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# What Documents Do Not Do: Papering Persecution and Moments of Recognition in a Congolese Refugee Camp

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**Abstract:** Congolese refugees living in Tanzania's Nyarugusu refugee camp curate and submit documents to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to bolster their cases for resettlement. UNHCR representatives often resist receiving these documents, and if received, they view them as supplementary to the case. The resettlement process requires that refugees prove that they fled their homeland because of individual persecution. However, an examination of the types of documents that refugees submit to the UNHCR, shows that they do not actually provide proof of persecution. Nonetheless, both refugees and UNHCR representatives use the documents to construct a convincing narrative of persecution that can successfully pass through the resettlement process.

**Keywords:** documents, refugees, humanitarianism, resettlement, Congo, governance

**Résumé :** Les réfugiés congolais installés dans le camp de réfugiés de Nyarugusu en Tanzanie conservent des documents qu'ils soumettent au Haut-Commissariat des Nations unies pour les réfugiés (HCR) dans le but d'étayer leurs demandes de relocalisation. Les représentants du HCR rechignent souvent à réceptionner ces documents et, lorsqu'ils le font, considèrent ceux-ci comme accessoires aux demandes. Le processus de relocalisation exige des réfugiés qu'ils démontrent avoir fui leur pays en raison de persécutions individuelles. Or, l'examen des types de documents présentés par les réfugiés au HCR montre que ceux-ci ne constituent pas réellement des preuves de persécution. Quoi qu'il en soit, les réfugiés comme les représentants du HCR utilisent ces documents pour construire un récit de persécution convaincant qui puisse être intégré avec succès à la procédure de relocalisation.

**Mots-clés :** Documents, réfugiés, humanitarisme, relocalisation, Congo, gouvernance

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Waiting for our friends to return, we sat in broken plastic chairs outside their home in Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania. Carlos pulled a folded letter from his pocket and showed it to me as we passed the time. It was originally written in Swahili, and Carlos had translated it into English after another Congolese man had asked him to do so. "More and more people are asking me to translate letters for them," he told me with a smile betraying his pride that other camp residents recognised and relied on his self-taught English skills. He handed me the letter to read. He had shown me others in the past, and so I knew he wanted my assessment of the claim in the letter. *Will the UNHCR call them to their offices for an interview? Will their claims qualify them for resettlement in another country, such as the United States or Canada?* He wanted my predictions, my answers to these questions.

I read the letter as we sat in the shadows cast from our friends' mud-brick house, hiding from the equatorial sun. "The story of the violence they endured in Congo is harrowing," I said, "But do they have any evidence of persecution? Has anything happened to them since they arrived in the camp?" Both camp residents and aid workers had taught me that persecution that occurs in the camp tends to be the key to moving resettlement cases along. "He and his family have not been here [in the camp] for very long. Probably not long enough to be known by anybody just yet," Carlos replied. In Nyarugusu camp, home to more than seventy thousand refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, to not be known means several things. In the context of this conversation, Carlos meant that the recently arrived man had not been in the camp long enough to reconnect with any friends or enemies from Congo, nor had he had the time to make many. It also meant that the man probably had not yet been able to become familiar with the camp authorities and aid workers or learned the practices of documentation that require assistance from the people who occupy these positions.

Nyarugusu refugee camp has been my primary research site since I started investigating the politics of humanitarian solutions – and lack of such solutions – across national borders through the closure of UN refugee camps in Tanzania and the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). My research asks how Congolese refugees are faring when the conflict they fled has been declared beyond the scope of humanitarian intervention. Between 2008 and 2014, I spent more than two years conducting participant observation and interviews in refugee camps, aid compounds and government offices across Tanzania. I have also ethnographically researched war, reconciliation and everyday life in South Kivu, DRC, and interviewed UNHCR representatives in their regional hub in Nairobi, Kenya, and their global headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. By bringing refugees and humanitarians into the same theoretical framework, my analysis reflects the realities of refugee camps and humanitarian governance.

For the purposes of this article, I draw on my research with Congolese people who dwell in Nyarugusu camp and with representatives from the UNHCR and their partnering organisations who work in the area. More specifically, I focus on my research encounters with camp residents who were preparing and submitting documents for resettlement purposes, representatives from UNHCR partnering organisations who would provide refugees with documents, and representatives from the UNHCR who were the ones receiving and using the documents for protection and resettlement cases. Participant observation with the camp residents included witnessing and speaking about the ways in which they created, collected and submitted these documents in their resettlement cases. It also included informal conversations about the letters and documents themselves, and we even examined documents together, as the opening with Carlos demonstrates. I conducted participant observation with representatives from UNHCR and their partnering organisations in their camp offices, observing them while they worked and informally interviewing them about their documentation practices. Participant observation with the UNHCR representatives also included the times when I delivered documents to them on behalf of the camp residents. I informally interviewed resettlement officers on the subject of documentation as well as casually discussed with them outside of their offices, particularly when I would come to town and spend weekends with aid workers.

Both aid workers and refugees recognise that camp-dwelling tends to create a heightened desire for resettlement (Horst 2006; Jansen 2008), the process through

which a refugee can be officially selected to live in a new country. This desire is often born out of refugees' wish to escape restrictive and harsh living conditions (Sandvik 2008; Thomson 2015), but in Tanzania the desire for resettlement has been compounded by the implementation of what the UN calls "durable solutions." From 2007 to 2012, Nyarugusu residents watched and waited as the Tanzanian government and the UNHCR closed the ten other refugee camps in the country. As the threat of impending camp closure loomed during those years, refugees sought ways to qualify for resettlement. Efforts to close Nyarugusu camp have waned in recent years, due in large part to the implementation of two large resettlement schemes. In 2013, ten countries agreed to participate in the "Enhanced Resettlement of Congolese Refugees" program, and in 2015, the United States implemented a group resettlement scheme, pledging to accept approximately thirty thousand Congolese refugees from Tanzania.<sup>1</sup> Some Congolese refugees have said that the desire for resettlement has increased and intensified only because these schemes have made it seem much more attainable.

