

Study of the link between the physical transformation of a camp and a deliberate "policy" to maintain instability.

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I first became aware of the Agamé camp in 2009 following a chance meeting with the spokesperson for refugees in Mali. He was trying to make the existence of this "little" camp known and invited me to go and visit. Six months later I passed through the main gate at the entrance to the site and my first impression was that this place did not match the images of refugee camps from television. There were no white and green tents with the UNHCR¹ logo emblazoned on them, and no white 4x4s with flags around them bearing the emblems of international NGOs. The place was calm - serene - as people passed by greeting each other with a "bonjour". There were little shops, a small snack bar, mud houses, a school, young children. That strange first impression became the basis of a documentary film in which I recounted this dichotomy between the camp and the perception that it was a village with inhabitants².

During the analysis of the camp's apparent transformation into a village I observed different urban elements and their integration throughout the "geography of daily life" in the camp. The appearance of being a village comes from the presence of houses, terraces and gardens which have replaced the tents which are symbols of survival and instability. However, after having participated in daily camp life and watched the construction of these houses, it would appear that they are also intended to represent instability.

The Togolese refugee camp in Agamé is both "young and old"; it was created in 2005 and the urgent humanitarian crisis is "history". The refugees are moving into their seventh year here and are in for the long haul. This "pseudo-village" was built on a palm grove and consists of several renovated neighbourhoods that are occupied which have seen properties change ownership over the years, and even tenants coming and going as family circumstances change.

The camp covers one square kilometre, purchased or rented (there are different views on this) by the HCR from a village cooperative that cultivates the palms to produce the local alcohol. It has been home to up to 5,000 people but the current population is 3,000. The camp was established in the wake of the mass exodus produced by Faure's controversial victory in the 2005 presidential election following the death of his father, Gnassingbe Yeadéma, who had been president of Togo for 38 years. The hope for political change in 2005 prompted numerous street demonstrations in public spaces in towns and villages around the country. This action was initially supported by the West and led to the election of the opposition candidate in the first ballot, but he pulled out of the second ballot unexpectedly, handing Faure the victory. This prompted a witch-hunt carried out by the presidential party's henchmen prompting thousands of opposition supporters to flee on foot to the border of a neighbouring country, Benin.

¹ UNHCR : United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

² LE CAMP/THE CAMP, 91 min, which was presented at various international film festivals (Cinéma du Réel and Festival d'Amiens, France; Quintessence, Benin; DocVille, Belgium). <http://vimeo.com/49742876> password: camp.

Context

Two years after their arrival the refugees began to replace their tents with houses.

No one imagined staying here for so long; those who were most optimistic thought they would only stay for a few weeks. As the situation developed and the presidential party regained control they gradually resigned themselves to their fate. Some of them recalled the words of one of the camp's administrators who predicted they would be here for at least 20 years. "We laughed at that, at the time," some of them told me.

Two Beninese camp administrators have since been in charge. They work from a small office at the entrance to the camp next to the guard post manned by three good-natured officers. The UNHCR Representation, which is not located at the site, is based in Cotonou³ and makes increasingly less frequent visits. A somewhat dilapidated building bearing their emblem serves as a reminder that they are the "owner-managers" of the site.

My first source was Jonathan, an agricultural engineer from southern Togo and a father-of-two in his forties, who did not fit the description of a die-hard activist. At the time of the "events", and against his wife's better judgment, he says, he had some political training. It was a kind of return to his militant student days on the campuses, he says. In the course of his work for the State he refused to help the member of the presidential party who wanted to arm the farmers in order to quell the student uprising. Having refused to act as a recruiter he was considered an opponent and a traitor. Initially he lost his job and then one day, seeing soldiers at the door of his home, he left. He set out on foot towards the border, leaving behind his wife and children. He wandered for several weeks hiding out in the capital until he felt the net closing in. One night he crossed over the border, along the beach, into Benin. Thousands of others made the same journey and, like him, have found themselves massed on the Beninese border. That is when the UNHCR set up the camp⁴ and once the fugitives were assembled and settled in their tents they were able to repatriate their families.

