

KIN AND COMMUNITY: TRADITION MAINTENANCE AND THE ECONOMIC
SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF REFUGEES IN A MIDWESTERN TOWN

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I dedicate my dissertation to all of my kin.

Words cannot express the gratitude I feel for their support, nor the love I have for them.

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ABSTRACT

The plight of international refugees has been a global concern since the establishment of the UNHCR after World War II. Since the United States accepts more refugees than any other nation, the resettlement process currently in effect has global ramifications. Further, since refugees are often incapable of securing their own passage out of their nation of origin, and getting resettled in the United States requires complicated logistics as well as significant funds, having a support system in place could be a major advantage in terms of getting refugees resettled and economically self-sufficient quickly. In order to assess the available support systems, namely kin and ethnic communities, I interviewed refugees about their traditions and recorded their personal journeys as refugees. I focused on whether they had a kin network already in place in the US and how that affected their ability to maintain traditions that could help them cope with their new life. Subjects such as marriage, religion, and interactions with Americans (especially government, co-workers, and the local aid organization) were especially significant since they are the mechanisms through which social bonds are established and support systems are built. I found that under the current US refugee policy, refugees are resettled in small groups that are scattered across the country. This leads to isolation and makes building a support system very difficult. Since the goal of US refugee policy is to get refugees economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible, and small groups don't aid in that process, I propose that refugees be resettled in communities sufficiently large to enable tradition maintenance and support system building, but not so large as to burden the local economy (since refugees often require public assistance when they arrive) nor to create insulated communities that hinder integration. The exact parameters for how large these communities should be will depend on the capacity of the local community and available resources.

Chapter 1 – Methodology and Study Population

1.1 Introduction

Imagine coming to a new country where you can't speak the language, have no knowledge of the culture, no money, no family, and no friends, and you will be completely on your own in six months. This is a terrifying prospect to any person in any country around the world. With no way of communicating effectively, and no support system, you are at the mercy of the resettlement agency, which is likely underfunded and swamped with requests and obligations, and thus unable to get you to where you need to be. No personal connections leave you alone and scared, and unfamiliar American routines make even the simplest chore, like going to the market, extremely challenging.

Now, imagine coming to a new country where you have family and friends waiting, where a job is secured until you can learn the language and get on your feet, and someone is there who can teach you how the system works. You still don't have much money of your own, nor do you have any real job skills, but this time there is someone who speaks your language to explain your duties and time to get acclimated. This may still be terrifying, but considerably less so for the presence of a support system. You can imagine that your chances of success are considerably greater!

In my dissertation I conducted and evaluated semi-structured interviews, conducted between June 2009 and October 2010, with 30 refugees from Burma/Myanmar, Iraq, Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo-Brazzaville, all of whom were resettled in and around a Midwestern town of approximately 100,000 residents. Refugee and Immigration Services (RIS), under the auspices of the Catholic Diocese of Jefferson City, Missouri, acted as the local resettlement agency. All but two informants arrived between 2007 and 2010; the two refugees that arrived before 2007 both came to the US from Rwanda in 1995, shortly after the Rwandan Genocide in 1994.

I was particularly interested in refugee experiences in navigating the international resettlement process, and the ways in which they seek to establish themselves within American culture. I found that the social networks of all of my informants were structured such that they were isolated and extremely reliant on the local resettlement agency. My analysis indicated that this isolation was due to a lack of kin living nearby, as well as an inability to maintain traditional behaviors within American culture. The combination of these two factors, along with their experiences with current US resettlement policy has created a process that is inefficient and decreases the likelihood that refugees will become economically self-sufficient in a timely manner. From the results of my research, I suggest that refugees be resettled with kin-groups, beyond just the nuclear family, sufficiently large to provide social and economic stability.

1.2 Study Methodology

1.2.1 Sampling

Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations, including the public library, the informant's apartment, restaurants, and outdoor spaces. This was necessary as my disability prevented me from accessing many of their apartments, and the public library is a well-known landmark that is familiar to all refugees. Initially I utilized a snowball technique originating with an African informant who is very well-known in the community and who has excellent English skills. When this avenue was exhausted, I asked a contact that worked for RIS to get me in contact with additional refugees that had adequate English skills to conduct the interview in English. Finally, through my volunteer work in an ESL class, I met a couple of my informants who agreed to interviews and who subsequently put me in contact with additional refugees.

I sought aid from the local resettlement agency because they had access to all of the refugees that they helped to resettle, as well as a number of secondary migrants (refugees who moved from their initial resettlement location to a new community). My contacts within the RIS also had knowledge of which individuals had adequate English skills to conduct interviews in English. Through these contacts, I was able to interview nearly all of my Iraqi informants as well as all of my informants from Myanmar. See table 1.1 for demographic information.

1.2.2 Interview Protocol

I used a semi-structured interview technique in order to ensure a high degree of consistency between informants but also to allow for more detailed information in areas where my informants had additional insight since the chances of being able to do follow-up interviews was low. Due to the length of the interview (anywhere between 50 minutes and two hours), and the extremely busy schedules of my informants, I knew it would be very difficult to set up multiple meetings. I created an interview guide so that all informants were asked the same lead questions with any follow-up questions necessary to clarify or expand upon the specific answer they provided. By utilizing a semi-structured technique I was able to get comparable data from all informants as well as candid stories and information related to their individual experiences.

The interview protocol focused on which traditions were consistently maintained and which traditions were readily lost or altered as refugees became acculturated. For my dissertation I defined a tradition as any behavior that was learned from an elder, entailing multiple generations of transmission. (For a more thorough discussion of this definition, see Chapter 4.) During the interview, this is the definition that I gave when my informants didn't understand the term; I also often gave the further explanation of something they learned from their parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc. I was fortunate that my first Iraqi informant was very fluent in English and wrote down the translated word for tradition in Arabic (عرف) so I could show future informants, which seemed to help immensely. From the nature of their responses, the translation was

accurate and indicated that my Iraqi informants understood the term as I was using it. After explaining what the word “tradition” meant, my other informants also gave responses that indicated that they understood the term as I was using it.

Since traditions are necessarily dependant on kin, I started by asking about the presence of family members in the United States to determine the size and nature of the kin network they had to rely on. Then I asked about their upbringing, including what traditions they learned as children that they thought were important and who, exactly, taught them these traditions. Then I narrowed the focus to traditions related to marriage and religion. The literature suggested (Cadge and Ecklund, 2007; Gardner and Grillo, 2002; Eck, 2001; Evans-Pritchard and Renteln, 1994; Krulfeld, 1994) that these were primary concerns and, since they are interwoven into nearly every aspect of life, the specific traditions that are retained would have the greatest impact on the lives of refugees. Finally, I asked about their country of origin, specifically about the political situation, why they left, and if there were any national holidays that they still observed.

Given the variation in English proficiency of my informants, there was certainly some clarification necessary on my part in relation to the questions on the interview protocol. I was sure to ask every informant the same questions; and I was sure to ask every informant all of the questions on the protocol. Where the variation in the interviews came from was the follow-up questions. This was where I felt it was necessary to elicit as much information as I could, especially when the informant began

talking about a subject that was particularly interesting or when telling me a part of their story that was particularly poignant.

1.2.3 Confounds

For the refugee population that I studied, snowball sampling was a good way to find the informants who had adequate English skills to interview, but is unlikely to be representative of all refugees. In the local community, where there are no enduring ethnic communities akin to Little Havana in Miami or Chinatown in San Francisco, I was able to isolate the effect of the resettlement agency independent of ties with a larger ethnic group. In the context of this study, it was desirable to separate these influences in order to understand how refugees resettled under the current policy, where refugees are intentionally dispersed, differ from those resettled in the past, where they were not intentionally dispersed and consequently settled in large communities. This is going to have a substantial effect on the nature of the interactions between refugees and their American neighbors as well as between the various groups of refugees. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 8. Also, given the possibility of secondary migration, there is no way to identify all of the current refugees in order to make a randomized sample.

Because of issues with English proficiency, I limited my informants to those who had, at least from a reference, adequate English skills. When this turned out to not be the case, I either found a convenient translator (often a young adult or child in the household) or obtained as much information as possible given the informants English

skills. In no case did I ever conduct an entirely translated interview, nor use information that was not clear in its conveyance (though sometimes I did have to resolve grammar issues in some quotes for clarity). All stories related herein are quoted as directly as possible, or paraphrased from statements made during the interviews. Informants are given pseudonyms throughout, with identifying information either omitted or modified to protect the identity of my informants.

1.3 Descriptive Statistics

Country of Origin	No. of Males	No. of Females	Ave. Age	Ethnic Affiliations
Burma/Myanmar	13	2	31.5	1 Burmese 4 Chin 10 Karenni
Iraq	7	1	32.5	2 Kurds 6 Arabs
Rwanda	1	1	31.9*	2 Tutsi
Congo	2	0		2 Congolese
Burundi	1	2		3 Tutsi

*African refugees combined

Demographically, my informants were from three main areas of the world. I interviewed 15 Burmese (two women and 13 men); though only one man was an ethnic Burmese (self-identified), all of my informants identified their country of origin as Burma/Myanmar. I also interviewed eight Iraqis (one woman and seven men), of which two of the men were Kurdish and the rest were Arab. My sample also included seven Africans, two from Rwanda (one woman and her nephew), two from Congo (both men), and three from Burundi (a married couple and a second woman).