While Congolese refugees recognise that the UNHCR and the recipient states make the decisions for resettlement, they still employ various strategies to increase their likelihood of being selected (Thomson forthcoming). These strategies include practices of documentation, such as writing and submitting letters like the one Carlos showed me, as well as collecting other forms of documentation to substantiate claims for resettlement. Refugees endeavour to obtain documentation from UNHCR partnering organisations in the camp so that they can submit it to the UNHCR as part of their claim. Nyarugusu residents have learned not only that they must shoehorn their lives, their traumas, their complicated histories into the narrow requirements of persecution narratives (Blommaert 2001; Fassin and d'Halluin 2005; Fassin and d'Halluin 2007; Kirmayer 2003; Lynch 2013; Ticktin 2006, 2011), but also that the UNHCR representatives who first evaluate these narratives will find their narratives more believable if they also include official documentation from organisations within the camp.

The letters and documents that I examine are not an official part of the resettlement process. Yet both camp residents and UNHCR representatives exert a great deal of effort on these supplemental documents. Camp residents put much work into crafting, sometimes translating, obtaining, copying and submitting their letters and documents in hopes that they will stoke a resettlement case. There is a great deal of labour that goes into letters that end up in a resettlement file, including

resistance and refusal by UNHCR representatives to accept the documents and their questioning refugees about them. Once the documents are in the resettlement files, however, UNHCR representatives then use them to construct a convincing narrative that their colleagues and superiors will push through the resettlement process. Examining the documents leads me to argue that the documents themselves do not actually provide proof of persecution and that capturing the labour involved in curating these documents illustrates that there is a *moment of recognition* – an acknowledgement by UNHCR representatives that Nyarugusu residents are worthy of resettlement – whereby the labour involved in crafting the narrative of persecution transfers from the refugee resettlement applicants to the resettlement officers themselves.

## Resettlement Procedures

In Nyarugusu camp, the UNHCR has an entire team dedicated to resettlement procedures. The resettlement officers interview refugees who have been referred to them by the protection unit. That is, protection officers are the first to interview refugees, and if they deem that the refugee's protection claim might meet the resettlement criteria, they pass their case along to the resettlement unit. According to the *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* (UNHCR 2011, 75), the following are the "preconditions for resettlement consideration":

- the applicant is determined to be a refugee by UNHCR; and
- the prospects for all durable solutions were assessed, and resettlement is identified as the most appropriate solution.

To qualify for resettlement, someone must first demonstrate that they meet the official criteria for refugee status and that no other durable solution is more appropriate. To meet the requirements of refugee status, a person must have "a well-founded fear of being persecuted" (UNHCR 2011, 80). There is no mention of war at all in the UN definition of "refugee." It leaves no room to account for the broader social and political conditions that cause displacement; rather, it places the onus of proving refugee status on the individual in exile.

In addition to third-country resettlement, the other two durable solutions are repatriation to the country of origin and local integration in the country of refuge. Since Tanzania has not offered naturalisation as an option for Congolese refugees, local integration is not an official option. The other official option, repatriation, is actually precluded by officially qualifying for refugee status because the definition states that one must not

only be persecuted but also be unable to return to their home country due to that persecution.

It is not only that they need to meet the definition of refugee, but as the preconditions for resettlement explicitly state (see the first bullet point above), the applicant must be "determined to be a refugee by UNHCR" (UNHCR 2011, 75, emphasis in original). That is, those seeking resettlement must convince UNHCR representatives that they meet the criteria for refugee status. This shifts the humanitarian attention in the camp from a focus on refugee assistance to one of evaluation. Although the *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* states that evaluating who qualifies as a refugee is done "to facilitate, and justify, aid and protection" (UNHCR 2011, 80, emphasis in original), in practice it positions UNHCR resettlement officers as experts who can objectively evaluate refugee narratives of persecution (Thomson 2012, 192). This leaves the burden of proof to refugees themselves, who must convince aid representatives that they indeed qualify as refugees and are both deserving and trustworthy.

The irony here is twofold. First, positing resettlement as a "solution" creates a "rescue narrative" (Hyndman and Giles 2016, 97) whereby resettlement officers become saviours even as they are tasked with discrediting refugees. Second, refugees are left to prove their own worthiness for resettlement while simultaneously performing the role of hapless victim. While representing oneself as a victim can be a strategic use of one's agency (Utas 2005), it can be difficult to balance victimhood with proaction. Moreover, the fourth chapter of the *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook*, "Managing Resettlement Effectively," discursively frames refugees as suspicious, particularly those who submit unsolicited requests to UNHCR representatives (Thomson forthcoming). Refugees who make claims on the UNHCR and state governments are constructed as "deviant" and "problematic," while those who "wait patiently" are deemed to be "good refugees" (Hyndman and Giles 2011). Waiting patiently, however, can result in being overlooked when it comes to resettlement selection.

In Nyarugusu camp, residents have responded to this double bind by showing UNHCR representatives how waiting patiently has further victimised them. They write letters that show that the camp has not provided them with "refuge" from the persecution they faced in Congo. They solicit documents from UNHCR partnering organisations in the camp and submit them to UNHCR representatives as evidence to support their narratives. This is one way that Nyarugusu residents wait patiently. They document themselves as victims, patiently waiting until the papers propel them into a resettlement case.

