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Marc Sommers. *Fear in Bongoland: Burundi Refugees in Urban Tanzania.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001. xviii + 219 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57181-331-2; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-263-6.

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This book is the story of John, William, and James in Bongoland. As young Burundian refugees, these men illegally migrated from refugee settlements in central Tanzania to the capital Dar es Salaam, popularly known as Bongoland. In Bongoland (Brainland) only those with wits and cunning can survive. The author describes the ways in which these young migrants cope with the atmosphere of fear, suspicion and secrecy that marks their lives.

Although for all city-dwellers the danger of violence and crime is a source of fear and concern, the refugees view their situation as particularly fraught with risks and hazards. These dangers may not only come from Tanzanian officials and policemen, but also from Tanzanian citizens, and especially from fellow refugees. The Tutsi are seen by these Hutu refugees as an imminent threat, who dispose of many allies. In more formal historical imagining Hutu identity is presented as unified: the Hutu are portrayed as the collective victim of Tutsi hatred.

Yet, beneath this veneer of Hutu harmony, Hutu refugees are sharply divided internally. Both Imbo and Banyaruguru Hutu sub-groups accuse each other of aiding the Tutsi to eliminate their fellow Hutu and give a self-portrayal of innocence and victimhood. While the myth of Hutu ethnic purity has been studied in detail, Marc Sommers has contributed a more layered perspective: ethnic purity comes in degrees (p. 61). His analysis of Imbo and Banyaruguru tensions is an apt illustration of how fear can become omnipresent and a determining factor in all dealings with other people.

In the context in which Sommers worked it may not have been easy to find out more about these tensions. As one refugee put it,"Who told you our secret? " (p. 49). It is to the author's credit that he has pursued this subject in such detail. In the shop where the young men work as tailors all visitors are treated with circumspection as anyone could be an informer and everybody may be a spy. Issues that relate to refugee status are carefully avoided in conversations and if Burundi or other places that betray the refugees' origin are mentioned at all, it is done in a veiled way.

Marc Sommers shows the importance of language usage where some words are never said, while others are only understood by a small circle of trusted people. The use of specific linguistic codes is important not only for refugee migrants. For newcomers who flock to town, Tanzanians and foreigners alike, knowledge of the youth language in Dar es Salaam is a means to show that they are well-versed in street life and know how to survive in Bongoland. Yet, this sort of knowledge has clear moral implications, for the youth language is also known as *lugha ya wahuni*, or the "language of the ignorant." Respectable elders frown upon the quick-witted slang, and for fundamentalist Christians merely hearing the youth language is sinful.

For youngsters who belong to such fundamentalist Christian churches, there is the constant dilemma of wishing to integrate into town life as quickly as possible and living up to the expectations of their church denomination. In *Fear in Bongoland* the role of the Pentecostal church among the refugees is studied in detail. Hitherto very little has been written about the religious life of refugees and Sommers's attention to this issue leads to important insights and conclusions. The owner of the shop in which the tailors work is a devout pastor and the

young men are under considerable pressure to follow his guidelines concerning righteous and sinful behavior.

Despite this pressure, the young men, each in his own way, develop their own standards for evaluating their deeds. They try to avoid sin and Satan, and they believe that by doing so they reduce the possibility of falling into Tutsi hands or being harassed by Tanzanian officials. Their religious belief forms "a code of behaviour for succeeding in the city after reaching there, and a source of spiritual uplift and empowerment" (p. 179).

Other studies have pointed to the importance of churches in building up a network in which people help and trust each other. In the Pentecostal church to which John, William, James and other Burundian refugees belong, this is hardly the case. Young men may find their patrons through the church, but the church does not form a close-knit community where youngsters may meet friends or help each other. Although the church members worship and pray together, they hardly ever communicate on a more personal level with other church members. Also in this context, talk about refugee issues is avoided, for the fear, suspicion and tension that refugees describe preclude the building up of large networks of friends and trustees. In John's words, "Too many friends could only bring trouble" (p. 169).

Marc Sommers's book is a well-written and fascinating narrative that fits well into the recent spate of refugee studies dealing with the cultural aspects of living in exile. The author explores the importance of language, the crucial role of religion and the relations between work and coping strategies in town. These various aspects of refugee migrant life do not remain bloodless issues on the researcher's agenda; through the words and deeds of John, William, James, and other young men these aspects become a lived reality.

Fear in Bongoland has become the personal account of these young male refugee migrants and the various ways in which they deal with their fears. Although the dangers they describe do not necessarily stem from direct harassment and violence in the city, fear and hiding may be seen as key terms in these young men's lives. The strategies they live by include limiting their public action and speech to a specific manner in which they want to present themselves. These public personae hide some aspects of their character, while deliberately emphasising other traits. Although the young men are bound by political constraints and social obligations, each one of them manages to create a living space.

Sommers discusses many aspects of work in the tailor shop in which the young men work. On the one hand this leads to a multi-faceted and layered study. On the other hand, sometimes one wished that the author had woven these various aspects more closely into the overall argument as in the present form some ends remain loose. Thus it is not easy to see how a discussion of the various cloths and sewing techniques contributes to an understanding of the fear of Burundian refugees (pp. 108-110). Perhaps a stronger theoretical framework could have helped to integrate these aspects more fully into the account.

In theoretical terms, the study is not without its flaws. Thus the author announces his book as a "gender study" (p. 12). Yet, writing about men (or about women, for that matter), does not automatically make a book a gender study. In fact the book tells us little about the construction of masculinity and relations between the sexes in Bongoland. Also the theoretical concept the author uses to denote the specific fears that refugees describe could have been developed further.

Sommers uses the term "cultural fear" to indicate that many of the fears are not based on tangible, direct threats, but are related to the refugee culture in which these young men were raised. Fear, the author indicates, is a key term in the definition of a refugee, i.e., refugees are those with a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" (p. 183). Yet, the idea of asylum is of course to end such fear and find a place where people are safe from their persecutors. The facts that refugees export their fears with their flight and that even young men (who only vaguely remember the atrocities on which these cultural fears are based) describe these fears and act upon them indicates the limits of the present definitions of refugees and asylum. The author fails to draw conclusions in this realm and merely states that "Burundians are ruled by fear" (p. 186). His own analysis, however, shows that John, James, William and other refugees are only partly ruled by their fears, while, at the same time, they manage to overcome them.

Finally, one wonders whether only refugees have to cope with such cultural fears. Do not many people all over the world express fears that have only limited substantial basis and combine discontent and deprivation with culturally and historically imbued stereotypes about others? The theoretical explanation does not make clear whether or not a history of trauma is a defining characteristic in the concept of cultural fear, or vice versa.

Despite these flaws, the combination of a broad per-

spective on exile, work, language, and religion and a personal account of people living with fear renders this book highly recommendable for students of refugee issues, social history, popular culture and new religious movements in Africa.

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