He recounts his story sitting under the thatched roof of his veranda with a few neighbours. The hot and humid conditions signal that rain is on the way, and a few drops come through the banana tree branches used to create the canopy. His friends listen distractedly as they fiddle with their glasses of the local alcohol; they have been on similar journeys. Seveha fled on foot from the centre of the country. An image remains with him of that which caused him to leave. They tied people up and threw them off the bridge. "There was a rush for power. Soldiers and members of the RPT (Rally of the Togolese People, the President's party), high on revenge, took out their anger on those who had wanted to see them out of power." He mentioned that Foly had hired a generator to make it easier to count the votes after nightfall. The police officers must have seen this as a hindrance, or perhaps just an overzealous act. Accused of trying to clarify the election he would be imprisoned before he could flee.

They sit around the table discussing the past, each of them talking about their area, their town in Togo, the place where they used to go out to eat. It could have been any Sunday afternoon, after a nice meal - the little glasses of alcohol help - as they laugh and tell jokes... The impression of being in a camp starts to become blurred by the facilities and relative comfort of Jonathan's home. And yet when they leave at the end of the afternoon, the "scenery" reminds them where they are. They

³Economic capital of Benin, 100km from the camp.

⁴ Another camp was set up to deal with the situation in Comé (Benin).

weave between the pegs of the remaining tents, avoiding the flaps of tattered and torn material, some of which are beginning to decompose. Along the main street which leads to the main gate, lined with huts and small shops which demarcate the camp's different neighbourhoods and zones, they each turn off onto a pathway or a side road towards their homes.

A layout of quadrilaterals

The camp saw almost three years of feverish NGO activity. The only restaurateur at the camp has fond memories of those days. Piles of empty mayonnaise jars are testimony to a commercially lucrative past. During that initial period of the camp's existence each neighbourhood was gradually demarcated. There are 48 which run along either side of the main street. Halfway down there is a football pitch on the left and opposite that there are buildings which previously served as the nursery, primary school and clinic, which are now abandoned or used for other purposes.

The neighbourhoods are compact and resemble courtyards with a central square which was initially enclosed by tents. The majority of them have been replaced or converted into either a storage area at the rear of the house, or an entrance hall at the front. Occasionally they become antechambers connecting two parts of a house built from mud or wood. Each neighbourhood is run by a neighbourhood head who reports to the zone head, who are in turn answerable to the "Coordination", an elected body made up of refugees.

Jonathan recalls the gradual establishment of the neighbourhoods.

"The first people arrived at the camp on 28th April 2005. At the time it was (an) old overgrown palm grove. During the first few days we had no idea that there would be a massive influx of refugees. So the development of the camp's architecture was a gradual process. As one neighbourhood was filled the new arrivals had to clear an area to put up their tent. I arrived in June so lots of zones and neighbourhoods had already been set up."

The different neighbourhoods were given names as they were built, some of which refer to transhumances and others to the surnames of people who had been of help to the refugees, or those figures on the political stage at that time. Sometimes they were named after neighbourhoods of the towns in Togo which had been left behind.

"There's Effata. Then there's the Ebenezer neighbourhood, Saint Esprit... Main de Dieu, George Bush, New-York. Joël Amouv and Chicago. So there are 12 neighbourhoods along each street in the camp," says Jonathan to a young child who is trying to draw a map of the camp on a board.

The American grid-style layout and the blocks which make up these well-named neighbourhoods form the basis of a hierarchy and an organisation of refugees, particularly among the neighbourhood heads. Although the hierarchical structure is still well established, the neighbourhoods themselves have become less distinct entities. The sides of the quadrilaterals which were marked out geometrically have become blurred. Extensions have spilled over and pathways have been created to move around more discretely without having to take the main street where you can be seen by everyone.

From comfort to compensation – urban planning in the face of oblivion.

Jonathan was one of the first to build a house with bricks thanks to his position as a primary teacher in the local schools.

"I called a builder from the next village, for 25,000 francs he built that for me. When it was finished some guys here at the camp told me that they also knew how to do that type of work. I asked them to work on other building projects, like my hen-house. You can see there are lots of other people who have built, or at least they have started to."