This documentation becomes the record of “working the space of ambiguity between life and law” (Reeves 2013), as refugees reconcile the constraints and possibilities of the humanitarian system for themselves.

## Politics of Recognition

These documents, though unnecessary and unwanted, are still “paradigmatic artifacts of modern knowledge practices” (Riles 2006) in that they reflect the bureaucratic relationships in which they are embedded. As I have argued elsewhere, the bureaucratic structure of resettlement makes the process opaque for both refugees and aid workers alike (Thomson 2012). Institutional documents play an increasingly central role in ordering and producing meaning in today’s world (Hull 2008, 2012a, 2012b), and refugees seek to provide meaning and order with the unsolicited documents they produce themselves and solicit from camp officials. In many ways, such documents provide refugees with an “in,” that is, a way to approach UNHCR officials in a system that discourages unsolicited requests from refugees. Usually, refugees can meet with UNHCR officials only if they have been summoned by them.

The “career” or life of these documents (Brenneis 2006), from their production to their circulation and usage, illustrates that they stem from and are confined by the humanitarian apparatus while also exposing the ways that both refugees and aid workers manoeuvre within this incomplete and paradoxical system. Supplemental and even superfluous, these documents become vital parts of the resettlement system by assisting not only refugees but also aid representatives in achieving their goals. The Tanzanian government is largely absent from the resettlement process. Occasionally, refugees will obtain documentation from Tanzanian government officials, or the officials themselves will recommend refugees for resettlement. That is, however, the extent of their limited involvement. This is striking because institutional practices of documentation have become a technology of power through state formations (Cohn 1990; Cohn and Dirks 1988; Gupta 1995; Riles 2006; Scott 1998). While most of the agencies that produce and receive these documents in the camp are NGOs, they use these documents in a state-like manner (Ferguson 2002; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Resettlement can be considered a form of “governance without government” (Hardt and Negri 2001, 14; Piot 2010, 8), whereby aid workers decide who to support and who not to support. Moreover, resettlement can restore citizenship rights to refugees by relocating them to another country.

“Politics of recognition” are at play here. According to Charles Taylor, the need for recognition stems from

contemporary nationalist politics and the unmet needs of subaltern groups (Taylor 1994). For Nyarugusu residents, a subaltern group excluded from nationalist politics, recognition is at stake. If UNHCR officials do not recognise refugees as deserving, then they have no chance for resettlement. In a way similar to Frantz Fanon’s “colonized subjects,” refugees have become humanitarian subjects whose desires, thoughts and behaviours subscribe to the humanitarian practices that necessitate their continued domination (Fanon 2008 [1952]). Furthermore, scholarship focusing on the “politics of recognition” has shown how subaltern claims for recognition serve to reinscribe the colonial systems of exclusion and domination that they seek to overcome (Coulthard 2014; Englund and Nyamnjoh 2004; Hale 2002; Povinelli 2001). The reinscription of colonial relationships may be particularly pronounced through the process of resettlement in that unlike most of the aid workers in Nyarugusu camp, who are Tanzanian, the resettlement officers tend to be European and American expatriates. These expatriates are tasked with the job of selecting the refugees most deserving of resettlement in Europe, North America, and Australia.

As humanitarian subjects, refugees in Nyarugusu camp have learned how to craft, solicit and submit certain types of documents. Recognition demands a predetermined aesthetic in that claims must adhere to particular forms in order to be recognised (Englund 2004, 10; Strathern 1988, 180–181). Refugees know this, but they also know that even with institutional documentation of discrimination in the camp and well-crafted letters that explain their persecution, their documents may not make a difference. They may not end up in the right hands. They may not make it to a file. But Nyarugusu residents know that success is possible, and so they persist.

Nyarugusu residents continue to endure the labour of crafting, soliciting, copying and submitting documents because they know that if these documents can spark a resettlement case and convince a resettlement official, there will be a *moment of recognition*. Achille Mbembe has theorised this moment as a face-to-face instant of two self-consciousnesses exposed to one another (Mbembe 2001, 192). This recognition, however, cannot be complete or total when an asymmetrical relationship exists between the two individuals, as is the case with the refugee resettlement applicant and the resettlement officer. For refugees, the *moment of recognition* in the resettlement process does not entail a complete recognition of their selves but instead marks a pivoting point, especially in terms of labour. It is the point at which refugees are no longer working to convince resettlement officers to push their

case through to the next phase of the process, and instead the resettlement officers are working toward that end. Capturing the mechanics of the vast enterprise of this documentation exposes how this shift occurs via the materiality of the documents themselves.

### **Refugees: Producing, Reproducing and Submitting Papers of Persecution**

One day in June 2012, Amani and I were sitting in Patrice's makeshift bar. We used to have sodas at his bar across from the camp hospital, but that became no longer possible after the Tanzanian government demolished all of the marketplaces in June 2011 in an attempt to persuade camp residents to repatriate to Congo. As we sipped Fantas and Coca-Colas in the open-air stick shelter outside of Patrice's home, Amani lectured him about how to find documentation for his protection case. "If he is going to complain about life here [in the camp]," Amani said to me in front of Patrice, "he needs to take action. He needs to get documentation and write a letter explaining his case." Amani explained that he had coached Patrice on what he needed to say in the letter, as he had done with many of his friends. At this point in time, Amani had already been selected for resettlement in the United States. He had begun to advise other camp residents on how to "take action," as he phrased it, and attempt to initiate their own resettlement cases.