1.3.1 Refugee Age Groups

The ages of my informants ranged from 19 to 55 with an average of 31.8 ± 9.7 . The average age for each demographic group, Burmese, Iraqi, and Central African was 31.5, 32.5, and 31.9, respectively. Thus, with respect to the age of my informants, my sample was consistent between demographic groups, and consisted mainly of young adults with only two individuals over 50 years of age. The average age of refugees entering the United States in 2010 was 24 years old, with those under 18 accounting for 35% of the incoming refugees. Refugees over the age of 55 accounted for nearly 8% of incoming refugees in 2010, leaving the 18-55 demographic, which comprised my total age range, representing 57% of incoming refugees to the United States in 2010 (Martin, 2011). (Note: The age statistics for 2008-2010 are nearly identical; see Martin 2011.) Since I did not have IRB permission to interview minors, my sample is skewed towards older refugees.

1.3.2 Refugee Gender

In total I conducted thirty (30) interviews with six female and twenty four male refugees. For 2010, 52.7% of incoming refugees to the US were male, and 47.3% were female with nearly identical numbers for 2008 and 2009 (Martin, 2011). My sample is skewed towards males because it proved very difficult to find female refugees that had both the time and English skills to conduct an interview. When I initially realized that my sample was skewed, I tried to find additional female informants, but was frequently told by any potential female informant that they didn't have time, or they were always busy,

or they didn't speak very good English; analysis of this issue from a cultural perspective is further discussed in Chapter 3. However, I suspect the last excuse was often used as an easy way to avoid doing an interview when they had more important things to do, or just didn't want to talk to me but couldn't just say no; and one that they knew I couldn't really object to.

However, my interviews with women turned out to be some of the best, most informative, interviews that I conducted. The women that opened up to me gave very personal information with a greater amount of detail and emotional impact than many of the men. While my male informants often gave me very straight-forward answers, I got some extraordinary information about the personal impacts of fleeing from their home country and integrating into American society from my female informants. In any future research in this area I will make a greater effort to speak with women, and perhaps employ a female translator as this may help to alleviate any tension that may exist.

1.3.3 Refugee Length of Time in the US

With regard to length of time that my informants had been in the United States, I divided them into four categories; 0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-3 years, and more than 3 years. I chose these categories to reflect what I perceived to be substantially different levels of economic and social self-sufficiency (including language proficiency). Due to the absence of extensive ethnic communities in my study area, refugees are almost forced to communicate with Americans on a daily basis to accomplish everyday tasks like

working or shopping. From my own observations, and discussions with individuals who have worked with refugees for many years, I discovered that at six months most refugees become somewhat comfortable with their new living situation, and that it takes about a year to gain adequate English proficiency to get by day-to-day, and after three years most refugees are comfortable getting around on their own and begin to explore the community on their own. Of my informants, five were in category one, 12 in category two, 10 in category three, and three in category four. Due to the timing of the various conflicts, and when my informants were admitted into the US, all of my Central African informants fell into the last two categories, including all three of my informants that had been in the US longer than three years. To see if there was any secondary migration, or if any refugees had moved away for an extended time, I also recorded whether or not any of my informants had spent any time elsewhere in the US since their initial resettlement, and only two of my African informants had left for any significant length of time.

Since the length of time that refugees can spend in refugee camps can vary greatly, and some refugees can spend significant amounts of time in neighboring nations as undocumented immigrants, I recorded the age at which my informants left their country of origin. The categories for this question were 0-18, 18-30, and 30+ years of age; chosen to reflect various life stages that could impact the amount of traditional information to which a given individual may have been exposed. I chose these groupings based on the UNHCR rule that individuals over 18 are treated as adults, and my own observations that individuals over 30 are often married and/or have children and

therefore have additional considerations beyond themselves that young single people do not. I found that six informants had left their home countries as minors, 16 had left as young adults, and eight had left as older adults.

1.3.4 Refugee Marital Status

According to Martin (2011), 56% of refugees admitted to the US in 2010 were single, 39% were married, and 5% were "other." In my sample, 21 (70%) were married, and 9 (30%) were single. While not stated explicitly, I suspect that Martin is reporting marital status for all refugees and thus his percentage of single refugees is much higher than mine due to the large percentage of juvenile refugees in his sample (35% of all refugees). Marital status, and how it impacts refugees' lives and tradition maintenance is discussed in Chapter 6.

1.3.5 Refugee Religious Affiliations

Additionally, as religion plays a significant role in the practice and maintenance of traditions (Palmer, 2010; Palmer et al., 2008; Steadman and Palmer, 2008; VanPool et al., 2008; Cadge and Ecklund, 2007; Franz, 2003; Krulfeld, 1994), I recorded the religious affiliations of my informants. VanPool (2008) identifies religion as a "metatradition," a tradition that facilitates the transmission of other traditions in general. Nineteen of my informants self-reported as Christian (the majority of Burmese and all Africans), three as Buddhist, six as Muslim, and two as Atheist/Agnostic. In Chapter 7, I discuss the details of not only the specific traditions associated with each religion but the length of time that my informants have identified as a member of each religion.

1.4 Interview Protocol

1.4.1 Kin

Given the importance of kin in every human culture around the world (Jones, 2010; Chakravarti, 2009; Palmer and Steadman, 1997; Chagnon, 1968; Fox, 1967), and the fact that refugees are often separated from their kin in the resettlement process, it seemed obvious to start by asking my informants about where their kin were located. I also suspected that asking about kin would be a generally benign way to get them to start talking. Indeed, I found that talking about their kin put many of my informants at ease. My goal was to assess the amount of contact that my informants had with their kin to see if that had an effect on the number, and kinds, of traditions that they sought to maintain. Specifically, I started by asking if any immediate family, defined as those individuals with only one degree of kin separation, currently lived in the United States; this includes parents, siblings, and children, and I asked about each one separately. My assumption was that they would have easy access to, and regularly communicate with, kin that lived in the US. I then expanded that question to any kin that lived elsewhere in the world besides their country of origin. Finally, I asked about any other kin, including immediate family, that still lived in their country of origin. Not only did I think this would be informative in respect to contact with their native culture, but also to assess the extent of their social network back home, and the likelihood that they would want to return to their country of origin in the future, if only temporarily to visit. I wanted to know about distant kin in order to understand how extensive the kin connections were

with refugees from different parts of the world, and to assess the importance of distant kin as they tend to be more important in more traditional countries than they are for most Americans. The extent of their perceived kin-group will also be important for advising policy on which individuals to resettle together.

1.4.2 General Traditions

After determining the current location of kin, I asked who taught them the traditions that they learned as a child. The responses fell into four categories: parents, grandparents, elders, and school. I then asked about any traditions that they could remember that were particularly important to them. Based on the responses I received, I divided them into six categories: respect (for others), cooking/food, language, lifestyle/occupation, family/kin, and religion. These categories were not mutually exclusive, since informants were allowed to give as many responses as they felt were important to them.

1.4.3 Marriage Traditions

Since marriage practices help determine kin relations, often involve strong proscriptions, and are a common topic in ethnographies, I asked my informants about their preferences related to marriage. I focused on their marriages to people from their own culture, as well as their preferences for their children's mates with respect to culture and religion. All responses were recorded as yes/no responses. I initially asked about the level of importance of their preferences, but after I found clear evidence that

many of my informants did not understand what I meant by “how important” I dismissed the responses as unreliable and was left simply with their yes/no answers.

1.4.4 Religious Traditions

After gathering basic data on religious affiliation, and length of time of their current affiliation, I then proceeded to ask them about any important religious traditions that they had. Their responses were divided into three non-exclusive categories: worship-related, social, and holidays. Finally, I asked about their preference for their children to also follow their religion.

Even though eight informants did not specify any religious traditions that were important, all but six indicated that they wanted their children to practice their religion. One of those six was an older Buddhist man with grown children, and a very relaxed demeanor, while the other five were Muslims or Atheist/Agnostics from Iraq. Discussed further in Chapter 7, the reason many of my Iraqi informants had no preference for their children to practice their religion may be because they themselves were young and not particularly devout.

1.4.5 National Traditions

A final specific area of traditions that I thought would be important was any national holidays that my informants still observed. I divided their responses into five non-exclusive categories: Independence Day, military-related, religious, worker-related, and secular. Nineteen informants said that their home country’s Independence Day was

an important national holiday, and one that they still observe. Nineteen informants also responded that religious holidays were important on the national level, even though the holiday may not be associated with their personal religion, such as a Buddhist informant saying that Christmas was important in Myanmar. Sixteen informants cited a secular holiday, such as a solstice festival or other social holiday, as important to them. Nine informants said that military-related holidays, similar to Memorial Day or Veteran's Day in the US, were important, while seven said that a worker-related holiday, like Labor Day in the US, was important to them. When asked if they wanted their children to know about these holidays, 20 informants said yes, five said no, and five did not respond.

1.4.6 Refugee Process

In order to understand the context in which my informants arrived in the US, why they left their home country, and if they had plans to go back, I asked them about their refugee experience. In their own words, I asked them to describe the political situation in their country, and then the reason that forced them to flee. The political situations in Myanmar, Iraq, and across Central Africa are discussed in Chapter 3. The reasons for leaving fell into four categories: persecution, fear of death, political conflict, and economic hardship. Even though the reason for economic hardship was related to persecution, I categorized them separately because my informants emphasized that their reason for leaving their country of origin was due to not having a way to make a living, and not from persecution per sé.

Next, I asked about the decision-making process. Specifically, who made the decision to leave the country of origin, if this was a permanent move or if they planned to return in the future, and how they made their way to the US, including navigating the international resettlement process. The responses for who made the decision to leave were divided into three categories: ego, spouse, and parents. The details of the international resettlement process are discussed in Chapter 2.

1.5 Chapter Overview

In chapter two I will discuss the process of resettlement in the US. I will cover how the UNHCR designates refugees, the definition of what makes someone a refugee, what a refugee endures in getting resettled and how US government policy affects the kind of aid a refugee can receive.

