

Catherine-Lune Grayson, *Children of the Camp: The Lives of Somali Youth Raised in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya*, 2017. 233 pp. Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford. ISBN 9-781785-336317

In Kakuma refugee camp in northwest Kenya lies a make-shift quasi-city of 115,000 people. Here, refugees impatiently live their lives waiting for updates on resettlement, knowing their native countries, particularly Somalia, will likely never again be safe place to which they might return. For many, the news of an approved resettlement application never comes; for others, their resettlement application is denied, and they will be left with a life lived in judicial limbo. What was originally intended as a temporary solution to the violence in Somalia and neighboring countries and a response to the Kenyan government's antipathy towards refugees, Kakuma refugee camp has become a stable home for many. In *Children of the Camp: The Lives of Somali Youth Raised in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya* by Catherine-Lune Grayson takes an anthropological look at a group of youth that have been forced to lay permanent roots in Kakuma refugee camp. For many, Kakuma is not only the place most familiar to them—it is the only place they know, because in their mid-twenties they were born and raised there. Through personal interviews and commentary from the youths themselves, Grayson takes the reader to Kakuma and explores the complicated relationship the refugees have to the camp, a place that unintentionally became the closest thing they have to a home.

*Children of the Camp* sheds light on the life of a Kakuma refugee by looking at refugee struggles chronologically—starting with perspectives on the past, then transitioning to the reality of the present, and concluding with the refugees' hopes, fears, and desires for the future. The author was successful in achieving this holistic view on the life of a refugee as she conducted over 100 interviews with youth living in Kakuma, focusing on Somalians, and extending her interviews over a period of six months. She also thoughtfully planned her interview strategy; aware that as a white woman asking interview questions, the youth would equate her with NGO and aid workers, so she sought to differentiate herself and give something in return to the youth she interviewed. Accordingly, Grayson hosted journalism, photography, and writing classes—a much needed outlet for Kakuma youth who are often restricted from attending secondary school. In addition to quotes and personal stories from interviews that are scattered throughout the book, some of the most informative insight into the life of a refugee occurs as she describes the work that students completed for class, particularly their photography and writing. By developing an on-going relationship with the students, she is able to shine light on who these Somali youths are, and their complicated relationship with their home, in a manner that feels thorough and genuine to the reader.

Grayson starts the book with an introduction that explains her interest in the camp, her background, her methodology, and her reasoning for writing the book. She does a great job of explaining the why, and I know that I myself was curious as to why she chose to focus on a specific age group, the youth of the camp, of a specific population, Somalians, and a specific refugee camp. Much of the available refugee literature takes a more birds eye-level view in approaching refugee law, and explores different groups of refugees across different camps. Academic work generally focuses on the full spectrum of ages, -- from children, to adults, to the elderly -- but in reading the introduction, I quickly understood Grayson's reasoning for writing a book with a specialized subject matter and a focus on a specific population: "Refugee-related research has commonly focused on young children and adults, neglecting youth as a distinct social group" (17) Her in-depth personal interview style and goals for the book also shed light on why she chose this specific topic rather than focusing on refugee law as a whole.

Chapter 1 transitions from the introduction into a historical account of forced displacement in Somalia and an explanation of how refugees arrived in Kenya. It also describes the refugees'

initial naiveté, as they at first thought their displacement was temporary. One quote, which starts the chapter, describes it all: “We were relocating...for a few days. Twenty years later, we are still not back” (24). The chapter describes routes into exile and the civil war, collapse of the Somalian State, violence, and draughts that contributed their exile. This is the story of a people left with almost nothing in their native country and their later confusion and indirect path to Kakuma. The chapter also does a great job of explaining the Kenyan government’s reaction to the mass influx of Somalians; what first started as turning a cold shoulder to Somali refugees later led to flat out closing of the border. It further explains the Kenyan government’s inability to prevent the influx of refugees and their adoption of refugee camps for this “temporary” solution to the refugee crisis. There are wonderful descriptions of a people who displaced from their home, a home many of the youth interviewed throughout the book have no recollection of beyond the shared stories they have to recant to aid workers and to resettlement officers. As one interviewee succinctly put it, “Somalia is a foreign country to me, even though I am Somali. I know nothing of this place” (39) The chapter closes with the reader having one overarching thought: that for these Somalian refugees, Somalia is, while technically their home country, really a place that feels more like an unknown, violent, far off locale than home.