A few weeks later when Amani and I were visiting Patrice again, he showed us his letter. It was typed and in English. Patrice did not speak English, and he once told me that he did not know how to write well. "I dictated my story to a friend for a couple of dollars," he explained to me. Because he could afford it, Patrice had someone translate his letter into English because that way the Tanzanian UNHCR representatives would not have to translate it for the expatriate representatives, who camp residents thought to be both more powerful and sympathetic. Not all letters are translated into English. Many write letters in Swahili and submit them that way, knowing that the majority of the protection officers, who will first process the letters, are Tanzanian.

As far as I could tell, Patrice's letter was typed on a word processor. It had a font and light ink similar to Amani's letter. Most camp residents' letters are handwritten because of the difficult task of accessing computers (see Figure 1 for an example of such letters). Some refugees, however, seek ways to type their letters because they are easier to read and to reproduce. For example, a man called Lumumba told me how he was banned from the Tanzanian Red Cross Society compound in Makere because he was using their communal computer to type his letter for the UNHCR. The compound is located in Makere, the closest Tanzanian

village to the camp, and Lumumba routinely went there to tutor Tanzanian aid workers in French. One day, he finished his work before transport was ready to depart for the camp, so he decided to use the computer, which was free even though the generator was running. A maid reported him, and the compound leadership ruled that he must cease his tutoring, for which he earned a small wage. According to Lumumba, he did nothing wrong. No one from the compound was using the computer, and he was using it to type his own letter because he did not normally have access to a computer. Lumumba's experience illustrates not only refugees' limited access to items such as computers and printers but also that aid workers commonly assume that refugees are trying to take advantage of the humanitarian system set up to help them (Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Sandvik 2008; UNHCR 2011; Zetter 1991).

As I read Patrice's letter about how he was persecuted in South Kivu, Amani urged Patrice to obtain further documentation of persecution in the camp before trying to submit this letter to the UNHCR (insert Figure 1 here). "They will ask you all about being persecuted in Congo if you get an interview. But what they actually care about is whether you were persecuted here in the camp. That is what will even get you the interview in the first place," Amani explained to us. Camp residents talk to one another about how their cases are viewed and vetted by UNHCR representatives, and those who had already been through the process explained that the resettlement officials focused more on persecution in the camp than on persecution in the refugee's country of origin.

On another occasion, this time in November 2012, I was visiting a family I had known for four years at the time. We were in their sitting room, which was filled with wicker chairs and covered with unattached linoleum that attempted to hide the dirt floors but seemed to only highlight them, as red dust coated the once shiny white surface. There, the husband, Jitahidi, showed me the claim that he had prepared to submit to the UNHCR. As I read it, his brother, who was also sitting with us, explained that he had recommended that Jitahidi add a section about his persecution in Congo. Jitahidi's letter focused only on the persecution he had experienced in the camp, and he responded to his brother's comment by explaining that refugees who had already qualified for resettlement had told him that persecution in the camp was key to the resettlement process. "Yes, that may be true," his brother said, "but officially resettlement is based on persecution in your home country, so you should add in why you fled." Jitahidi agreed, recalling how UNHCR representatives had held seminars in

Zone [redacted] Village [redacted], Cluster Plot [redacted]  
 Household no [redacted]  
 Ration Card no [redacted]

Nyarugusu Camp Nov 29, 2010

TO RESETTLEMENT OFFICER  
KASULU

RE: OUR CASE STATEMENT

Dear sirs/madams

We humble and honestly come to you to report our problems that we faced in our home country DRC.

I was born from BABUYU ethnic group. My father was a Commandant of Bokoyu rebel group. In 1996 when the war broke, most people from different ethnic groups in DRC thought that father was killing, and raping women. People from Bembe ethnic group spread the bad news among themselves about father that he was the one who killed many people from Bembe ethnic group. In 1998 when father was invaded by unknown people, he was murdered and left outside our house when we were at school. On our way back from school found a crowd - a big crowd of people before the door of our house. At first we didn't know what was going on, until we approached the plot and discovered that people were watching how father was cut the head and it was left before the door of our house.

Being so afraid my big brother decided to leave the area and went to South-Kivu where our aunt lived. When we told all of this to our aunt, she was also afraid and decided to flee from Baraka to Ubwari. We hired about after aunt worked on it, and came to Tanzania.

When we arrived in Tanzania in Kigoma we were taken to Lugusu camp where we lived by hiding ourselves, until 2003. A few years later, I decided to enroll in a school. In form 6 secondary school, our headteacher passed into each class and while reading the students' names on the school registration. I got to my name called and at the same time disclosed my ethnic group in our classroom mixed with all different ethnic groups. In 2007, one week after the headteacher had mentioned my ethnic group that of BABUYU, a group of people came home and burnt all the houses I was staying and those of our foster-parents. We reported the event to the police, I was moved and the family to different place until 2008. I am sorry and sad to say that I failed during the national exams, and started again the school in 2008 when most of those people repatriated to Congo.

In 2010 we moved to another camp Nyarugusu where different events to harm me and my family were perpetrated:

- On 19 Feb 2011: when I was at school all my chickens were found killed by unknown people.
- On 9/Feb 2012: my child was surrounded by unknown people who beat him and broke one of his eyes. I reported to the police and to IRC child protectors.
- In the same month on 16 Feb 2012: unknown people came home and put deadly things into the food and we were diagnosed at the hospital and found intoxicated.
- we thought all of that was the result of the event, the group Wabembe who came home and attacked the whole family and promised that they would kill me and my family.

So dear sirs, according to all of those problems, I pray that you may help me get safety as I don't feel like I am peaceful in the camp and in Congo where I will never return.

Figure 1: Example of a letter self-authored by a Nyarugusu resident (author's photograph)

the camp to explain that persecution in Congo is the prerequisite for resettlement.


