

Anti-Refugee Violence and African Politics

Using comparative cases from Guinea, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, this study explains why some refugee-hosting communities launch large-scale attacks on civilian refugees whereas others refrain from such attacks even when state officials encourage them. Ato Kwamena Onoma argues that such outbreaks happen only when states instigate them because of links between a few refugees and opposition groups. Locals embrace these attacks when refugees are settled in areas that privilege residence over indigeneity in the distribution of rights, ensuring that they live autonomously of local elites. The resulting opacity of their lives leads locals to buy into their demonization by the state. Locals do not buy into state denunciation of refugees in areas that privilege indigeneity over residence in the distribution of rights because refugees in such areas are subjugated to locals who come to know them very well. Onoma reorients the study of refugees back to a focus on the disempowered civilian refugees that constitute the majority of refugees even in cases of severe refugee militarization.

Ato Kwamena Onoma is currently a Program Head at the Institute for Security Studies in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He was previously an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University (2007–2011). He is the author of *The Politics of Property Rights Institutions in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

*To my mother, Ewurama Ofei-Addo,
and my father, Kwesi Neeyi*

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Acknowledgments

The broad questions and issues concerning refugee–host relations that are at the heart of this book first began to occupy my mind in August 1997. I was one of thousands of refugees fleeing the war in Sierra Leone who had settled in the Guinean capital, Conakry. Relations between Guineans and refugees were not particularly cordial, but they were peaceful all the same. The two groups mostly lived parallel lives. My stay in Guinea ended up lasting for only a month as I made my way first to N’Zérékoré in the country’s Forest Region, Abidjan in Cote d’Ivoire, and then Accra, where I enrolled at the University of Ghana, with the support of relatives. I had just commenced my first semester of graduate work at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, when I began to hear of widespread attacks on refugees in Conakry in early September 2000. Reports from Human Rights Watch were confirmed by phone conversations with friends in Guinea and Sierra Leone. It was painful news that immediately suggested a dissertation topic to an eager graduate student. When I made an effort to actually begin to read about the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia and the refugee situation in Guinea, I realized it was a rather traumatic exercise, so I shelved those issues and instead wrote my dissertation on a no-less-interesting subject – the politics of land rights in Africa.

When I arrived at Yale University in 2007, I decided to revisit the subject of refugee–host relations and received tremendous support from many colleagues with whom I discussed this. Yale University had a lot of faculty members with interests in violence and conflict. Elisabeth Wood, Peter Swenson, Stathis Kalyvas, Ellen Lust, Mike McGovern, Kiarie Wa’Njogu, Kamari Clarke, and James Scott contributed a lot to the formative stages

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I was about to send the manuscript out to publishers when Elisabeth Wood encouraged me to seek funding from the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center at Yale for an author's workshop on the manuscript. The MacMillan Center responded favorably with a Kempf Family Fund award, and on the 2nd of May 2011, seven scholars who had read various parts of the manuscript met to give presentations on and discuss it. At the conference were Paul Richards, Jason Stearns, Mike McGovern, Stephen Wilkinson, James Scott, Adrienne Lebas, and Siba Grovogui. Kamari Clarke, Esther Mokuwa Richards, and Torjia Karimu also joined the discussions. Unsurprisingly, given the cast of characters present, the discussions were animated and rather heated. The workshop produced a wealth of feedback that I used to revise the manuscript extensively before submission to publishers.

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