Chapter 2 explores Kakuma in its infancy and describes the manner in which Kakuma inhabitants made the camp bearable and dealt with the daily struggles of living in the camp. One interviewee’s account of Kakuma upon arrival sets the scene: “We came to Kakuma from camp Barawa...It was such a surprise when we arrived here. We were expecting high buildings. There was only grass, sand, dust, snakes, scorpions, and naked people. Those Turkana [an indigenous population to the area], we thought they were going to eat us...There were not even houses. We were supposed to build them. We slept under the tree for many nights. We just had to survive.” (49). Not only did the refugees have to build the camp themselves, they had to do so in the presence and alongside people from different countries who spoke different languages. The camp experienced a mass influx of people from a variety of countries and clans, which is a source of tension later explained in the book. Further, especially without the homes and security systems that were eventually developed after years of living in Kakuma, the camp was in its early stages a very violent place. As one interviewee made clear: life in Kakuma at this point was far from safe, in fact the fear experienced in Kakuma was similar to the fear experienced when living in Somalia. The one difference? “When someone attacked you in Somalia, you knew what they were saying as you spoke the same language. In Kakuma, you didn’t even know what the person was saying or why they were targeting you” (56).

Despite the violence and the inadequacy of Kakuma upon arrival, the Somalians in a lot of ways made the best of their locale: today they have a Somalian market, taxis for transportation, cybercafés, secondhand clothing stores, and butchers. People, especially those living in the main area of Kakuma, have cellphones, electricity, and often times televisions. In reading Chapter 2, it is almost unfathomable that the place described merely twenty years ago, where people had to sleep under trees and fear being eaten by the Turkana, is the quasi-city with a semi-legitimate economy described by the end of the chapter. Here Grayson does what she does best throughout the book: she lays out a realistic, raw look at Kakuma and perplexes the reader. After reading this chapter, and really the book as a whole, the reader does not know what to think of Kakuma. Is it dangerous and what we think of as a stereotypical refugee camp? Or is really just a makeshift city of sorts with its own economy and traditions and way of life? This tension between the expected and unexpected lasts throughout the book and is perhaps best captured in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 provides a raw account of what it’s like to grow up in Kakuma. As one student said in reference to Kakuma: “I [have] faced many problems here, but this was always my place,

my home.” (p. 71) A dominant focus of the chapter is the importance of education in the camp. In a place where time is at a standstill while hoping for resettlement, education provides the youth with a way to pass the days in an efficient and purposeful manner. One student described his devotion to receiving an education by stating: “I don’t want to go [to South Africa to find a job]. I want to learn. I don’t want a job without education. One day, people can rob you. Your mobile, your computer, they can be taken away. But if you are a lawyer, a doctor, no one can take your knowledge away. So I want to learn first, materialize my ambitions” (74-75). While education is held in high regard for many in the camp, a secondary education is far from guaranteed. The point at which one stops going to school is a pivotal moment in the life of a youth growing up in Kakuma, and as the chapter illustrates an important choice is to be made: does that person want to succumb to a life of idleness and absolute reliance on humanitarian and UNHCR support, or does that person want to try to obtain an incentive position in the camp? Incentive jobs are available, but as the chapter points out, the salary is despicable, especially compared to the vastly higher amount that Kenyans are paid for doing the same jobs within the camp. Because of this, many Somalis are unwilling to work in such positions, preferring to make nothing rather than work for the scant amount offered. The chapter ends with a short iteration of the impact of growing up in a refugee camp on personal relationships and marriage: much like life in general in Kakuma, personal relationships are hard to maintain as one’s hopes are constantly set on resettlement and life can uprooted at any moment.

In Chapter 4, Grayson explores what it means to be Somalian for refugees who live in Kenya and are surrounded by people from different clans and of different ethnicities. As she makes clear, Kakuma is an anomaly: its religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity is highly unusual. This “enforced proximity” (94) forces the refugees to learn to live in peace despite their differences, and forces everyone, be they Somalian, Sudanese, or Congolese, to interact with one another. Some recent developments have aided in creating a sense of community that transcends ethnic lines, particularly the recent camp Constitution. Grayson also explains intercultural friendship and union, but unfortunately does not delve far enough into personal accounts and provides scant individual stories during this section. This is one area of the book that would benefit from more personal accounts, rather than the characterization of how the author believes the refugees behaved and lived. Despite the differences between ethnic groups living in Kakuma and efforts to preserve individual cultures, Grayson does a good job of explaining the communal culture that has been created. As one interviewee aptly put it: “I just know Kakuma. It feels like one nationality to me” (p. 103).

Kakuma, despite having individuals who have spent their entire lives there, is in constant motion. Chapter 5 describes the movement of people into and out of the camp and the impact this has on the refugees who are permanent fixtures in Kakuma. It also describes that despite the fact that a relatively small population leave Kakuma for good each year, people within the camp are still well-connected with the rest of the world. This is in part due to the relationships that the refugees have with family, friends, and loved ones throughout the world, many of whom have been resettled themselves. This chapter helps to further defy the common stereotype of a refugee camp—these are not a people living in isolation, but rather individuals with connections around the world and many with hopes and dreams to explore life beyond Kakuma. Chapter 6 feels like a natural extension of Chapter 5, as it goes on to further describe the mistrust felt by the refugees who were promised the chance to resettle and were denied the opportunity to do so. For people who are stuck in Kakuma without the chance to resettle, they are left to live in a place where life around them is constantly in motion and people are fixated on resettlement, but without any hope

for resettlement themselves. Grayson informatively describes how this can lead to distrust and ill feelings towards aid workers and other refugees.