Chapter three will be a discussion of the cultures from which my informants came. I will discuss the conflicts that resulted in the displacement of my informants, including the reported causes of the conflicts both from reputable news sources as well as my informants (which may not be in agreement). This chapter will provide background on how some selected individuals have negotiated the resettlement process.

The importance of traditions will be the topic of chapter four. Here I will discuss the social importance of traditions as well as how traditions have functioned to shape human evolution. I will also discuss how traditions related to marriage, religion, and economics are generally important.

Chapter five will cover how the presence or absence of kin effects the traditions that refugees seek to maintain. I will discuss how traditions are treated by refugees when they have family present; and how the absence of family correlates with the presence or absence of other traditions.

Traditions related to marriage will be discussed in chapter six. The importance of marriage as a kin and alliance generating mechanism will be discussed along with how refugee marriage traditions are maintained and what the effects are of tradition loss.

Chapter seven covers the origin and function of religion and how religious traditions affect the resettlement process for refugees. This includes the effects of religious conversion, and how interactions with religious institutions in the US affect refugee religious activities.

How refugees negotiate their new surroundings, including Americans, is the subject of chapter eight. Issues related to respect for others, age, gender, and traditions surrounding how people should be treated will comprise the bulk of this chapter. A short discussion of how refugees from different cultures interact with each other will also be included.

Chapter nine will focus on economic opportunities and how refugees attempt to find jobs and begin to plan for their future. I will discuss how the resettlement process/tradition/social network interaction may or may not be making economic self-sufficiency more difficult for refugees. This includes a brief discussion of US refugee economic policy, refugee aid providers, and social networks for job finding.

In Chapter 10 I give some overall conclusions and offer my recommendations for some of the important issues discussed in previous chapters.

Chapter 2 – International and United States Refugee Policy

2.1 Introduction

After the soldiers came back for the third time demanding food, Mo decided he'd had enough. The threats to his family, constant demands for food, and now demands to work for the new government, work Mo knew he would not be paid for, had finally pushed him far enough. A normally soft-spoken young man, Mo is clearly distraught, and his animated gestures and raised voice show that this story is difficult to tell, but he says that it is important to know what was happening in Myanmar. That's when Mo decided to leave his home and head into the forest, and eventually the refugee camp in Thailand. Operated by the Thai government, but backed by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the refugee camps are crowded, dirty, and already worlds away from Mo's simple agrarian village in the Northeast corner of Myanmar. The journey from his village was fraught with danger. Capture by government soldiers meant at least a long prison sentence if not death, and capture by Thai soldiers meant getting sent back to Myanmar, likely with the same result. As Mo told me: "We only live in camp. We cannot go outside because police arrest us and send us back to Myanmar."

Yet while the trip to the refugee camp, and living therein, was very difficult, the selection and resettlement process presented a whole new set of challenges. Mo has been up to the task, but getting used to life in the United States has had its ups and

downs. This chapter will focus on the history of the UNHCR and how it deals with refugees around the world followed by a discussion of how US refugee policy interfaces with international policy, and how refugees are processed and resettled in the United States. I finish by illustrating how refugees navigate the resettlement process and some problems within the process with stories from my informants.

2.2 Refugee Experience in the United States

The resettlement process begins with the decision to leave one's country of origin. Often this decision is made with very little, if any, planning or forethought; when the soldiers are coming or the bullets are flying overhead, there isn't much time to gather belongings or get money to travel or help with resettlement. The refugee process often continues through contact with the UNHCR in a refugee camp. After a series of interviews and health screenings to determine eligibility for resettlement, a refugee (and his/her spouse and children) is resettled in a new community in the United States. While the process of resettlement may be completed at this point, the process of acculturation is just beginning. The majority of this dissertation focuses on the negotiation between the life they knew and the one they are quickly learning.

When it comes to ease of acculturation, and the ability to be economically self-sufficient, refugees, as opposed to economic immigrants, often lack the benefits of planning; they are often forced to leave with little notice and almost no time to accumulate any wealth to make the transition easier. They reach the US with only the clothes on their backs and are dependent upon service organizations for the basics right

from the start (Shandy, 2003). This creates a situation where economic self-sufficiency is much more difficult to attain. Refugees often lack any job training relevant to jobs they are likely to get in the host country and do not have the luxury of going to school for a number of years to get it. They are thus often forced into manual labor and the service industry positions where they make minimum wage (Haines, 1982; Shandy, 2007; Holtzman, 2008). The need to work, and the long hours that that work entails, makes it almost impossible for refugees to gain additional training to get a better job.

Sometimes, refugees can practice secondary migration and move to live with kin while getting training (Haines, 1996; Holtzman, 2008), thus not having to fully support oneself. However, this was not the case for any of my informants, and the literature suggests that this is not an option for the vast majority of refugees (Haines, 1982; Haines, 1985; Haines, 1996; Shandy, 2007), especially if they arrive in the first wave of refugees from their nation of origin.

This lack of a kin-based support network not only makes it very hard for refugees to succeed, but also puts enormous strain on local resettlement agencies to provide the extensive aid that refugees require (Haines, 1996). Many African and Asian refugees spend many years in refugee camps or hiding out in neighboring countries. In neither place can they expect to get the education or training that is necessary for success in America. Unlike many countries with public education systems, even learning English is not likely. For this reason, having support in the form of kin (which is the only likely source of aid besides the local resettlement agency) can be vital in quickly achieving economic self-sufficiency.

2.2.1 US Refugee Policy

Finding kin, however, is not always very easy. The federal government has an explicit practice of dispersing refugee populations so as not to create a large impact on any local economy with the influx of large numbers of refugees (Haines, 1982; Shandy, 2007). This policy was implemented in 1975 with the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (along with the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program that provided for domestic assistance) in the wake of the large influx of Cuban refugees in the 1960's that predominantly settled in Miami, FL (Haines, 1996). Thus, it has been the case for refugees arriving in the past 39 years, including all of my informants, to be dispersed across the US. This creates a situation in which refugees are initially isolated and forced to work in low-paying jobs. More recent refugees, like my informants, however, are increasingly able to stay in contact with relatives in their country of origin and thus can locate other family members that have also been resettled in the United States (Shandy, 2003; Holtzman, 2008). Many of these refugees subsequently move to be with relatives, called secondary migration, sometimes creating sizable ethnic communities that run counter to the desired resettlement goals of the federal government. As of 2011 (Ott, 2011), data on exactly how many refugees engaged in secondary migration was unavailable, but the practice has been identified as a significant issue and potential challenge to community organizations that aid refugees.

2.2.2 Economic Aid and Kin-groups

Looking at refugee vs. economic migrant groups can give some context to the potential benefits and drawbacks of having extensive kin-groups. The reliance on kin beyond the nuclear family is often considered a benefit to refugees, especially when many people in the same household are eligible for government assistance. This can be in stark contrast to economic immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants who cannot access government resources. This is the case for some undocumented immigrants from El Salvador. Cecilia Menjivar (1995) discusses what makes Salvadoreans unique in this matter compared to Mexican immigrants and to Vietnamese refugees. Essentially, they all have extended kin networks to help them adjust to American society. Additionally, Vietnamese refugees have access to government aid when resources are lean. This allows them to support kin that are temporarily unemployed, and alleviates conflict within the household due to economic concerns. Mexican immigrants, Menjivar (1995) claims, have a greater network of kin in the United States to rely on to find them jobs. Thus, even though they cannot get much aid from the US government, they have a more abundant supply of jobs available through kin networks than do Salvadoreans.

Additionally, ethnic communities often create mutual assistance organizations, such as those listed on the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) website, where resources are pooled for the benefit of group members, with the pooled funds rotating through the group (USDHHS, 2012b; Shandy, 2007; Dunnigan, 1982; Haines, 1982).

These associations can have different compositions, but are often coordinated or initiated by a core group of kin for the benefit of the kin group. Later, they may expand to include more distant kin or even non-kin who show allegiance to the association (Dunnigan, 1982).

These economic concerns are significantly affected by the kinship organization of the population. Some groups have a kinship structure that allows for flexible movement while maintaining ties to kin; others lack this flexible structure and thus suffer if they are separated from kin (Shandy, 2007). The traditions that are transmitted through kin, and dependent upon the kinship structure, reinforce cooperative behavior (Palmer and Steadman, 1997). The ability of refugee groups to successfully adapt to American culture thus hinges on the traditions and kinship structures that refugee groups maintain.

The structure and nature of kin-groups is closely linked with traditions surrounding marriage and religion. Changes to these traditions, as the case with East African groups no longer paying a brideprice will show (Chapter 6), can have a significant impact on the strength of kin bonds and thus the willingness of kin to provide assistance. Likewise, the adoption of the American concept of family as the nuclear family decreases the scope of relatives that can be relied upon for assistance. However, my Christian informants often told me that they received a great deal of aid from members of their new church; in one case a fellow parishioner gave my informant a car so he had reliable transportation to get to work. In some cases, religious organizations

can provide the kind of aid that has traditionally been provided by kin, although my informants expressed a clear preference for seeking aid from their kin when possible. I will discuss this further in Chapter 5.

Some refugees attempt to reconnect with distant kin through secondary migration, but the cost of moving can be prohibitive, especially when one has to leave behind a job and the assistance of the local resettlement organization (Shandy, 2007; Holtzman, 2008). More recent refugee groups are also often not able to handle the additional financial burden of caring for a newcomer who does not have access to aid from the local resettlement agency. So, while having a large kin-group can be beneficial when jobs/aid is available, Menjivar (1995) points out when discussing Mexican immigrants that when there is a very limited resource base, kin are the only possible sources of aid, and a lack of established kin or job prospects is the norm, a large family can be very stressful.