Jitahidi later added a second page to his claim about the reasons why he fled. At the top of the page, he explained that the persecution he had experienced in the camp was a continuation of what he had experienced in the DRC. The family also prepared a claim to submit for Jitahidi's wife, Nia, using his claim as the model. The "my insecurity in the camp" section detailed the same events as Jitahidi's claim did, but the section on "my persecution in the DRC" differed.

Jitahidi and Nia provided police report numbers in their resettlement claims, just as many other camp residents find ways to document instances of persecution within the camp. Listing report numbers from the Tanzanian police force in Nyarugusu is the most common form of such documentation, but providing other forms of documentation is becoming more and more common. In fact, I have heard camp residents encourage their friends to obtain reports from as many aid agencies in the camp as possible before taking their case to the UNHCR, just as Amani urged Patrice to do. For example, parents will solicit referrals to the hospital from aid agencies in the camp that deal with child pro-

tection, such as World Vision and International Rescue Committee (IRC), to show that their children sustained injuries at school that are causing them lasting problems (see Figure 2). The idea is that if they build their own file before presenting their case to the UNHCR, they will increase the likelihood that they will qualify for resettlement.

Camp residents recognise the power of official paper trails, knowing that they not only record the past but can reframe and redirect the future as well (Yngvesson and Coutin 2006). To these ends, they will collect their hospital reports as medical evidence of their persecution in the camp. People will use their psychological diagnoses as evidence of severe trauma, injury reports as evidence of violence, and food intoxication reports as evidence of poisoning (see Figure 3). At least one camp resident even submitted a copy of her entire medical records as evidence of ongoing injuries sustained from attacks in the camp and of chronic mental illness resulting from these attacks and the violence she had endured in Congo.

Camp residents will also obtain letters from the Congolese security guards in the camp (for example, see Thomson 2012, 195–196). It is easier to obtain these

  
 International Rescue Committee  
 Tanzania Programme  
 Box 259, Kasulu Field Office

CBR - HOSPITAL REFERRAL FORM - IRC NYARUGUSU CAMP

TO: TRCS - HOSPITAL  
 Date: 9 Feb 2012  
 Name: [Redacted]  
 Address: [Redacted] Age: 4yrs Sex: Male

**History** Has been experiencing itchy eyes. Some  
 2-3 weeks after being beaten by other children  
 was treated at the hospital although  
 the status of both eyes became  
 worse & he now wears a night vision aid.


**Examination** No pupil reflexes. Not detectable  
 [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted]

**Reason for Referral** For eye examination & Rx

Referred by: Name: [Redacted] (CR) Date: 9/2/2012 Signature: [Redacted]


Feed back on the plans:  
 [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted]

Name: [Redacted] Title: AMO-0  
 Signature: [Redacted]

  
 INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE  
 TANZANIA PROGRAM

TCA 1/2 to review

Figure 2: IRC referral to the camp hospital for a child who has long-lasting effects from an eye injury caused by a fellow student at school (author's photograph)

TANZANIA RED CROSS SOCIETY  
  
 KIGOMA REFUGEES RELIEF OPERATION

CARTE DE SANTÉ / HEALTH CARD

Dispensary/Dispensaire: [Redacted] N.  
 Name/Nom et Prenom: Mangusi [Redacted] SCDM  
 Date of Birth/ Date de Naissance: [Redacted] Age / age: 27 yrs Sex/ Sexe: M  
 Village/Camp: FT, T. 9 Commune/Prefecture/Secteur: [Redacted]  
 Height / Hauteur: [Redacted] Weight / Poids: [Redacted]  
 Feeding Programme / Programme d'alimentation: [Redacted]

Date	CONDITION / ETAT	TREATMENT / TRAITEMENT
6/11/2011	<p>               this pt was admitted to the                dispensary 19 Feb 2011 &amp;                after 2011 with the same history                of vomiting, diarrhea especially                after eating some food                Diagnosis given was Food poisoning                and was admitted                laboratory for 3 days and                April for 20 days                The treatment given was                1/2 RL 200mls,                1/2 Atropine 1mg b.i.d.                and Amoxicillin             </p>	

Figure 3: Hospital record of food poisoning used for a resettlement case (author's photograph)

letters than it is to obtain reports from the Tanzanian police, who usually give out report numbers only like the ones included in Jitahidi's and Nia's claims. A few refugees have shown me that they have been able to obtain the actual written descriptions of the crimes committed against them from certain Tanzanian police officers (see Figure 4). In addition, camp residents will often submit copies of threatening letters delivered to their homes or threats posted in the camp that personally name or accuse them of something (see Figure 5). A few have even been able to procure letters from the Tanzanian government officials that manage the camp. Those fortunate to have such letters stressed to me that they were able to acquire these letters only because they had developed personal friendships with certain government officials and that most camp residents would not have access to such documentation.

Refugees report their problems in the camp to various camp officials not only because they anticipate that UNHCR representatives will ask them about them but also because they realise that doing so strengthens their credibility. Within the humanitarian structure of

the camp, refugees occupy the bottom rung of the hierarchy of credibility (Sandvik 2008; Stoler 1992). The approval and assistance of camp officials can help refugees climb this social ladder. Documents produced by the institutions within the camp legitimate refugee cases for resettlement. The documents show that camp officials confirm that certain events did indeed occur in the camp. Stamps, signatures and official forms can lend credibility to refugees in a system that treats them as untrustworthy. Documentation extends the authority and credibility of its authors – aid workers and government representatives – to camp residents.