Chapter 7 is perhaps where *Children of the Camp* shines the most. The chapter focuses on self-representation and is an in-depth account of how refugees depict and see themselves. Here, the reader is called upon to abandon the title of “refugee”, and instead think of these people as individuals. It describes that refugees in the camp almost universally decline using the word “refugee” to describe themselves, as this is not a defining characteristic of themselves. As stated by Grayson, “the refugee” has become “a universal figure to which is attached a quasi-generic image of misery and suffering” (165). The refugees refuse to submit to this stereotypical representation of themselves. She also exposes a dangerous reality of life as a refugee: despite their hopes to be individuals and to overcome their position through strength, community, and education, “playing the vulnerability card is crucial to being assisted as a refugee” (171). Here, Grayson again sets up a juxtaposition that the reader is left to sort out for themselves: is the refugee an individual with their own ambitions and goals or are they individuals playing a role in order to maximize their chances at resettlement? Grayson seems to suggest that refugees would prefer to be individuals, but at times are forced to be vulnerable victims as well.

The book aptly ends with the refugees’ goals for the future, in Chapters 8 and 9, largely focusing on resettlement in America and Canada. Because resettlement is an unlikely reality for most, other options, such as returning to Somalia, are also explored. There seem to be mixed sentiments regarding the viability of such a return, with some outright refusing, and others considering the possibility if violence lessened. Grayson then shatters the illusion of the perfect life upon resettlement in Chapter 9 with reference to her interviews. One interviewee stated that “I always used to calm myself by thinking I’d go to the U.S. But here, it is permanent. I am no longer going somewhere else.” Grayson goes beyond resettlement and exposes the struggles of successful refugees, those who made it to safe countries of resettlement. One quote sums up the quandary in which most people find themselves: “At the end of the day, a refugee is always a refugee.” She concludes her book in Chapter 10 with an assertion that seems obvious, yet one that has not been heeded by most countries, that a refugee camp cannot be a permanent solution to displacement.

While the book does a fantastic job of providing a realistic view of the camp and exploring its habitants’ complex relationship with it, the reader is sometimes left with the desire for more personal, raw stories. Grayson has a tendency throughout the book to over-characterize aspects of life in the camp, when it would be much more beneficial to use the actual words and stories of the refugee themselves. Having conducted over 100 interviews and formed personal relationships with the students and interviewees, it seems that this would not be too much to ask. The book is also relatively short and the added personal stories would not add unnecessary length to the book. Upon finishing *Children of the Camp*, I wanted more details from the stories that were provided, particularly because of the relative dearth of information about the Somali population in Kakuma refugee camp.

While the occasional over characterization and lack of personal stories were drawbacks of the book, this was overcome by the fascinating juxtaposition that Grayson sets up throughout. She is constantly forcing the reader to reimagine and redefine who they think a refugee is and what it would be like to spend one’s entire life living in a refugee camp like Kakuma, as she mentions in the introduction: “Camps can be construed as places of confinement where freedom is restricted and where individuals are treated as victims” (7), which accords with the traditional view of refugee camps. But what Grayson does that is so thought-provoking and unique is that she doesn’t stop there, and instead challenges the reader’s perception of a refugee camp as a place of reinvention, community, and even a place that individuals feel is home. She goes on to call refugee camps

“spaces of (re)invention and (re)definition, connected to the world” (7). Perhaps this juxtaposition of what we think a refugee camp is, and what it is actually is, is best expressed in one of best moments in the book. In Chapter 7, entitled “Through Their Eyes,” Grayson depicts side-by-side two very different sets of images of similarly situated individuals: on one page are self and family portraits taken by her students in her photography class, on the other are photos used by the UNHCR to show the world what a refugee in a Kenyan camp looks like. The photos could not be any more different. The students’ photos are what you would expect of “normal” people posing for a photo: the people are posing, smiling, and laughing, wearing their best attire in a neatly-kept home. In the UNCHR photos, by contrast, the people look distraught, hungry, and scared. These people look like those we expect to see in a refugee camp. This side-by-side comparison of the photos is so interesting because it further challenges the reader to change their perceptions on what it means to be a refugee and to spend one’s entire life therein. Grayson is careful to pay significant respect to the fact that people in Kakuma are often distraught and hungry and scared, while still opening the reader’s eyes to the complexity of the camp and allowing the reader to develop their own understanding of what it means to create a home in a place that was never intended to be a home.

*Children of the Camp* left me wanting more in the best way possible: more personal accounts of life in Kakuma, more insight into how the inhabitants fostered a sense of home in the most unlikely of places, and most importantly, more effort paid to these individuals who have been more or less forgotten and forced to live in the most unstable and temporary of environments. Through writing the book, Grayson gave a voice to a group of people who have for almost all of their lives been voiceless. I highly recommend *Children of the Camp*.

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