2.3 UNHCR History and International Refugee Policy

2.3.1 UNHCR History

The UNHCR was founded in 1950 with a three year mandate to aid European refugees from WWII. This mandate was later extended to the end of the decade; after Soviet forces put down the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the resulting outflow of Hungarian refugees made the UNHCR a necessary agency for refugee aid on an international scale. Further conflicts, with the innumerable refugees they have produced, have eliminated any doubt as to the need for the UNHCR. Since its founding,

the UNHCR has grown from a small department with only 34 staff members and a budget of \$300,000 to an international organization with over 7,500 staff members working in 126 different countries, and an annual budget of over \$3.59 billion (UNHCR.org, 2013).

There are currently over 33.9 million persons of concern to the UNHCR, including 10.5 million refugees. Conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, where my informants originated, account for approximately 1.6 million, 1.8 million, and 200,000 refugees, respectively (UNHCR.org, 2011).

2.3.2 Refugee Definition and Designation

Under the 1951 Convention, UNHCR defines a refugee as 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.org, 2011). Additionally, “**UNHCR recognizes as refugees** persons who are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and unable to return there owing to **serious** and **indiscriminate threats** to life, physical integrity or freedom resulting from **generalized violence** or **events seriously disturbing public order**” (UNHCR.org, 2011, emphasis in original).

There are also three exclusion clauses, such that individuals that meet the above criteria are not afforded the protections of refugee status. These three clauses “include persons who could be considered persecutors, having committed one or more of the following: a crime against peace, a war crime or a crime against humanity; a serious, non-political crime prior to admission in the asylum country; acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations” (UNHCR.org, 2011).

Functionally, this is a political definition, and has been largely used to designate refugees of oppression under political regimes. This definition has historically been used to aid people who have fled from an oppressive government that disclaimed their rights; that this addresses government persecution, and not individual or corporate, for example, makes it political. It is also problematic, as it is unclear what constitutes persecution: does it need to be directly life-threatening? does it need to be ongoing? and what about governments that are generally seen as friendly (or powerful)? (Haines, 1985)

To address these questions, it is informative to look at the process of how refugees are designated; and further to look at how refugees are selected for resettlement. The mission of the UNHCR “is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country” (UNHCR.org, 2011). These three options constitute the so-called “durable solutions.”

Of course, the only one of these solutions relevant to the current situation is the last one: resettlement; even if any of my informants decide to return to their country of origin, they have already gone through the process of resettlement and would not be returning under UNHCR supervision. UNHCR cannot guarantee admission to a resettlement country, and thus must abide by the admission criteria of the resettlement State. For example, Sam, an Iraqi informant, told me: “[You] must have a relative to go to Australia, but [you] can go to US alone.” To be considered for resettlement, an individual or family must be a refugee under the UNHCR definition, and must also fall under one of the following categories:

Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs of the refugee in the country of refuge (this includes a threat of *refoulement*);

Survivors of Torture and/or Violence, where repatriation or the conditions of asylum could result in further traumatization and/or heightened risk; or where appropriate treatment is not available;

Medical Needs, in particular life-saving treatment that is unavailable in the country of refuge;

Women and Girls at Risk, who have protection problems particular to their gender;

Family Reunification, when resettlement is the only means to reunite refugee family members who, owing to refugee flight or displacement, are separated by borders or entire continents;

Children and Adolescents at Risk, where a best interests determination supports resettlement;

Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions, which generally is relevant only when other solutions are not feasible in the foreseeable future, when resettlement can be used strategically, and/or when it can open possibilities for comprehensive solutions. (UNHCR.org, 2011)

2.3.3 Repatriation

With resettlement as only one option for a “durable solution” under UN policy, the prospect of returning to their home countries is an option for many refugees. In fact, voluntary repatriation “is considered the most beneficial solution” (UNHCR.org, 2011a, p.31). However, refugees in the US are granted permanent visas and are essentially treated like Americans, with the freedom to move around within the US, obtain employment legally, and receive social assistance such as Medicare and Social Security.

Even these basic rights are an improvement over what they experienced in their home countries and refugee camps. For this reason, about 75% of my informants said that they had no intention of returning to their country except to visit family and friends; and even going back to visit was often contingent on the political and/or

humanitarian problems improving. “When they have a democracy, I come back. No democracy I don’t want to go back,” is what Allen, a refugee from Myanmar, told me.

2.3.4 Refugee Perception of UNHCR Process

Given that most refugees are not literate in English, or have access to the internet, it is easy to imagine a person who is fleeing from their country of origin not having any clear idea of how to navigate the resettlement system. For the majority of my informants, especially those from Myanmar and Africa, it seemed as though they had arbitrary meetings with UNHCR officials, sometimes months or even years apart, underwent medical tests they were unfamiliar with, and then waited in suspense for a final decision, often not having any inclination of what that decision might be. Mo said, in regards to how he perceived the evaluation process: “If we don’t have any problem, and our health is clear, then they let us go [to the US].”

One of my eight Iraqi informants, John, was an entrepreneur in Iraq before the US invasion in 2003. With the newly installed government came cheap imported products that he could not compete with. He decided it would be better to sell his business and move to Jordan. He lived in Jordan for two years before applying for resettlement in 2007. It was another two years, with no work and only the profits from selling his house and business in Iraq for support, before he was told that he and his family had been approved for resettlement in the United States. The next month was a whirlwind of tests and paperwork. His entire family was examined by doctors, including submitting to blood tests, to check for diseases and general health. After the tests came

back negative he and his family left Jordan late in 2009. They flew from Amman to Frankfurt, Germany, then to Chicago, Memphis, and finally to the town where they were resettled.

A common critique of the UNHCR is how long it takes to get through the interview process. Virtually all of my African and Burmese informants waited in camps for two years or more, going through interviews and medical exams for themselves and their families. This process can be complicated (and extended) when a married couple is involved. Jane left a war-torn Burundi at 5 yrs old, escaping to Tanzania with her family. When they arrived they were placed in a refugee camp in the forest, where, she said, they displaced some pygmies who moved deeper into the jungle. She stayed in the camp for more than 12 years before coming to the US at 18. The refugee camp in Tanzania housed Rwandans, Congolese, and Burundi, all trying to survive on a small area of land since the Tanzanian government would not let them leave. The UN only had a supply station, but no significant outpost, so there was almost no protection, medical services, or support personnel to aid in the resettlement process. Since her husband's family filled out the forms, Jane was able to come to the US with her husband, but was forced to leave her own family in Tanzania. She told me that she and her husband had been registered as refugees for years, during which time they were interviewed and given a medical exam. However, once they were approved for resettlement in the US it only took 6 months to leave. During a two day trip, they flew out of Kibando, Tanzania to Kenya, then on to London, New York, Kansas City, and finally to their new home.

John's and Jane's stories are not isolated, and show how long it can take for refugees to be approved and resettled; this process often involves long waits between interviews, then a scramble to get everything together very quickly once they have been cleared to leave. These stories indicate that the refugees themselves don't understand the process and are kept in the dark as to their status, making any planning futile, and increasing their stress when they are forced to resettle very quickly. The UNHCR keeps their exact policy decisions hidden so refugees can't try to manipulate the system (Haines, 1985), but this lack of transparency makes it hard on the refugee.

2.4 Refugee Resettlement in the United States

2.4.1 Early US Refugee Policy

From its founding until 1948, the United States made no distinction between refugees and other immigrants, and thus they were subject to the same laws and admittance policies. This became an issue in the 1920's and 30's when increasingly strict immigration policy denied entrance to virtually all immigrants, including many Jews attempting to flee Nazi Germany just prior to WWII (Haines, 1996; Bockley, 1995; Breitman and Kraut, 1987). Recognition of the atrocities of the Holocaust, and of the denial of entrance to many Jews became the impetus for a change in immigration policy, especially in relation to refugees. And thus it was shortly after WWII that the US first separated refugees from general immigrants in terms of admission and assistance. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 and the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 set the precedent for US handling of refugees. Specifically:

“First, admissions were to be handled separately from general immigration; second, admissions focused almost entirely on political refugees from communism; and third, lacking any government program of domestic assistance for refugees after arrival, help to refugees in adjusting to American society necessarily came from the private sector.” (Haines, 1985: p.4)

While the first of these precedents continues (although admission of refugees is still counted towards the overall immigration quotas), the second precedent has shifted in response to the nature of conflicts around the world. The Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and Castro’s rise to power in Cuba two years later, led to the admission of large numbers of refugees fleeing communist controlled countries. Again in the late 70’s and early 80’s, refugees from the now communist countries in Southeast Asia came to American shores in large numbers and were offered resettlement as political refugees (Haines, 1996).

With The Refugee Act of 1980, the second of these three precedents, that refugees must be fleeing communism, was officially removed, and replaced by the United Nations definition of a refugee (Haines, 1996). Since then, the new policy has been demonstrated with the recent admissions of refugees from war-torn parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. That refugees from these parts of the world are not associated with communism, but with authoritarian governments indicates a shift in US political perspective more than a fundamental change in refugee policy. Past refugee admissions included large numbers of Soviet Jews, Eastern Europeans, Cubans, and Southeast Asians from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; all of which were fleeing communist governments which were antagonistic to the United States. The fall of the Soviet Union and a slowdown of the spread of communism, coupled with a rise in the

prominence of terrorism and a focus on the human rights abuses by military and authoritarian regimes has caused a rise in political refugees from these situations. The US, in following the lead of the UN, has responded by admitting refugees from places like Central Africa, Myanmar, and Iraq among others. Thus the trend of admitting refugees from countries with which the United States is politically opposed continues, even though those nations are not communist, but authoritarian (USDHHS, 2012c; Haines, 1996).

