords

Liberian refugees, self-reliance model, Buduburam refugee camp, protracted displacement

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Debunking the myth held by United Nations organisations, government workers, international researchers and local citizens that Liberian refugees in Ghana are self-reliant, Naohiko Omata's introductory chapter opens with one of the most troubling accounts of the refugee experience in Ghana. In 2008, after being displaced to Buduburam Refugee Camp for 18 hard years, Liberian refugees protested against the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) local integration package, rejecting a \$5 per person repatriation cash grant. The uproar lasted for more than a month and resulted in some 630 arrests and 16 deportation cases. UNHCR's goal was to "...get them to return to assist in rebuilding their country, so the issue of resettlement in a third country does not come up..."¹ But Tenneh Kamara, who led the protest, believed otherwise, "we are going back to emptiness and I can't imagine that the UNHCR aided by the Ghana Refugee Board can be so cruel..."² Regarding the economic state in Liberia, Naomi Hney laments "There are no jobs, no education. The poverty rate is just getting higher and higher"³ Backlash to the protest came with Ghana's Minister of Interior warning that "Liberian refugees should go back to Liberia" (p12). The sentiments highlighted here are at the crux of Omata's work. He followed Liberian refugees for years after in the hope of giving voice to their situation of protracted forced displacement.

Chapter 1 – "Guests Who Stayed Too Long': Refugees Lives in a Protracted Exile" – provides the book with its necessary context. This is based on geographical and demographic information, with emphasis on the host communities, the unique features of life in Buduburam Refugee Camp, and the importance of building networks to sustain daily living. The chapter further expands on Liberian refugees' war history, taking this in chronological order, from prewar accounts to their current protracted condition. Chapter 2 – "Economic Lives in Buduburam" – assesses the various mechanisms employed by Liberian refugees to strategically ensure their livelihoods and survival. Amidst the most traumatic, strenuous and devastating war and exile experiences, Omata found that Liberian refugees persisted with social networks and remittances. Notwithstanding, with duress from the UNHCR regarding repatriation, many households reliant on remittances felt compelled to return to Liberia. Eventually, the once blissful economy of the refugee camp, perceived as self-reliant, collapsed and dried up as income dwindled.

Chapter 3 – "The Household Economy in the Camp" – presents a microscopic view of the living conditions of Liberian refugee households. The chapter dissects the questions of who administers the household economy, who acquires and consumes food, what are the sources of finance, and what are the associated spending patterns and behaviours. Omata's analysis shows that overseas remittances (primarily) and camp-based businesses (secondarily) are of the utmost importance for the daily survival of Liberian refugees. In chapter 4 – "The Roots of Economic Stratification: A Historical Perspective" – Omata "unveils the hidden implications of privilege and oppression that were embedded in refugees' economic well-being and livelihood strategies..." (p85) by examining the structural inequalities of refugees' economic status prior to the civil war. In chapter 5, Omata asks a critical question – "Repatriation to

¹ Staff Reporter, "Ghana - Liberia: Refugee protest repatriation", *IRIN News* (13 March 2008), online: <<https://reliefweb.int/report/ghana/ghana-liberia-refugees-protest-repatriation>>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Bowers and Ackerman, "In Ghana, Liberian protesters fear deportation", *Women's eNews* (1 April 2008), online: <<https://womensenews.org/2008/04/ghana-liberian-protesters-fear-deportation/>>.

Liberia: The ‘Best’ Solution for Refugees?” Recognising the dilemma of returning to Liberia given the length of time spent in exile and the subsequent lack of institutional support associated with local reintegration, Omata reasons that repatriation “turned out to be an onerous challenge” since “a considerable number of returnees from Ghana lives did not necessarily improve – in fact, they worsened – despite the fact that they had obtained the ‘ideal’ durable solution ...” (p122) after repatriating to Liberia.

In Chapter 6, Omata evaluates the UNHCR 1951 Refugee Convention cessation clause by asking whether it is “The ‘End’ of Refugee Life When Refugee Status Ceases?”. In January 2012, when the UNCHR invoked the cessation clause, some 11,000 Liberian refugees had resided in Buduburam Refugee Camp for 22 years. The tactics used by the UNHCR to ensure repatriation, which included free transportation, a \$300 cash grant per adult (\$200 per child), was a requirement to register a repatriation decision by March 2012. To be clear, Liberian refugees, who had been living in Ghana for three decades were compelled to declare their intention to repatriate within the space of three months or risk living in limbo. Such a demand to repatriate by UNHCR has been criticized as coercive, inhumane and inconsiderate rather than “durable.” Ultimately, according to Omata, wealthier refugees tended to repatriate when compared to those who were in a more vulnerable situation, the latter being “abandoned in exile to survive as ‘economic migrants’” (p139). Chapter 7 – “Developing a Better Understanding of Livelihoods, Self-Reliance and Social Networks in Forced Migration Studies” – combines both theoretical and empirical knowledge of the study to reassess the viability of Buduburam Refugee Camp as a model of self-reliance. While Omata agrees that refugees should be recognised as “active, capable players with ingenuity and resilience” (p157), he nevertheless concludes that “over-emphasis on their reliance, agency and capacity can obscure internal differentiations in refugees’ economic capacities, and universal celebration of refugees’ livelihoods, social capital, and self-reliance will continue to disguise the flaws of existing humanitarian responses to prolonged situations” (p157).

Without a doubt, Omata’s book is seminal on account of it being a rare publication focused on the protracted displacement experience of Liberian refugees in Ghana. His meticulous, respectful, empathetic yet rigorous research approach, which helps towards raising the voices of Liberian refugees in a space where they would never be given an audience, is commendable. As someone who lived in Ghana and partly in Buduburam Refugee Camp for almost a decade, I can attest to the fact that survival as a refugee is mainly predicated on remittances and the good will of friends and family in Ghana and abroad. An effective conglomeration of refugee experiences into a “self-reliant” camp model categorically dismisses and invalidates the trauma, risks and suffering of many. Omata’s *The Myth of Self-Reliance* raises difficult questions, implores sombre reflection, and stimulates critical learning about what is a genuine “durable solution” to protracted displacement in the context of Liberian refugees in Ghana. *The Myth of Self-Reliance* attracts UN staff, humanitarian and aid workers, forced migration scholars and researchers, international migration lawyers and policy-makers, refugees and displaced peoples’ advocates and activists, and local and regional governments in refugee-hosting countries.