


BOOK REVIEW

Mobility and Identity at the Tanzania-Rwanda Border

From Migrants to Refugees: The Politics of Aid along the Tanzania-Rwanda Border

By Jill Rosenthal. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. Pp. 336. \$107.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9781478020356); \$28.95, paperback (ISBN: 9781478024996).

Kevin Donovan 

University of Edinburgh

(Received 21 February 2024; accepted 3 September 2024)

Keywords: East Africa; Tanzania; refugees; citizenship; economic; decolonization

In a twenty-four-hour period in April 1994, perhaps as many as 200,000 Rwandans crossed the Kagera River into Tanzania's Ngara district. Some were perpetrators of violence, others fleeing it and its aftermath. Regardless, these people were quickly framed as “refugees” — not exiles or East Africans, citizens or workers, criminals or victims. As Jill Rosenthal details, the ready application of the refugee label — and the ensuing humanitarian response — was itself the result of decades of debates and struggles over belonging, mobility, and identity in the Tanzania-Rwanda borderland. In contrast to the ahistorical presumptions of much refugee studies scholarship and the methodological nationalism of much historical research, *From Migrants to Refugees* shows how colonialism, decolonization, and humanitarianism remade ways of relating and distributing resources in this part of the Great Lakes. By tracing the conjoined histories of displacement and citizenship, Rosenthal shows how national identities are made in distinction to others, as well as through competition over resources and comparisons about relative morality. It should come to be a key reference in the history of African refugees, as well as complement a vibrant literature on identity and citizenship in postcolonial Africa.

The substance of the book begins in the interwar era, when German East Africa was divided into the British mandate of Tanganyika and the Belgian mandate of Ruanda-Urundi. Rosenthal shows how the Anglo-Belgian Boundary Commission (1922–24) provided the cartographic basis for seeing some forms of movement in the region as “international displacement.” Previously, such mobility crossed neither clear territorial lines nor legal categories. Smaller chiefdoms in today's Ngara district had long-standing links of kinship, trade, and tribute to larger polities like Burundi, Buhaya, and Rwanda. The conceit of imperial cartography was to link the people of Ngara administratively to Dar es Salaam rather than these more proximate authorities, yet such reorientations were not accomplished overnight. In some cases, lines on the map were redrawn: Rosenthal gives the example of Gisaka, a small polity that was initially included in Tanganyika but then transferred to Ruanda-Urundi, allegedly in the interests of its residents. In reality, people in Gisaka resented the “increasingly brutal and racialized rule” (36) of colonial Rwanda, and they moved eastward to escape it. Such a differentiation of colonial administration was salient in the newfound borderland: while the British ruled Ngara through native authorities known as Tutsi, they did not do so in the more infamously

stratified and consequential ways that Belgium reified such identities next door. As a result, the interwar bordering came to slowly remake experiences and sensibilities in the two mandate territories but labor, violence, and other pressures would ensure Rwanda and Tanzania remained entangled in a combination of competition and cooperation.

One effect of this newly divided territory was to, over time, create new circuits of exchange within British colonial territories. During the colonial period, economic imperatives like paying tax and opportunities like buying new commodities set Ngarans and their neighbors on the move. An important chapter on labor migration and control explores how workers' treks to sisal plantations near the Tanganyikan coast or cotton fields in Buganda sparked colonial anxieties. Administrators fretted that migrant wage earners would upset local hierarchies, spread disease, or unduly divert their attentions from the tasks officialdom preferred (such as laboring on their own farms). While migration was encouraged by colonial economic policy, it simultaneously was perceived, Rosenthal writes, as "an economic, medical, and social threat" (51). As a result, Britain endeavored to channel it, including by establishing some of the first "camps" for mobile Africans. Medical inspections and quarantines combined a carceral logic with sanitary interventions, trying to balance between competing colonial imperatives, all the while provoking suspicion and degrees of resistance among the migrants themselves. By placing these troubling regimes into the history of postcolonial humanitarianism, Rosenthal challenges those who see independence as a significant rupture. Her point is less that subsequent refugee camps explicitly drew on the colonial model and more that states and their international allies frequently perceive mobility as a problem to be contained. Moreover, in both her colonial and postcolonial history, Rosenthal challenges readers to see care and coercion as a matter of perspective — not self-evident opposites.