2.4.2 Current US Refugee Policy

“Title IV, chapter 2 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) contains the provisions of the Refugee Act” (USDHHS, 2012a). The Refugee Act of 1980 saw the consolidation and reallocation of authority for all previous refugee programs. This act “incorporated the UN definition of a refugee into US law, established a single program of post-arrival assistance for all refugee groups in the United States” (Haines, 1985, p.6), and made additional changes to government policy in the realms of management, resettlement goals, and admissions (Anker, 1984; Kennedy, 1981).

The Refugee Act of 1980 is the current law for refugee resettlement. This act, in addition to keeping the US in line with the UNHCR definition of a refugee, and removing the requirement that a refugee be from a Communist or Communist-controlled country, established the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services. The role of the ORR “is to fund and administer (refugee) programs of the Federal Government” (USDHHS, 2012a).

Section 411 footnotes of the INA outline some key provisions for the treatment of refugees and provide policy guidelines for how they are resettled and what kinds of resources should be made available. The following provisions and policies are particularly relevant to my research:

(1)(A)(i) - make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible.

(2)(C)(i) - insure that a refugee is not initially placed or resettled in an area highly impacted (as determined under regulations prescribed by the Director after consultation with such agencies and governments) by the presence of refugees or comparable populations unless the refugee has a spouse, parent, sibling, son, or daughter residing in that area.

Additional provisions include funding for English language classes, job-placement in a timely manner to promote economic self-sufficiency (although this interferes with potential additional education and English language proficiency), and equal funding and treatment of men and women (USDHHS, 2012a).

A final amendment to immigration law was included in the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act in 1988, which allowed for Amerasians from Vietnam fathered by US citizens (especially servicemen) to be covered under the refugee program and to emigrate to the US, along with their immediate families (Haines, 1996).

The Refugee Act also outlines how the ORR Director is to coordinate efforts with state and local agencies:

(2) (A) The Director and the Federal agency administering subsection (b)(1), shall consult regularly (not less often than quarterly) with State and local governments and private nonprofit voluntary agencies concerning the sponsorship process and the intended distribution of refugees among the States

and localities before their placement in those States and localities. (USDHHS, 2012a)

2.4.3 Role of States and Local Agencies

While the provisions of the Refugee Act of 1980 outline the legal status of refugees and set up the system for resettlement, the actual structure of refugee resettlement in the US is complex and decentralized; relying on interaction between the federal government and voluntary agencies, largely administered through state governments. The wide variety of voluntary agencies, which are almost necessarily contained within a single state, and often only oversee a region of that state, that are all vying for funding can create logistical nightmares.

The role of the federal government is primarily limited to issues of admission and resettlement, with the Department of State overseeing the foreign aspects, and the Department of Health and Human Services overseeing the domestic aspects, however, it is the Department of State that is responsible for administering grant money to the voluntary agencies (Haines, 1996; Haines, 1985).

The voluntary agencies include a wide variety of organizations, large and small, with varying amounts of resources and social perspectives. Many are religious organizations that rely on the contributions of their congregations to provide time, money, and material goods to the refugees that they agree to help; although these costs can be subsidized with money from state governments (Haines, 1996). In the area where I conducted my interviews, Refugee and Immigration Services (RIS), associated with the Catholic Diocese, is the primary provider of services and resources.

Additionally, many refugees get a great deal of assistance from members of local churches and citizen volunteers. For the first five months after resettlement, RIS pays for nearly all of their expenses including rent, utilities, food and clothing, and English language classes. Indeed, the literature suggests that many refugees are totally reliant upon these local organizations for even basic needs (Haines, 2010; Holtzman, 2008; Shandy, 2007; Haines, 1996). When I asked my informants who they would talk to about getting basic needs met they responded:

“I (would) go to Refugee Immigration Services. We go to them for everything.”

“Sometimes the church helps with clothes, school supplies.”

Between the federal government and the voluntary agencies are state and local governments. The primary responsibility of these entities is to act as liaison for funding between the federal government and the voluntary agencies. As the federal government does not directly fund social services, it is up to state and local governments to award contracts to voluntary agencies or to coordinate and administer these services themselves (Haines, 1985; Haines, 1996).

2.5 Complications Arising from Refugee Policy

There are a number of issues that complicate the resettlement process, both from the refugee’s standpoint, and the standpoint of the various governments and organizations involved. First, the very definition of refugee, being a political definition, is subject to the complex world of international politics. For the United States, and the UN,

economic oppression rarely gives rise to the kind of persecution necessary for refugee designation. This is why many Central and South Americans come to the US as immigrants, either legal or undocumented, rather than as refugees from a political system that has disenfranchised and oppressed them (Cuba being the major exception). This is further complicated by the fact that, as trade partners, the US is friendly with these governments. The US is unlikely to make the politically unsavory move of accepting citizens from favored trade partners as refugees knowing it is likely to sour relations. Likely, this happens around the world; so we are left with a political designation based on international political relationships, regardless of the actual oppression of the people involved. Haines (1985) sums this up nicely: "The application of the legal definition comes to reflect not the experiences of the applicant for refugee status, but rather the current realities of U.S. domestic or foreign policy" (Haines, 1985: p.11).

A second issue, after a refugee is accepted for resettlement, is the complex bureaucracy that they face in getting through the UNHCR office to the US and then to the specific city in which they are placed. This is due to both coordination between the UNHCR and US government in regards to numbers and other requirements for resettlement, and the fact that local organizations do the bulk of the funding via state allocation of federal funds. Haines (1985) also points to the fact that different federal offices are responsible for refugee resettlement efforts in the country of origin vs. on US soil. The State Department oversees the acceptance of refugees, while the INS oversees the funding of travel and resettlement in a community. Then the State Department is

again responsible for reimbursement of local organizations for some of the expense of actually resettling a refugee. This bureaucracy makes it nearly impossible to achieve a quick resettlement, and can even lead to family members getting separated, albeit temporarily. Joseph, a Congolese informant, was initially to be resettled in Seattle. However, after two years of interviews and medical tests for himself, his wife, and their six children, his eldest daughter came to the US first, and after landing in New York, was redirected to Missouri. He shared with me his telephone conversation with his distraught daughter after her arrival in Missouri, describing how he got out a map and coaxed his crying daughter to describe where she was so he could figure out her location and get the rest of the family to the same place. Over two months later, the rest of the family came to the US and was reunited with the eldest daughter.

A third issue is the promotion of economic self-sufficiency of refugees.

“Promoting refugee economic self-sufficiency was always the goal of the refugee program” (Haines, 1985: p.12). Instead of promoting the genesis of wealth, this goal has become seen mostly as decreasing the use of cash public assistance, unemployment, and medical aid. As discussed further in Chapter 9, without efforts in generating wealth, the reality is that getting refugees to just above the poverty line where they no longer qualify for assistance, yet aren’t financially stable, is seen as a success.

Finally, there is the issue of public perception of refugees and their use of public assistance. Given the recent economic recession, this issue is the same today as it was in the early 80’s. Economic recession raises concerns that refugees are taking jobs,

creating a burden on state and local services, and taking from social welfare programs at an escalated rate. However, “Refugees are too small a segment of the overall immigrant population to have large effects on a national level” (Haines, 1985: p.13). This topic will be addressed further in Chapter 9.

2.6 Conclusion

International refugees face a very long, arduous process when attempting to flee their country of origin and get resettled in a third country like the US. First, they have to go through numerous interviews to assess their situation and if they meet the UNHCR definition of a refugee; then there are additional medical tests that are necessary to get approval for resettlement. These interviews and tests can take years, during which refugees are forced to live in often over-crowded camps with few opportunities for earning money or acquiring job skills (Brees, 2008; Shinoda, 2004; Takeda, 2000).

Once they are granted admission to the US they are shuffled through state and local agencies according to which areas aren’t currently highly impacted by refugees (which almost necessarily limits the extent of the ethnic community for them to incorporate with and rely on). Then work is found for them as quickly as possible, but often not commensurate with their current job skills, and they are placed in English language classes. I couldn’t find specific rates of ESL (English as a Second Language) completion, but I know through my experience as a volunteer for ESL classes, that many refugees and immigrants stop taking classes because they are too busy working and

between work and family obligations just don't have the time to keep taking classes, even though those classes could lead to a better job in the future.

The Refugee Act of 1980 emphasizes economic self-sufficiency over social or cultural concerns, and only places refugees with immediate family members. This leads to a dependency on local agencies for both cultural knowledge about the US and job placement, things that immigrants often get help with from family and a larger ethnic community (Salaff and Greve, 2004; Stoloff et al., 1999; Wilson, 1998; Menjivar, 1995). By relying on larger family structures and ethnic communities, these immigrants have a larger network for finding employment, more time to learn English, and a safety net in cases of economic downturn. Therefore, it seems to me that refugee policy should be amended to better accommodate refugee family units and cultural concerns, which may also lead to an increase in economic self-sufficiency.

Chapter 3 – Reasons for Leaving: Strife and Conflict

3.1 Introduction

As a requirement for refugee status through the UNHCR, a refugee has to have a “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” (UNHCR, 1992). Functionally, this persecution is often the result of internal warfare or government persecution of a specific portion of the population which leads to this portion of the population fleeing their homes and seeking refuge in another country. Due to either threat of violence or imprisonment, individuals must avail themselves of the aid offered by the UNHCR at a refugee camp.

Understanding the circumstances surrounding the conflict or persecution is necessary to understanding the circumstances of the refugees, as well as the possibility that they may be able to return to their country of origin in the future. In this chapter I discuss the historical circumstances that have led to ethnic conflict in Myanmar/Burma and parts of Central Africa and generalized warfare in Iraq. The nature of the conflict determines the possible options for refugees, including where they can go and what resources are available for their emigration. I finish by discussing the perceived options that my informants thought they had for their lives and whether or not they thought they could return to their country of origin.