Indeed, in his neighbourhood, christened Chicago, around the regularly swept and well-kept square, there are several unfinished houses with tarpaulins covering the walls which are awaiting their framework.

Each of them has tried to increase their level of comfort and replace the old tents, which leak when it rains or become stifling when the sun is beating down. It's the first thing that comes to mind upon seeing these structures which appear to be "short-term dwellings", as Marc Bernardot describes them. He speaks, from his own observations, of a kind of connection between being forced to live in cramped accommodation, which is imposed by an authority, and a form of freedom of enterprise which stems from instability. He believes these construction methods fit into a context of submission and poverty, where there is a crossover between the military model and the set-up of shanty towns:

"The camp model takes on different forms and is adapted throughout society, such as with the cramped accommodation in migrant worker centres which have the same living quarters as the camps and barracks of colonial workers. There is not so much surveillance there, but freedom of movement is often restricted. It is also linked to temporary settlements and self-built dwellings or "shanty towns" imported directly from the peripheries of colonial cities both by name and in reality."⁵

At the camp, in contrast to Bernardot's descriptions, faced with the tents' obsolescence and despite the basic standards of quality, the construction methods of the houses speak of a desire for comfort, yet also meet a more combative objective which represents a will to rebel. Instability in the Agamé camp is less synonymous with "rebellion" or "shortage" and closer to "freedom" and "inventiveness".

Félicien, who lives next door to Jonathan just across one of the side paths, on the right-hand side, near Las Vegas, in the last neighbourhood before the vegetable garden, laughs as he mentions that he has decided to move into a house made from tarpaulins which is "almost unoccupied".

"Though the owners left a long time ago there is still a young person there, a teenager. I told him I was moving in with my daughter, that he could take it or leave it."

Félicien is tough and known for his quick temper, and though he may act kindly, few people dare to stand in the way of what he wants. He recalls the other "little issues" he has caused. Once, a tree which he was cutting fell onto the roof of the house of a little old lady. On another occasion the rain

⁵ BERNARDOT M (2009) "Les camps d'étrangers, dispositif colonial au service des sociétés de contrôle", *Projet*, 2009/1 n° 308, p. 41-50. DOI: 10.3917/pro.308.0041, URL: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-projet-2009-1-page-41.htm>, consulted on 6th June 2013, p 48.

was coming into his digs - as he refers to his first house - and he had to steal some mud from his neighbour, the pastor, to repair it...

Deep within the camp, far from the administrator, problems are often resolved without applying the rules in the more remote neighbourhoods where it is more rural. It is a long way from Agora where the main square has become a rumour mill.

Beneath the palm trees, surrounded by the squawks of the birds perched on the branches or hiding in the bushes, in the houses made from mud by the "wise ones", "former camp inhabitants" come to get advice. They come, for example, when an official announcement sends a shock throughout the camp and sets people worrying, like the one saying *"that refugee cards will be distributed to registered individuals"*.

Rewind a little. During the night the public crier went around each neighbourhood making an announcement with a microphone and calling out a reminder that everyone should present themselves at the camp entrance in the morning.

As the intermediary of the Coordination, acting as the messenger, he has taken on the traditional role of the public crier who announces a death or celebrations in Togolese villages. The morning after his announcement, at 6:30am, the main street is teeming with crowds of people. Unfamiliar well-dressed figures mill around restlessly...

In the little inn where I take my coffee each day I noticed a sudden increase in activity which was as brief as the stay of these "unknowns". They are the well-to-do refugees who come to register before heading back to town, Cotonou or the North, where they do business. They are proud to show off their social standing in front of the other refugees who stay in the camp: *"I do business; I go to Togo and bring back the food you buy here."*

Although they dress ostentatiously some of them seem nervous in public. In order to obtain a new "temporary certificate" each refugee must have been registered. This was done previously by the Coordination team which simply surveyed and identified the tents and houses that were occupied. A number of refugees working as "itinerant traders" have not lived at the camp for months or years and have been struck off the list.