Refugees go to great lengths to collect these documents from their institutional sources. They befriend camp officials and recount their experiences in the camp to them. They will wait outside of camp organisation offices for days on end until they get their documentation, and in some cases, they have even paid bribes. Once camp residents write their letters and/or obtain official documentation, they take care to store these

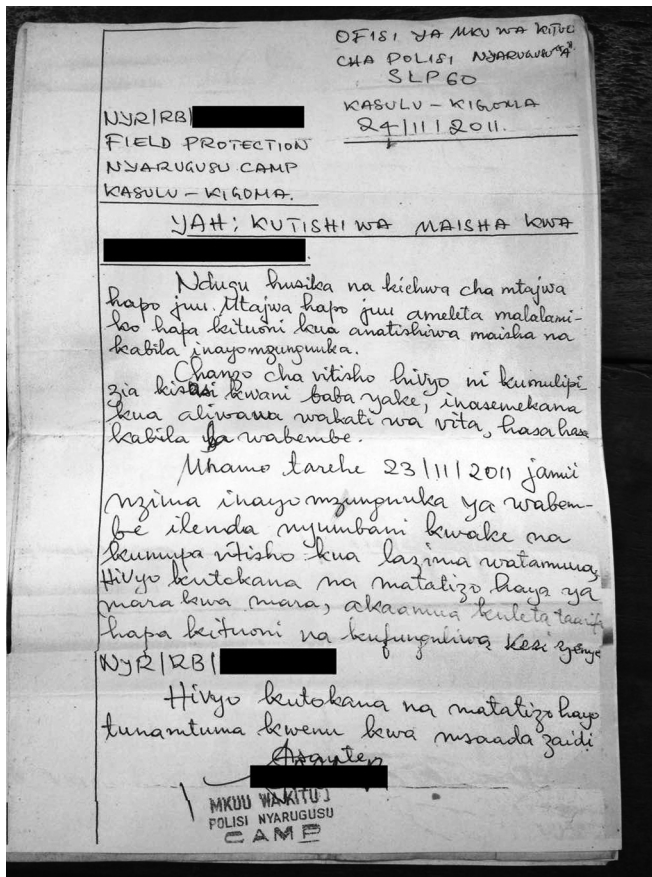


Figure 4: Report from the Tanzanian police force in the camp, documenting threats to the safety and security of a family in the camp (author's photograph)

documents to keep them in as pristine and readable condition as possible. This is a difficult task in a camp constructed of red mud and dirt, where red dust finds its way onto anything and everything (Thomson 2015). In addition to careful storage, camp residents also take great effort to make photocopies of these documents. They submit these documents to the UNHCR as many times as they can in the hopes that one submission will find its way into the hands of a representative that will call them for an interview.

There is no electric grid in the camp. Aside from the generators that run the hospital and UNHCR offices, electricity is scarce. Refugees find ways to manipulate car batteries, obtain solar panels and buy small generators to produce electricity for themselves. Until recently, there were no photocopy machines in the camp. Now there are a couple of refugee-run organisations that have obtained machines. Until last year, however, most refugees had to travel outside the camp to photocopy their documents. Many would travel to Kasulu, a town about an hour drive from the camp, to visit the stationery shops with



Figure 5: The board in front of the hospital entrance where slanderous posters and threats to camp residents are sometimes posted

photocopiers there. Some were able to use photocopiers at the aid compounds in Makere with the permission of aid workers. Either way, camp residents were taking a risk. According to Tanzanian law, refugees are not allowed to travel more than four kilometres beyond camp perimeters. Risking imprisonment if caught, many refugees took their chances because increasing their potential for resettlement was worth it. These risks were taken, however, with no guarantee that any combination of documents would secure camp residents' ability to qualify for resettlement.

## Receiving Papers of Persecution

In contrast with the camp residents who go to great lengths to obtain, store, reproduce and submit letters and documents for their resettlement aspirations, UNHCR representatives usually downplay the importance of such documents. Some would receive documents in the camp; others would not. When I would deliver documents on behalf of refugees, sometimes they would accept them; sometimes they would not. When they did accept the letters that I delivered, the UNHCR representatives would often tell me that they would deliver them to the protection unit but emphasised that that was all that they could do. Many feared that receiving letters would give refugees the impression that their cases would open or proceed when this was not necessarily the case.

Some expatriate representatives would receive and deliver the letters, reasoning that it was the least that they could do. Other expatriate representatives would not accept letters because they thought that receiving



the letters would give the refugees false hope. As one European expatriate told me, “I do not accept the letters because they [camp residents] will believe that by giving the letter to me, a *mzungu*, that their case will definitely succeed.” *Mzungu* is the Swahili word used to denote both light-skinned people and expatriates. A few UNHCR representatives encouraged me not to deliver letters to them for the same reason: because I am a *mzungu*, even being the messenger may give refugees false hope. These comments point to the racialised politics in the camp: expatriate representatives usually hold the more senior positions. Camp residents not only recognise expatriates’ elevated status but often also believe them to be more sympathetic than the Tanzanian representatives, who comprise the majority of the aid workers in Nyarugusu camp.

One Tanzanian protection officer told me that they were trying to stop this “letter business.” “There was one woman in another camp, Nduta, who would take a basket of letters home with her every night.” He laughed at the memory. “These people [camp residents],” he said, “they are relentless.” His point was that if any UNHCR representative accepts letters, that person will be bombarded with them every day. His comment hinted at the sense of being overwhelmed that many aid workers in the camp expressed. The need for assistance in the camp is so great, and the ability to deliver it is so limited. Some UNHCR representatives also recognised the desperation that drove camp residents to relentlessly submit letters. They understood refugees’ relentlessness to be the result of the camp conditions, which had created a desperation to have their problems recognised by UNHCR representatives and solidified into a case that would eventually free them from the constraints of the camp.