3.2 Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar/Burma

3.2.1 Demographics and Political History

There is currently an estimated 415,343 refugees fleeing from the military government in power in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, and 871,364 persons of concern (UNHCR.org, 2012); a government that had been reported as amongst the most corrupt governments in the world since 2003 (when Myanmar was first included in the study) by Transparency International (transparency.org, 2013). However, the reform elections of 2010 have caused many countries, including the US, Japan, and the EU to ease sanctions and increase foreign aid (CIA.gov, 2013; Oshima, Nojima, and Ito, 2012). Economically, Myanmar is a resource-rich country, but has suffered from mismanagement, a crumbling infrastructure, and pervasive corruption (CIA.gov, 2013). Once the second richest country in the region under British rule, subsequent bombing during WWII and later government mismanagement and nationalization of business caused a rapid decline in GDP (Tallentire, 2007). A brief history of Burmese politics is necessary to show how ethnic conflict has led to the current situation, and how this ethnic conflict has affected the lives of the 15 people that I interviewed from Myanmar.

As a short aside, when I asked my informants from Myanmar if there was a preference for what they called their home country, either Myanmar or Burma, all fifteen of them said it didn't matter, that they were the same thing. However, not surprisingly, the current government insists on calling the nation the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (and the capitol city, Yangon not Rangoon) saying, "Refusing to call a

nation by its proper official name may seem insignificant to some but generates resentment among a very high majority of the Myanmar population (Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, retrieved Nov. 29 2013). I did not get the impression that any of my informants were purposely referring to the nation as Burma as a sign of resistance to the current regime, but obviously they all have had a contentious relationship with government entities in Myanmar. Due to my informants' interchangeable usage of Burma and Myanmar, I use Burma and Myanmar interchangeably throughout my dissertation except when quoting specific sources.

Despite having a rich history of advanced early civilizations, including the Mon, Pyu, Nanzhao, and Pagan cultures, Burma is home to many agrarian ethnic groups, including the 135 "ethnic nationalities" recognized by the Burmese government (Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, retrieved Nov. 29 2013). The various kingdoms that controlled parts or all of modern-day Burma from 1044-1885 resulted in the movement of numerous groups and subsequently to the occupation of Burma by a large number of different ethnic groups, of which the Bamar are the most numerous, constituting roughly 70% of the current population (CIA.gov, 2013). All but one of my fifteen informants came from the less populous ethnic groups, including the Chin, Kachin, Kayah, and Karen. During British rule from 1886-1948, Burma was ruled, at first, as a part of the Indian Colony, and later as a separately administered colony.

Burma was largely devastated by both the British and Japanese during WWII, as it served as a major battle zone. While many Burmese fought for the Japanese, some

groups joined the British, and other groups switched sides at various points; as such, the various ethnic groups had different outcomes from the war. Specifically, the Karenni were granted independence by both the British and by the Burmese King Mindon in 1875. However, with the formation of an independent Union of Burma in 1947, the Karenni State was included, according to the Karenni people, by force. There was a concession in 1947 that granted the Karenni State the right to secede from the Union of Burma after ten years, but this has not been granted and has led to armed conflict ever since (www.karennihomeland.com, 2005). While not a standard question during the interviews, many of my Karenni informants talked about this during their interviews. As Mo told me during our interview:

“The most important thing is in 1875, a British (Viceroy) and (Burmese King) Mindon; the two come and sign this agreement, that Karenni is an independent state. Before, the British control (Burma), but not including Karenni, so they sign an agreement in 1875.”

Due to its proximity to Thailand, refugees from the area considered Karenni State often end up in Thai refugee camps where they are confined to the camp only, with threat of death or repatriation to Burma if they try to leave. As Seth, a young Karenni man, told me: “When we live in Thailand, we can’t go anywhere.” With nearly 180,000 refugees, these camps are a significant economic burden on Thailand, and five of my informants also told me of a clear desire by Thai officials to send them back to Burma or resettle them elsewhere.

Many other ethnic groups have been oppressed by the current military-led government of Myanmar, and have responded with protests, most notably the 8888

Uprising in 1988. This general pro-democracy uprising resulted in a harsh crackdown by the government and a coup d'état by General Saw Muang, forming the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which changed to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, and ruled until March 2011. During this time, Aung San Suu Kyi, a very prominent pro-democracy activist, and head of the major opposition party, the NLD, or National League for Democracy, was put under house arrest. She was finally released in November of 2010 after the reform elections (Lighton, 2010). Yet, despite this public show of openness and reform, only two of my informants expressed a desire to return to Myanmar (although this number rose to six of fifteen when I asked if they would return if the conflict were resolved and it would be safe to return).

3.2.2 Options for Refuge

Burmese refugees fleeing this government oppression have three primary paths out of the country; they can go east to Thailand, south to Malaysia, or west to India (going north to China was not even mentioned as an option by any of my 15 informants from Burma). For Ken, a middle-aged Bamar man, his flight from Myanmar began with his involvement in the 8888 Uprising. On his participation in the uprising, he told me: "Military government oppressed people. Then I stand against. They catch me. I lost my house. My mother also tired about this matter. She worry about me. I lose my business. They catch me. I run." "I help demonstration people. I give my car to this group." For my Karenni informants, by far the most common reason for those fleeing to Thailand was the forced labor practices by the government. Shane, a young Karenni man, told me: "If

they (Burmese government) call us and we don't go, they kill us." This sentiment was echoed by Brian: "They (soldiers) can do what they want, anything. What they don't want..." with the clear implication that deadly violence would be the result. Others, like Mo, a Karenni man who you may recall from the beginning of Chapter Two, fled due to government pilfering of food, namely rice, to the point that they could no longer feed themselves. For these informants, and other refugees from Eastern Myanmar, Thailand is the closest nation in which to seek refuge. This path, however, often involves surviving days or weeks in the forests along the border before finally reaching a camp. Once they arrive, the situation is not much better. Mo, in describing the conditions in Thailand, said: "We only live in camp. We cannot go outside because (Thai) police arrest us and send us back to Myanmar."

Other refugees flee south to Malaysia. For Susan, a Chin woman, her situation started much like Shane and Brian: "No pay (for forced labor), and if you no work, they shoot you." "I work for three months, no pay." At that point, she'd had enough. Forced to flee her home in Chin state with her small child, and without her husband, she spent nearly a month in squalid conditions with little food and no medical care. Riding in the back of trucks with other refugees, she fled to Mandalay and then to Dawei and Kawthaung in the southern tip of Burma. From there she took leaky boats to a small island, then through a small part of Thailand and eventually into Malaysia. Along the way, at least one baby died from starvation, and she became so sick that she needed intravenous fluids once she got to Malaysia. Eventually she was reunited with her

husband and resettled in the United States where she and her children are happy and healthy.

The third option for Burmese refugees is to flee to India. This was the path taken by Jane, and described in Chapter Two. Her efforts to educate her people about human rights earned her the wrath of the Myanmar government and forced her to flee to New Delhi, where she lived and worked for four years in adverse conditions before being resettled. Due to their refugee status, Burmese refugees are often treated poorly and do not enjoy any of the protections of citizenship. She said that sexual harassment was particularly bad in India for Burmese women. "Some women, they are raped by their boss."

Being forced to leave their homes with little time to prepare, and often leaving family behind, meant that when they arrived in the refugee camps they had no resources and were at the mercy of the host nation and the UNHCR. This lack of familiar kin ties, and the resources to purchase traditional goods has made it difficult for my informants to maintain their social networks and traditional behaviors. While all refugees from Myanmar had to flee their homeland, often through extremely difficult and potentially deadly paths, the same is not true of half of the eight Iraqi refugees that I interviewed.

3.3 War in Iraq

3.3.1 2003 Iraq War

On March 20, 2003, The United States led a coalition of nations in an attack on the sovereign nation of Iraq with the stated intention of stopping then President Saddam Hussein's construction and deployment of weapons of mass destruction. A program Saddam Hussein had supposedly pursued in violation of UN Resolution 687. No WMD's were ever found, and there is international controversy over the political reasoning and subsequent fallout of the invasion. After a short invasion period, the United States established the Coalition Provisional Authority. Power was transferred to the Iraqi Interim Government in June of 2004, and then to an elected government in October 2005. The United States formally withdrew the last of its troops on December 18th, 2011. As a result of US occupation, sectarian violence escalated between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, causing untold numbers of casualties, with an estimated 2.2 million people being displaced (including nearly 750,000 refugees both within and outside of Iraq) (UNHCR, 2013). It was due to both the initiation of combat in 2003, and the escalation in sectarian violence that my informants fled Iraq and sought refuge in the United States. Like Myanmar, a brief overview of the political history of Iraq is necessary to understand the conditions that have led to the recent war and the social circumstances of the Iraqi people.

3.3.2 Recent Iraq Political History

As with Burma, Iraq was a British protectorate from 1916 until 1932, and then re-established the Hashemite monarchy in 1941 after a series of coups. This time the monarchy lasted until 1958, when it was overthrown by another military coup. This pattern continued until 1968, when the Ba'ath Party took power under Ahmed Hasan Al-Bakir; finally Saddam Hussein gained the presidency in July of 1979. Through the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein, and his predominantly Sunni government maintained control. Throughout this time, the Iraqi government was accused of various and sundry crimes, including killing its own citizens and developing chemical weapons in violation of numerous UN Resolutions (CNN, 2002; Pincus and Smith, 2007).