They returned post-haste thanks to calls received on their mobile phones but are left confused because they do not know how to get back on to the famous lists. Having made a return on a small investment a long way from the camp, and sometimes in Togo, despite everything they hope to be recognized as refugees. So that is the reason why some of them, feeling more humble and less proud, are in the houses of the old-timers where the birds sing in the trees, trying to find a solution.

It becomes apparent that the construction of houses and external works (in the case of unfinished houses) has another dimension: they are not just to keep the rain off! Five years after the camp was created the lists of those admitted have become obsolete and the only way thought up to distinguish between *"those who are still refugees and those who are not"* is to survey the inhabitants. *Jus soli* is also established in the transient location of the camp. It is similar to the strange rule, which was imposed in Belgium especially, whereby the homeless were required to provide evidence of a home address in order to receive a benefit payment!⁶ Building a house, or at least "putting up walls",

⁶ In Belgium, in May 96, Jan Peeters, Secretary of State for Social Integration, made a "minimum street subsistence income" (income support allowance) available to homeless people who could find someone to shelter them. Various sources, including Le Soir. URL: http://archives.lesoir.be/les-cpas-devront-payer-les-sdf-la-circulaire-sur-le-min_t-19960515-Z0C362.html, consulted on 5th June 2013.

allows you to have a "letter box", a symbol testifying to your existence even if you are sometimes far from the camp.

As well as being comfortable, spacious and even "almost stylish abodes"⁷, in contrast to the tents, the houses function as agents of identity.

The "political position" of the house, after its identity function

Although they may all attempt to register as residents - even the most affluent of them - the qualifying status and the acquisition of the refugee card are not permanent for those who we could call the "pseudo-refugees" of Agamé.

Inclusion on the refugee list allows them to continue to wait in the hope of being resettled. The endless wait, a long insomnia⁸, has given them the time to read the rules of the UNHCR and now they claim their rights. Some of them also make their demands known with four slogans printed on T-shirts: Repatriation impossible/Utopian integration!/Resettlement required/Help us, UNHCR.

Given that there seems to be relative political calm in Togo⁹ and that the host country, Benin, does not want to upset its neighbour, which appears to have halted the process of obtaining refugee status¹⁰, the refugees are fighting back!

The day following the announcement of the public crier the wise ones are bombarded with requests for advice by refugees who were suddenly rejected: " *how do you get back on the list, who should I call?* " Telephone numbers are quickly chalked up on a blackboard. "*We are going to try to intervene on your behalf,*" conclude the "wise ones", as a parting statement to the worried young traders.

They leave with slightly less heavy hearts, looking for taxis to take them to the capital to carry on with their business.

After they leave, speculation is rife over the validity of the renewable temporary refugee certificate which the trader-refugees are unsuccessfully trying to obtain. All of the old residents present have it, though it has made no difference whatsoever to their life in the camp. The laminated card bearing

⁷ Michel Agier sees these houses as an outlet for the refugees to use their invention and creativity to kick-start their lives. An outlet where life goes on. AGIER, M (2008) *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, Paris Flammarion, p 124.

⁸ Victor Hugo, *Pierres*, p 62.

⁹ Some opposition parties (CAR, CDPA, UFC) have joined the governing coalition following the Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed in Lomé on 20th August 2006.

¹⁰ This is the impression that you get, in the sense that according to the UNHCR criteria regarding eligibility for and acquisition of refugee status, those Togolese people who fled do meet the required conditions: a refugee is any person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it". UNHCR : CHAPTER ONE RESETTLEMENT WITHIN UNHCR'S MANDATE: INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION AND THE SEARCH FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS, chapter 1.2 Persons of Concern to UNCHR, p 18.

the logo of the UNHCR and the CNAR¹¹, signed by the Beninese Secretary of the CNAR¹², is merely a sign of hope.