The letters, UNHCR representatives emphasised, come in such abundance that there is no way for all of them to be read, much less be useful to residents’ protection cases. An expatriate protection officer once told me, “Protection is so disorganised. There is no order. At least resettlement is organised.” Acting as the filter through which all cases and complaints from refugees must first pass adds to the protection unit’s disorder and chaos. In addition, UNHCR representatives’ ambivalence toward refugees’ documentary submissions reflects the fact that these letters and documents are considered supplemental. While they are one way to initiate a protection or resettlement case, they are not required. Documentation from camp organisations used toward resettlement is, at least in part, a remnant of past resettlement procedures whereby NGOs did most of the case identification and referrals for resettlement

(Slaughter 2017). It was not until the mid-1990s that the UNHCR assumed the role of primary resettlement organisation across the globe, codified with the publication of the first resettlement handbook in 1996.

UNHCR officials are required to question and assess refugees’ character (Kagan 2003, 2006). Both the official *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* and my interviews with UNHCR representatives indicate that a great deal of the resettlement process is dedicated to evaluating refugees’ character. Documents from UNHCR implementing partners allow resettlement officials to “diffuse their individual agency” in making decisions about refugee cases (Hull 2003). Refugees are not the only ones seeking to build credibility in the resettlement process; humanitarian agents are as well (Fresia and Von Känel 2016; Sandvik 2011). Documents from partnering organisations therefore build credibility not only for refugees but also for the UNHCR officers who forward their cases on to their colleagues and superiors.

Aid workers are sceptical of written threats that refugees submit, questioning whether the refugees themselves might have actually crafted these documents. For example, one day after my arrival at the camp I noticed a crowd gathered around the boards in front of the hospital (see Figure 5). Posted on the board was a letter threatening the lives of three Congolese who worked in the hospital. A Tanzanian Red Cross Society doctor took the note, and when I asked her what she planned to do with it, she told me she would report it to the Tanzanian government authorities and the UNHCR. She also told me, however, that it was likely that the people named on the paper might have authored and posted the threat themselves in hopes that it would bolster their resettlement case. Refugees have also shown me threatening letters delivered to their homes from both inside the camp and from people in Congo. Like the posted threats, however, these letters do not carry the same weight that the documents refugees collect from the agencies in the camp do.

The documents that refugees submit to the UNHCR reveal the power dynamics of the resettlement process, and their usage reinforces the power structure in the refugee camp (Lindsay 2017). The humanitarian system assumes that refugee populations are comprised of not only the persecuted but also the persecutors. This assumption justifies the interview processes through which aid workers try to catch refugees in acts of deception. The assumption is “true” by necessity. It is tautology. This is particularly evident through the example of the UNHCR partner-generated documents in the camp. The aid workers decide whether to provide the documents to the refugees and then the refugees use those

documents to convince other aid workers that they are worthy of resettlement. The aid apparatus produces and later receives the documents, a circular process by which credibility and authority are endlessly regenerated and confined to the loop of organisations in the camp.

UNHCR resettlement officers assured me that even when they decide to accept documents from refugees, they still fully vet the refugees. This statement again illustrates how UNHCR representatives view these documents as supplemental at best. But other statements they make about these documents illustrate how they can play a vital role in the making of a resettlement case. For example, when I first met a resettlement officer who had been interviewing a family I had known in the camp since my first preliminary visit in 2008, she connected how traumatic their case was to the vast amount of documentation they had gathered from UNHCR partnering organisations. This particular resettlement officer's statement indicates just how convincing she found the materials of that family to be in establishing their resettlement case.

Many resettlement officials stressed to me that the documents did very little to bolster the cases of refugees, that the onus still fell on them to evaluate whether these refugees had an honest and deserving case for resettlement. They would admit, however, that for the cases they selected to forward on in the process, they would include the documents and signal them as evidence of persecution. This refrain – the most common type of utterance by UNHCR representatives about refugee-submitted documents – signals two things: (1) a shift in labour and (2) the parallel usage of the documents by aid workers and refugees. First, it marks the moment when aid workers began their work with documents, and refugees no longer had to convince them to produce them, to accept them or to trust them. Second, it shows that the UNHCR representatives use these documents in the same manner that refugees use them. They use them to construct a convincing narrative of persecution in the camp.

### What Documents Do Not Do

For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work.  
– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Documents do not necessarily do what they say they do, and sometimes they even do more than they say they do (Tidey 2013). It is perhaps unsurprising that the unsolicited documents that refugees submit to the UNHCR do more than expected. The most noteworthy aspect of

this type of institutional documentation is not what it does but what it does not do. It fails to provide proof of persecution, even though it is used as proof by both refugees and aid workers alike. For someone to meet the criteria for the definition of “refugee” in the 1951 Refugee Convention, their documents would have to provide not only evidence of persecution – that is, hostility, ill treatment or harassment – but also evidence that the persecution was due to “race, religion, nationality, [or] membership in a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR 2011, 80). This means that to be indisputable proof of persecution required by the UNHCR, documents would need to contain the motive for the acts of hostility, ill treatment or harassment. When refugees report persecution to the aid organisations in the camp, it is the victim doing the reporting, not the perpetrator. Therefore, the aid workers recording the events are unable to record the motivations behind them, and the records lack this information.