Unlike Burma, however, Iraqis did not necessarily flee their own government, though that was certainly a concern. For all eight of my informants, the predominant reasons for seeking resettlement were religious persecution, especially from terrorist groups, and threats on their lives from people who did not like the fact that some Iraqis chose to work with the US troops, often as translators.

While all eight of my informants claimed that the Sunni/Shia division is unimportant, terrorist groups on both sides continually threaten the other, putting ordinary citizens in the middle. Between the Sunni-oriented al-Qaeda, and the Shia-oriented Jaysh al-Madhi, or Madhi Army, created by Muqtada al-Sadir, many of my informants found themselves essentially living in the wrong neighborhood at the wrong time. Add to that, that translators working with “the Americans” were targeted by both

groups, as well as people in the government for suspected spying, and it is easy to see that many people qualify as refugees under the UN definition with “serious and indiscriminate threats to life.” (UNHCR.org, 2011)

While these extremist religious groups are fighting for control of neighborhoods, cities, and, ultimately, the nation of Iraq, the ordinary citizens are caught in the middle. The threat to their lives gave them personal cause to seek resettlement, and many see the religious groups as an impediment to peace for the nation. Their conservative ideology, and us-or-them mentality make it very difficult for them to co-exist peacefully. As Clint, a young Iraqi man said, “In Iraq, you would not be acceptable socially if you don’t share their religion properly.” Adding, “They are born in a Muslim environment, in a Muslim family. They have some good things too. They are very emotional and sensitive. They think if you are not Muslim, if you don’t share their culture, you are against them. They have been taught like that.” Another informant, Sam, a middle-aged man said, “You know what I don’t like about this way of life. They make the religion their life and they tell you that they have a religion and it’s very important, but they do not hear anything from the religion. They tell you they do not lie, but they lie; they tell you do not thief, but they thief.”

There is also a big concern over corruption in the police force. This may be related to potential association with religious groups, or just the abuse of power in a nation in turmoil with little oversight of its police force. Sam described the formation of the police force thusly, “When they tried to make the police again, they bring 4000

people from the jail, and make them police. Political (prisoners), ok, because they have idea, but no, they thief, kidnap, kill, drugs.” Sam also told me that some corrupt police kidnapped his cousin, and even though they paid the ransom, his cousin was killed anyways. This contributes to a feeling that life after Saddam Hussein may not be much better. None of my informants said that they preferred his rule, but there was some order that is absent in Iraq today. Luke, a young Iraqi man, told me, “Situation, inside bad, before, ok, not good, but ok, now , bad, bad, bad. Everyday bomb, everyday some people kill some people. Nobody know who kill who. What’s the reason? Why?”

3.3.3 Fleeing Iraq and Life in America

Getting out of Iraq seemed to be an easier process than fleeing Burma. John, a young father of two, took a bus to Jordan, where he and his family lived for close to three years, hoping the war would be over quickly and they could go back once order was restored and the violence suppressed. Since there was no work to be found in Jordan, he was forced to live off the money he earned from selling his textile business. Another informant, Sam, worked with the US Army National Guard building computer and communications facilities and setting up computer networks near Baghdad. One day he got a letter threatening his life. When he didn’t quit, he got a second letter that said “If you don’t stop working with the American Army...” with a bullet. After that he changed his routine, driving routes, and where he stayed. Then one day when he took his daughter to school, he got shot at in a drive-by. He told his supervisor with the US army what happened then left everything and took a bus to Syria. In Syria, due to anti-

immigrant laws, and cultural biases, he could not find work for 2 years. Finally, he found a job working in a hospital answering phones. After a number of months, he was promoted to night manager where he worked 18 hours a day, nearly every day for 2 years. The job didn't pay nearly well enough, only about \$425/mo, which isn't much with rent being \$300/mo. Sam finally applied through the IOM (International Organization for Migration) in Syria and was resettled in the US. He is currently trying to get approval for his parents to join him.

For the translators working alongside American troops, the situation was a bit different. If they were identified by a terrorist group, or received death threats and reported them to their superiors with the US Army, they could apply directly to the US government for resettlement under the Special Immigrant Visa program for Iraqi translators/interpreters who worked with the Coalition forces (U.S. Department of State, 2014). This decision was made by the USCIS, and often took mere months to approve and get the translators to the US. From there, they were assigned to a local refugee aid organization and received the same help as any other refugee.

Compared to modern Americans, Iraqis are more family-oriented, which has made the transition to American life very difficult for many of my informants who had to flee alone. Steve, a former translator, said, "The core is the family." This sentiment was repeated numerous times during the course of my interviews. Further, four of my informants were young males working as translators with the United States led military forces and felt that they were abandoning their responsibilities by coming to the United

States. “Usually when parents get old they go live with the boy. They stay with the son, or the son will stay with them,” said Steve. Further, the lack of family, specifically brothers, in their new cities makes it difficult to create a support system. Jeremy, another young linguist who worked with the US Army National Guard, told me, “Back in my country, the first one you go to is your brother, and then your friend, and after that to your parents. You don’t go to your parents first.”

Then, when they do get to the US and find a job, they are met with prejudice and intolerance by people who think they are all terrorists or religious zealots (Takeda, 2000; Kaslow and Moffett, 1995). On a local scale, one of my informants, Steve, who found work at a local Wal-Mart was asked by a colleague if he was Muslim. When he said that he was, he was then asked if it was acceptable to throw shoes at a leader. He was very offended by this inappropriate question and quit his job over it.

As with the refugees from Burma, the isolation from kin, and lack of resources has made maintaining support networks and traditional practices difficult for Iraqi refugees. While all of my Iraqi informants had some college education or specialized job-training, the same cannot be said for my African informants. Even though their skills haven’t led to equivalent jobs in the US, and economic security, my Iraqi informants at least had a place to start when searching for employment. The duration of the civil unrest in Central Africa has meant that refugees often spend many years in refugee camps where education is minimal and job skills are virtually non-existent.

3.4 Civil Unrest in Central Africa

3.4.1 Political History of Rwanda/Burundi

The tumultuous history of Africa, especially in the aftermath of European colonialism, has been fraught with war and violence. Much of this stems from the forced integration of ethnic groups; the violence between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi being a tragic example. The history of these two nations is closely linked, as both were under Belgian control until their independence in 1962. Five of my seven African informants were Tutsi from these countries, though most had spent considerable time in refugee camps in Tanzania.

Initially part of German East Africa, the combined territory of Ruanda-Urundi was ceded to Belgium after Germany's defeat in World War I. It continued to be under Belgian control as a UN Trust Territory from 1916 until 1959 when the Rwandan Revolution caused tensions to increase and Burundi's ruler, Mwami Mwambutsa IV, to request a separation of Ruanda-Urundi from the Belgian Minister of Colonies. Both countries gained their independence in 1962, though that seemed to change little in the way of ethnic conflict between the majority Hutu, and the historically politically dominant Tutsi. The third largest group, the forest-dwelling Twa pygmies, were caught in the middle.

In Rwanda, Tutsi groups continued to mount attacks from their bases in neighboring countries, culminating in the 1990 invasion by the Rwandan Patriotic Front

(RPF) that led to the Rwandan Civil War. The civil war officially ended in 1993 with the Arusha Accords, but tensions remained high.

On April 6, 1994 President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane was shot down near the Kigali airport. This served as the flashpoint for the Rwandan Genocide. The next 100 days saw the deaths of an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu. After the initial attacks on Tutsi, the RPF went back on the offensive and eventually retook control of Rwanda. With Tutsi back in power, nearly two million Hutu fled the country for fear of reprisals. It was during this time that my informants left Rwanda, fleeing to Tanzania.

This period in Burundi's history is similarly tumultuous, being very closely linked to Rwanda. Political strife between Hutu and Tutsi was commonplace, with numerous attempted, and some successful, coups and ruthless suppression of rival groups by the police and military. Two major genocide events, the 1972 reprisals against Hutu groups by the Tutsi-led military and the 1993 killing of Tutsi by Hutu citizens following the death of Hutu President Cyprien Ntaryamira in the same crash that killed the Rwandan President, have resulted in over 550,000 deaths. Due to the long history of coups and rebellions when a leader of the opposing ethnic group took power, my informants from Burundi had varying lengths of time as refugees in different countries, but mostly Tanzania and Congo. One young woman had spent her entire life, some 20 years, in refugee camps in Tanzania; and even though she is from Burundi, she claims Tanzania as her home and would like to go back and live there someday with her boyfriend whom she met in the refugee camp.

3.4.2 Fleeing the Genocide

One informant, Megan, told me of her flight from her home in Rwanda. On her way to Tanzania, she was forced to pass through numerous roadblocks, attempting to hide her Tutsi heritage by speaking Kongolese.

“I’m gonna die. Let me try this. If they kill me I’m dead. I was nervous but I’ll do it anyways. Like calling me, I’m like, ‘What are they saying?’ I ask my friend. Tell me, ‘what are they saying? I know the language; I know everything but not saying it. This was at the roadblocks. Roadblocks every one mile, not even one mile. They have machetes, and killing people. They can be killing somebody and you are coming by and you are trying to hide who you are.”

Megan told me that she was dressed like a woman from Congo, where she spent much of her childhood in a refugee camp before going back to Rwanda to get married and start a family.

Walking with her sister-in-law’s boyfriend, they approached another roadblock.