The long-term stay and not acquiring refugee status set in motion the joint scenario of instability/longevity which is manifested paradoxically in the construction of houses. You have to stay in order to obtain the "card" which will allow you to leave. You could say, *it's the location which makes the man*. Tents or mud houses are given a number, recorded by the neighborhood heads, and then by the zone heads, who pass on the information to the Coordination, which in turn forwards it to the administrator. The latter submits the lists to the CNAR which issues the temporary certificates, which may one day be converted into permanent status...

This survey and renewal of temporary certificates, proclaimed loudly and clearly by the public crier, resulted in a wave of new construction and occupation of "abandoned houses" in 2010. Unlike migrants who arrive in Europe and see their journey end in failure once detained in a camp, here in Agamé, in the South, the camp has become more of a jumping-off point to move elsewhere. In any case, it is not a place which is guarded and people are free to leave.

No one stops them! In fact, "they"¹³ are relieved to see them go, as shown by the withdrawal of material aid and the electricity supply, and the recent water supply problems. Life is made gradually more complicated and troublesome as this assistance disappears, with the intention of encouraging people to leave and signaling the end of the process. But instead of indicating that it is time to go back (to your country), these withdrawals have the effect of creating tensions. The edgy atmosphere causes the resolve of the refugees to harden and they show their dissension by building.

It is at this point that the houses, and the act of building, can be considered to represent a political stance.

Organised and planned instability.

While they still allowed themselves the more illusory hopes which they collectively shared, the political demand of the refugees would be expressed through protest marches, visits to the camp by journalists, drafting of press releases.¹⁴ The struggle was open, visible. But since 2007, the camp settled into a "post-humanitarian-intervention" life and rhythm even though an NGO is occasionally present (Caritas International for the nursery school) and an association supports the vegetable garden projects (Forest Support Fund).

In fact, the daily presence of "the help of others" has practically disappeared, which means that there is no longer anyone to listen to and receive their demands, nor is there anyone to whom they can assign their complaints and their unhappiness. In a way, the refugees no longer have any enemies to direct their demands at. Owing to the lack of representatives who are physically present (and able to listen to them) the outlet for dispute has changed and now consists in building.

¹¹ CNAR: National Committee for Refugee Affairs.

¹² At the time Commissioner Alfred Sohau, based on observations of the signature which appears on the refugee registration documents which I saw.

¹³ "They" refers to the UNHCR and the CNAR.

¹⁴ Texts were posted on various blogs, as well as photos, but the majority of these posts were from 2006, the first year of the stay...

So, within the context of a long and undefined period, the dynamic of refugees creating living space is seemingly contradictory in nature.

You have to settle in the camp long-term and build a permanent structure to demonstrate a refusal to integrate with the Beninese population. And at the same time you have to maintain an unstable way of life to highlight the temporary nature of your "stay", while in a state of readiness to leave.

This dual gesture could be interpreted as an act of resistance. By maintaining a state of instability and refusing to participate in the reintegration process organised by NGOs, the refugees are demonstrating their desire to leave and be resettled in the West¹⁵. It is a question of not conforming to the local integration programme which they claim is organised by the NGOs and the CNAR; in other words, the people on the ground in Benin, and not according to the rules of the UNHCR based in Geneva.

This period of resistance, which will be the final act in the life of the camp (it will close in June 2013) is played out daily in a manufactured place that is lost in a ripple in space-time.

The men and women of the camp have nothing to do, have been abandoned and plunged into uncertainty. So they have gone beyond the search for physical protection – the hope of going to live elsewhere guards against a descent into madness. Resettlement is the utopian goal that is rarely achieved, which many among them concede, but it enables them to wait. It is their common objective while everything around them crumbles and falls into disrepair.

In contrast to the West where asylum seekers are placed in detention centres that are fortified, barricaded, regulated and kept under surveillance, in the South - in the Agamé camp for example - the concept of confinement does not exist. When there were still fences enclosing the perimeter it was to protect against incursions from outside.¹⁶

So, they live in a false fortress¹⁷ that has walls which today are malleable, porous, and open, which in fact show the disinterest and disengagement of the authorities. Nobody at the camp had entirely understood this, and interpreted the sloppiness of the administration as a sign of weakness and a victory for the refugees.