When Rwandans began "trickling into Ngara" (77) in 1959, they were different than the labor migrants of the past. They were no longer only of working age but reflected a much wider variety of ages, resources, and statuses. More consequentially, they were greeted by an emerging regulatory regime that now understood Great Lakes migration as a "refugee" crisis, not a matter of channelling workers. Officials still worried about disease and mobility, and they still relied on carceral techniques, but the increasingly dominant ideologies of national identity and development reshaped governance. So, too, did the presence of new sorts of actors, like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Tanganyika African National Union (on its path toward political power in 1961). As a result, it was possible by 1959 to envision the new arrivals "as Rwandan refugees—as people apart and in need of not only help but also control" (83). And it was desirable from the perspective of Tanganyika to set them to work. Getting this sorted was all the more pressing due to fears of contagion. The migrants-cum-refugees were fleeing a violent struggle for power in decolonizing Rwanda, and their movement provoked concerns about their wellbeing but also wider ramifications: would it lead to spill-over violence into Tanganyika? Would there be enough resources for the new guests? Rosenthal makes good use of Tanzanian archival sources — including less commonly consulted files in Mwanza — to show that the TANU leadership sought to turn threat into opportunity: they wanted to turn refugees into productive farmers, turning bushland into subsistence and exports. Yet, Rwandans were less eager *kujenga nchi* (the nation-building slogan of TANU). For one, they did not know if they would be around for harvest time; for another, some were more inclined to herding than digging.

After 1959, the humanitarian actors assembled a series of camps that would provide rations and facilities until such time as these supposed "outsiders" could return to their "proper" homelands. Rosenthal also has excellent archival evidence from the international aid organizations that found their purpose (and revenue) in both the control and care for the displaced. Records of the UNHCR, as well as Christian aid organizations, provide evidence of the everyday struggle between putative wards and their supposed overseers. Rwandans refused to go along with the dictates of international organizations and the Tanzanian state, despite the deployment of carrots and sticks (including the withdrawal of rations for uncooperative refugees). In one dramatic incident, more than 100,000 Rwandans at a refugee settlement began a hunger strike in 1970. They wanted to be resettled in the

Congo and they refused the state-mandated permits for refugees. It was the culmination of a “spirit of non-cooperation” (113) at Mwesi Highlands Refugee Settlement, a resistance that even led the UNHCR to recommend Tanzania use forced labor to break Rwandans’ spirit. Rosenthal highlights these coercive elements, as well as the racist views of some key expatriate officials who denigrated the refugees from the comfort of their comparatively well-provisioned facilities.

Ordinary Tanzanians also came to view refugees askance, but Rosenthal emphasizes that displaced Rwandans were in a series of double-binds. For one, if they stayed in camps and accepted their aid, Tanzanians saw them as lazy; but if the refugees left the camps and provided for themselves (by maintaining a herd they brought across the border, for example), they were deemed undeserving, deceitful, and insubordinate. Ultimately, Rosenthal has less to say about Rwandans’ identity formation, though she is sympathetic to their search for “autonomy” (194) and critical of administrative responses. Her main interest — as well as interviewees — are the residents of Ngara, and her overarching argument is that the presence of refugees and aid organizations did much to produce Tanzanians *in* Ngara. “The production of different nationalities in Ngara occurred at the interstice of decolonization and the ascendancy of an international regime created to operationalize the borders of new nations and the populations therein” (195). While scholars have long noted Tanzania’s particularly significant national formation, Rosenthal emphasizes just how much this identity was produced *in contrast* to supposed outsiders: displaced non-citizens. As Rwandans were set apart in camps, as Ngarans struggled to find ever scarcer firewood or pastures, as TANU ideology valorized productive labor and popular compliance, and as the turbulence of Rwandan politics echoed across the decades, residents of this corner of Tanzania came to know themselves as different than those across the border; they came to know themselves as national citizens.