Medical records show evidence of food poisoning, but they do not and cannot explain how or why the poisoning occurred (see Figure 3). Similarly, medical reports that document mental illness can explain that the cause was trauma, but it is beyond the scope of such records to explain what the trauma endured was. Even if the type of trauma was recorded, it would not indicate that the trauma was a result of individual persecution. Police reports of arson document that a refugee home burned and that the fire was likely started by another person, but they do not name the arsonist, much less provide the motivations behind the arson. Reports of violence, even if the perpetrators are named, do not include evidence of persecution either, only a record that the violence occurred (see Figures 2 and 4). The threatening letters and public posts are the only documents submitted in resettlement cases that sometimes contain evidence of motive, but these are considered highly suspicious by resettlement officials because of the ease of fabricating such documents (see Figure 5). As a result, the documents that provide the most evidence of persecution are taken to be the least convincing, and those that provide the least evidence are taken to be the most convincing.

If the documents that camp residents collect for their cases fail to provide evidence of persecution, but both refugees and aid workers still use them within the resettlement process as evidence of persecution, what does that tell us about the humanitarian system? The irony is that while camp residents must go to great lengths to convince aid workers that they have been individually persecuted to be officially recognised as refugees, the institutional documents refugees collect

are automatically taken to be records of persecution. In other words, the centrality of persecution to the UN description of “refugee” means that UNHCR representatives assume that the documents that refugees collect from their partnering organisations must provide evidence of the refugees’ persecution. For example, one expatriate representative told me that the thickest envelope in the box in his boss’s office might stick out because his assumption was that an envelope that thick must be full of institutional documentation of persecution. Persecution is the assumption; institutional documentation is the evidence, even when it fails to provide proof of persecution.

Evidence of persecution is not the only assumption that these documents and their usage reveal. These documents, in their ambiguity, also unearth the ways in which persecution is illegible and unprovable. They are used as proof for something they do not prove, and as such, perhaps these documents expose the biggest contradiction in the entire premise of the refugee system: that it is possible to determine and evaluate a person’s “well-founded fear of being persecuted.” Widely recognised as part of the collective refugee experience, fear, like trauma (Fassin and d’Halluin 2007), does little to provide critical evidence required by resettlement cases. In practice, fear almost becomes replaced by evidence: well-founded evidence of being persecuted. In other words, UNHCR representatives assume that refugees are fearful; what they need to prove is evidence that they have already been persecuted.

Another thing these documents certainly do show is that the humanitarian system is not only regulatory, bureaucratic and restrictive, but also indeterminate and multidirectional (Cabot 2012). The documents and their usage uncover the holes in the resettlement process that allow for creative navigation of it. Both refugees and UNHCR representatives use documents that do not provide proof of persecution to construct a convincing narrative of persecution. Yet there is no magic formula of documents that the refugees can gather and that the UNHCR representatives can use to create a surefire resettlement case. This contributes to the arbitrariness of recognition.

Refugees and resettlement officers do not work together in this endeavour; their work is consecutive. First, the refugees labour to convince aid workers that they are worthy of their assistance. They strive to persuade partner organisation representatives to document events in the camp that could be used for their cases. They then try to find UNHCR representatives who will receive their documents. In interviews with protection officers, refugees attempt to use those documents as

evidence of their worthiness of resettlement. Refugees measure their success by whether “they have signed.” If they have signed, it means the refugee has a resettlement case and that the UNHCR representatives in the camp are passing the case along to regional hub. Signing indicates that there has been a *moment of recognition*, a change in destiny that plays out in a certain relation (Mbembe 2001, 192). The recognition is severely limited by the asymmetrical relationship between resettlement officers and refugees. But it is still meaningful. It not only provides the very real possibility of a future in a new country, a pathway to citizenship, but it also represents a reprieve, albeit both partial and temporary, from the work of seeking to be recognised as deserving.

The moments that refugees seek in the resettlement process turn Fanon’s idea of recognition on its head. Unlike the master who wants only work from the slave, the humanitarian does not want work from the refugee. In fact, UNHCR officials go out of their way to explain that the documentation submitted by refugees is supplemental. It is not needed. It is unnecessary. They often even refuse it. They are not looking for refugees to do the work of documentation for them. The refugee, in contrast, wants not only recognition but also work from the resettlement officer. Work in this case represents a reprieve from the incessant labour of trying to prove their worthiness. It also signals a shift in their relationship to the future. The “gap between an instantaneous present and an altogether different distant future” begins to diminish (Guyer 2007, 417). The life changes of leaving the camp to resettle in a third country are no longer only faraway and illusory, but become an imaginable, even palpable escape from the daily toil of camp life.

Fanon wrote, “He who is reluctant to recognize me is against me” (2008 [1952], 193). This is how refugees experience the resettlement process, a process designed to find fault with their narratives. This is why Carlos, and others, sought my assessment of the letters they were submitting to the UNHCR: they knew they would have to endure much scrutiny before any sort of recognition could occur. Refugees, however, have not given up the hope that moments of recognition could lead to more, fuller recognition. Carlos, for example, longs for a world where he is not only recognised for his English skills by other camp residents, but one in which he could be recognised as a refugee. He lacks refugee status, which increases the precarity of his life in the camp because he does not receive rations and could be deported by Tanzanian authorities if he is discovered in the country without documentation. In Fanon’s words, Nyarugusu

residents are still “longing for a world of reciprocal recognition” (Fanon 2008 [1952], 15). Refugees search for moments of recognition, but not only moments.

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## Note

- 1 President Trump issued two executive orders, the first in January 2017 and the second in March, each suspending refugee resettlement to the United States for 120 days. After the first executive order was halted by a Federal Court ruling, the UNHCR continued its screening and interview process as normal in Nyarugusu camp. However, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services has not returned to the camp since the signing of the first executive order. This means that no new refugee applicants can be approved for resettlement in the United States.

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