



Adam, Gamal A. *Living in Limbo with Hope: Sudanese Refugees and Social Injustice in Egypt*. Vernon, B.C. Canada: J. Charlton Publishing Ltd., 2014, ISBN: 978-0-9919441-3-2, pp.232; reviewed by Teresa A. Booker (tbooker@jjay.cuny.edu), Assistant Professor, Department of Africana Studies, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York.

One need not look further than the nightly news to see waves of African immigrants risking life and limb for the safety of European shores. Men, women, and children are plucked from sinking boats and guided to dry land where they huddle, at least for a while, in foil blankets waiting to be processed at some intake center where they can plea for asylum. For those of us who believe that refugees

crossing an international border into safety are steps away from a new life, Gamal Adam's *Living in Limbo with Hope: Sudanese Refugees and Social Injustice in Egypt* will be an eye opener.

Dr. Gamal Adam—himself a Darfurian and former refugee-turned doctorate-earning, social anthropologist—uses his position as an insider to draw attention to the plight of Sudanese refugees living a life of limbo in Cairo, Egypt. Field notes collected during August 2003-June 2004 as both an observer of everyday activities from weddings to parties to prayers and snowball sampler interviewing people and groups as fate led him to them make a compelling argument for the need to expose the unfortunate treatment of people.

Before explaining the current conditions of Sudanese refugees in Egypt, Adam first provides some historical context to the relationship between African refugees and the African countries that neighbor their native land. For example, prior to the mid-1970s, East African nations like Egypt were “very generous” towards refugees [but] the generosity gradually disappeared” as the numbers grew. When the al-Bashir took control over Sudan by means of a coup (and allowed the scorched earth campaign that caused Darfurians to flee), Adams says that the Egyptian government was the first to recognize the new Sudanese government rather than condemn it.

Moreover, despite ratifying conventions meant to protect the rights of refugees and ostensibly extending those rights to domestic policy, there is considerable discrepancy between the Egyptian government's affirmations that they have "always welcomed refugees with open arms since the days of Joseph and his brethren," and assurances that the "Koran specifically enjoins Muslims to enter Egypt with confidence," and what they have actually delivered in terms of providing political asylum to the Sudanese. (p. 63)

Adam next explains that the granting of refugee status to Sudanese is based on both macro- and micro- factors. On the macro level, for example, the UNHCR convinced Egypt to temporarily halt for 18 months the arrest and deportation of asylum-seekers just beginning the petition process. However, not only did the Egyptian government ignore the yellow card system for temporary refugees agreed upon with UNCHR, but it disregarded, as well, the blue card system the government itself had already put in place to identify individuals whose completed petitions were already awaiting review phase prior to the UNHCR's intervention. On the micro level, Adam explains how the determination of refugee status is based on a refugee's persuasiveness in presenting their case to interviewing officials as well as the official's degree of familiarity with the situation in the refugee's country of origin. Due to red tape and political bias, asylum-seekers in Cairo waited, on average, 9 months only to be denied asylum in the end.

The only topic upon which the UNHCR and the Egyptian government both agree is that refugees should be forced to "stay in one camp or location" (p.20). Not only does it make them easier to numerate, but it minimizes the hostile actions frequently directed towards immigrants, who are often accused of taking jobs away from the host country citizens, the Egyptians. Adam does not make clear how and under what conditions individuals were allowed exit the designated spaces and enter into Cairo proper. Scant mention of this point is the book's only shortcoming

With a preferred stabling policy for refugees in place, it is no wonder that few individuals qualify for UNHCR-funded medical treatment, vocational training, and financial assistance for which they are eligible. It is similarly unsurprising that the refugee administration is overwhelmingly being handled by foreign NGOs: They compassionately occupied the vacuum created as the Egyptian government's abrogated its responsibility to safeguard the refugees.

Living in Limbo with Hope highlights a variety of hardships that refugees face—particularly those pertaining to seeking shelter and employment. However, it also identifies some of the temporary expedients that refugees developed. For example, local Cairene custom dictates that Sudanese immigrants must go through either housing agencies or middlemen just in order to meet landlords and secure apartments.

The former charge as much as 2 months' rent, while the latter about 200 pounds just for the opportunity to meet landlord. If refugees manage to secure an apartment, they are often forced to accept those in the worse part of the buildings, such as on the ground floor, near cesspools, or on the top floors which are very hot during the summer. If the broken furniture does not suit them, or they cannot afford to buy their own mattresses or plastic mats, they are forced to sleep on makeshift cardboard beds. In addition, some landlords charge residents telephone insurance", a non-refundable gratuity as high as a half-month's rent, must be paid along with the 1st month's rent before gaining access to the apartment.

Moreover, unscrupulous landlords have been known to evict tenants, along with their children, in the dead of night knowing full well that the immigrants have little legal recourse. One work-around used by the Sudanese to lessen the housing burden, is to dispense with rigid methods for determining rent when groups of individuals share a single: Each person is allowed to pay what they can afford. Another palliative innovation is newcomers' space, whereby a person joining the group after the beginning of the calendar month is excused from having to start paying rent until the beginning of the next calendar month.

Job hunting is another hardship faced by Sudanese refugees. According to Adam, Sudanese are forced to take on casual jobs because the Egyptian government does not permit them to obtain formal employment. Consequently, women are employed more often since they easily take on positions as housekeepers, or weavers of handicrafts like tablecloths and bedsheets, etc... This situation severely undercuts men's ability to fulfill the roles traditionally ascribed by their cultures, leading men on one extreme to commiserate their helplessness with alcohol or adopt non-traditional roles such as caring for the children and/or seeing to the processing of asylum papers. The very few who have become specialized in preparing asylum papers can earn as much as \$210 per month. However, as the southern Sudanese dialect of Arabic differs from that of Egypt, some information can be lost in translation for those processing the paperwork and those reading it.

Admittedly, *Living in Limbo* amounts to only a single case study, and its data only focuses primarily on populations in Cairo. Nevertheless, learning about the social injustices experienced by even a single group begs the question as to how other groups are being treated elsewhere throughout the world. Books like this should remind us that simply knowing that a United Nations agency is doing its good offices or a non-governmental agencies is extending its helping hand on site should not lull us into the false security of believing that enough is already being done to fully protect the human rights of others.

In fact, it should be a clarion alerting us to the fact that, once individuals leave the relatively safe humanitarian zones of protection and venture into the streets of their potentially new host country, the real challenges begin.