The vegetable garden which is the final area of NGO intervention and the last specimen project shown during visits of the HCR is physically located outside the camp. Placed at the edge beside one of the fences, it foreshadowed the movement which would gradually occur. The refugees who worked on it went out of the camp each day, as if they were symbolically and physically being reintegrated into the lives of "the others". Félicien, who was one of them, would have opted for this final solution in June 2013, as he explained to me over the phone.

"I'm in the town of Agamé, amongst "them" (the Beninese). The HCR contacted my landlord; they paid my first six months rent with my integration bonus¹⁸. I go back there to do the gardening.

¹⁵ For more on this, see: 3.1 Refugee status a precondition for resettlement consideration, p 75-79 URL: <http://www.unhcr.org/3d464c954.html>, downloadable pdf.

¹⁶ In 2006, the refugees were attacked by an armed group of native Beninese and members of the Togolese President's party.

¹⁷ Based on Claire Rodier who reflected on the migration policies of Fortress Europe and speaks of the walls that "are offshored to push asylum seekers back to the South." RODIER, C (2008) Immigration: fantasmes et réalités, Paris, La Découverte.

¹⁸ This bonus is a sum which has varied over the years, and which, since 2010, amounts to 60,000 CFA francs per adult and 30,000 CFA francs per child. Roughly €91 and €46 (€1 = 656 CFA francs).

Relations with the Beninese (with whom he works on the vegetable gardens) have improved. I'm like them! They all rue the departure of the refugees - the motorcycle-taxi drivers, the vendors. Aah, they've lost their customers! I'm OK now, I feel relaxed. We plant, we harvest, we sell. My daughter passed her exams; she's going on to secondary school in Agamé."

Jonathan, his neighbour, is still at the camp, but he is also preparing to leave. As the former president of the Coordination and being one of the wise ones who was regularly consulted, he had given up hope of being resettled in the West several months ago, but he continued to think about it. He confirmed that he was going to try to take up his agricultural engineering work here in Benin, against his wishes.

"By the 15th June 2013 the refugees must have left the camp, they are forcing us, you might say. There was no option other than integration. With my temporary certificate, I presented my resettlement plan to the HCR delegation. I spoke of Ouidah where I will do beekeeping."

"Do you want to leave the camp, just like that?"

"Yes, we are abandoning the houses. Some have already left and settled in the area. For now the only ones left at the camp are the resisters, who refused the last temporary certificates. I don't know what they will do. At the camp entrance the administrator's office is always open, he is very busy organising all the departures. You could choose, either to settle, "quote", in Benin by force, or go back to your country."

"Have some people returned to Togo?"

"I'm not too sure, but it seems that they have."

They are both pinning their hopes for life outside the camp on verbal agreements and promises... It was the same during their time at the camp, where as refugees, whether it was between themselves or with people from outside, everything was a compromise, a negotiation, and on occasion deceit. The difference these days is that they are playing by the same rules as the others, they no longer feel like outsiders and will no longer be considered as such, although in terms of their status they will receive a "privileged resident" permit, renewable every ten years.

Settling back into society, sleeping alongside others, and not on "a site", they can no longer be accused of being refugees – freeloaders. They will no longer get by on the vague and remote hope of resettlement, the intercontinental journeys, preserved and made plausible by the sole fact of being in a camp. They have left the "long term" behind and can begin a new chapter in their lives. That may not be the only benefit, but it is worth its weight in gold.

When considering the structures built by the refugees, it is evident that the evolution of a location such as a camp can only be analysed - beyond the little houses creating the impression of a village - by observing the political motivation of the individuals.

Building a house allows them to find their place, regain their dignity and get themselves back together.

Community life in a temporary and unstable location relies more on attitudes, actions and words, of which building is just one facet. It is a visible marker of the complexity of individuals' outlooks and objectives. The duality and the ambivalence symbolised by these little houses reveal as much about the desire to settle as they do about the will to leave.

Pragmatically, the houses provide a focus for daily life; to remain strong and keep fighting.

unfinished house in neighbourhood «CHICAGO»



the vegetable garden