“They are killing Tutsi. The people they are killing right now are people I know. People that are over here on the ground, I know them. I know them! They are in my neighborhood, they are people we eat with, and they are killed. I can see the body and I’m coming now telling them that I’m not a Rwandan. And when I’m speaking, I’m speaking this language (Kongolese); and they call me to come and I’m like, ‘What did they say?’ I don’t know how I did it. Sometimes I think about it and I shake. I’ll be just trembling. I will cry, 15 years after. I’ll be like, ‘Whoo, I did that!’ Chills! You know. I know that they killed my mother, they killed my brothers. My mother came to visit from Congo, they killed her. So, they killed my brothers, my sister. And over here, what am I waiting for? Even to getting out of the first hiding place, I’m like ‘Anyway, they are going to kill me. Let me just go and be dead.’ You are tired, in your brain; waiting for that day, and that minute, and that second. And you are like, ‘It’s about time.’ You don’t even know if you will live, you know. Everything that pass through, I was dead. I was like, ‘I’m going to die today. I’m not going to pass this minute.’ People are screaming over there. ‘OH! Next is me.’ You know, there is no hope! And you are there, and at the end of it, you are there alive; with your arms. People don’t have arms, they cut their arms off, their legs off. You have your two arms, your two legs, your

two feet, your ten fingers. And I'm like, 'God, how did you do this?' For me, even being here in this world, Chet, I'm telling you, I don't see me as a big thing. That's why I do what I do. I'm like, 'God, use me!'"

Her nephew, Tracy, had a similarly tragic story. This young man was born in Rwanda, but left for Kongo at a very young age after his mother died and his father thought it best for him to live with his grandparents. In Kongo, his grandfather died, and his grandmother was left to raise him on her own. Even though he was in a different country, the ethnic conflict followed him. His best friend in Kongo was Hutu, but after the genocide in Rwanda started their friendship fell apart. Then he found out his father was sick, and in a Rwandan hospital. His grandmother went to visit, and was killed, as was his father. With no family left, he thought about going back to Rwanda, but friends warned him against it. "If you go, they will take you out of the car, look at your face, and they will kill you." In the end he decided to go to a refugee camp in Kenya. Luckily he was only there for nine months before his aunt found him and brought him to the US. Despite the tragedy in his life, I was amazed at his optimism. He has plans to get a commercial driver's license and even wants to go back to Rwanda to find a wife!

Stories like this, while stunning and tragic to Western ears, are not uncommon. Almost all of my African informants shared some story where they were shot at, or threatened at gunpoint, or had to fake out soldiers or police officers to escape their country or get to a refugee camp that may be many miles away through hostile territory. Often the result of this kind of personal "miracle," as Megan's quote alludes to at the end, is a strong faith in God. While this topic will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7, it is worth noting that, for many refugees, converting to Christianity has had a

major impact on their lives. While certainly not a criteria for resettlement, being Christian makes the process smoother as refugees are often aided by Christian organizations as well as members of their new church when they arrive in their new community.

3.4.3 Civil War in the Congo

The Burundi and Rwandan refugees that fled to Congo-Kinshasa/Zaire/DRC found themselves in another volatile situation, especially during the reign of Mobutu Sese Seko, as this African nation struggled with numerous civil wars and political and rebel groups vying for power. The situation in Congo-Brazzaville, while also plagued by coups and assassinations between rival political groups, was somewhat more peaceful. After being granted independence from France in 1960, political leaders aligned themselves with communist governments around the world. For the next 50 years, Congo-Brazzaville was led by a series of socialist regimes. My informants from Congo-Brazzaville both fled to Gabon around 1998 after then-current President Pascal Lissouba and former President Sassou Nguesso destroyed much of Brazzaville in a struggle for political power.

Andrew, then only 23 years old, trained as a welder in Gabon, but could only find work at a textbook warehouse upon his arrival in the US in 2007. Due to his young age, his children were still quite young when they came to the US. As a result, they have lost much of their knowledge of African traditions, including their language.

My other Congolese informant, Joseph, was a local political consultant under Lissouba, and had to flee when Lissouba was deposed in 1997. Joseph also fled to Gabon where he and his family lived for nine years before coming to the US in early 2007.

When asked if he wanted to return to Congo-Brazzaville, he replied:

“No, I stay here! Africa is good, but government and President is very bad. All the money is for President, for family of President, for government, but the people (are) very poor. I give you example; roads are so bad you can only make 100 kilometers in one day, very bad! Bad schools, bad roads, everything is bad.”

3.5 Conclusions

While each person I talked to had a unique story of their experience as a refugee, understanding the political situation, both its historical development and modern form, gives us a broad base for understanding the circumstances that cause the war, strife, and corruption that prompts people to flee their homes. These refugees, often separated from their families and way of life, become economically dependent upon the UNHCR, the host nation, and finally local aid organizations for their well-being. Additionally, the mental and emotional toll that the refugee experience exacts makes these cases of war and oppression a true humanitarian issue.

A common theme that I heard from my informants from Africa, Myanmar, and Iraq for why they left was that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time; maybe they belonged to the wrong ethnic group or the wrong religion, but they found themselves caught in the crossfire or intimidated by various factions involved in the conflict. Rarely were they active participants in the conflict (none admitted to being involved in any active fighting), but circumstances forced them to flee nevertheless.

None of my informants was able to keep any kin-group beyond immediate family intact through the refugee process, yet nearly all expressed a desire to be in contact with their extended kin. This represents numerous potential issues related to their success in resettlement. The biggest difference between the groups I interviewed was that the Iraqi refugees didn't spend very much time, if any, in a refugee camp. Additionally, being from a modern nation, they had some job skills that could potentially transfer to the US job market. This gives them a potential advantage after resettlement, which I will discuss in Chapter 9 on economic issues in the US.

Due to the harrowing circumstances surrounding how refugees are forced to flee their homes, families get separated and support networks are destroyed. The kinship ties that provide this support, both emotionally/socially and economically, are important for the well-being of these refugees. The fact that so many refugees try to get approval for family members to join them clearly shows the importance of kin. It is my conclusion that, contrary to current refugee resettlement practices, efforts should be made to keep kin networks intact to a greater extent than they are today.

Further, these kin networks provide the cultural structure that humans have relied upon and been imbedded in for a very long time. The traditions of a culture provide a framework for social behavior, without which it can be very difficult to navigate the social landscape. A very common theme amongst all of my informants was not knowing how things worked in the US, from shopping to dealing with police to finding work and dealing with their boss, and how not knowing these things led to

misunderstandings and hardship. Traditions are, therefore, vital for giving refugees a framework for their social behavior. Certainly, they will be forced to adjust to American culture, but in order to facilitate rapid economic self-sufficiency and mental and emotional well-being, a more intact traditional social environment will be immensely helpful. This discussion of traditions and their importance is the subject of Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 –Traditions and Why They Matter

4.1 Introduction

One of the most unique aspects of the human species is our capacity for culture, or shared social behavior. Scholars debate the presence and extent of culture in other species such as chimpanzees (Tomasello, 1994), dolphins (Krutzen et al., 2005; Herman, 2002), orcas (Whitehead et al., 2004), and elephants (Chevalier-Skolnikoff and Liska, 1993); and theories on how human culture originated are varied and debatable, but at the core of the issue is how culture is transferred to other individuals. The evolution of language and recognition of kin ties were certainly vital components, but these were only tools through which traditions were passed down from parents to children (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982) or ancestors to descendants (Steadman and Palmer, 2008), known as vertical transmission, or from “nonparental individuals of the parent generation to members of the filial generation”, referred to as oblique transmission (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982, pg. 20). For my dissertation I consider traditions to be cultural behaviors transmitted down through at least two generations either vertically or obliquely.

The use of culture has allowed humans to expand into nearly every corner of the globe. Through the transmission of traditions, humans have been able to transfer the knowledge necessary for success in any environment, providing continuity for easy adaptation, relative to generating the knowledge needed for survival and reproduction anew each generation. Thus, culture serves as a pseudo-evolutionary process, enabling

humans to swiftly adapt, behaviorally, to their environment, and the transfer of this knowledge as traditions serves to maintain it in the minds of the originating individual and his/her posterity. Culture, and traditions, however, are not immutable, and thus can change as new innovation allows for (ideally) improved adaptation to an ever-changing physical and social environment. The mechanisms for this change, as related to refugees, will constitute a significant part of this chapter, of which the bulk will be dedicated to the role of traditions in maintaining continuity in the lives of my informants.

4.2 Origins of Traditions

“We must follow the older people.” “Tradition is good.” “We learn everything from our parents.” These are just a few of the things my informants told me when I started asking them about traditions. It’s undeniable that traditions play a significant role in the transfer of cultural information through time. Many of the classic early ethnographies, typically focusing on small-scale hunter-gatherer and horticultural cultures, repeatedly describe elders teaching traditions to the young (Malinowski, 1978; Mead, 1928), as did some later ethnographies (Chagnon, 1968). In environments with little environmental change between generations, it makes sense that children should copy their parents as this increased the likelihood of success and decreased the costs of discovering new methods for performing necessary tasks.

As an evolutionary strategy, copying a previously successful strategy is beneficial when the environment for which that method is adapted remains essentially

unchanged. For humans, this involves not only the physical environment but the social environment as well, as the dominant selective pressures come from other humans. At some point in our past, the selective pressures exerted by our fellow humans, in the form of social interaction and competition, overcame all other environmental pressures. Richard Alexander coined this high intraspecific selection pressure, ecological dominance and social competition (Alexander, 1990).

Two main sources that empower human traditions, and separate them from anything chimpanzees or any other animal may have, are ancestor worship (Steadman and Palmer, 2008) and the “axiom of kinship amity” (Fortes, 1969, pg. 232). At some point in our evolutionary history, humans widened their kinship circles beyond what simple kin-selection theory could explain, as “unlike non-human species, humans universally identify and exhibit nepotistic altruism toward kin beyond the range of first cousins” (Palmer and Steadman, 1997, pg. 39). This was likely due to the extension of parental influence through multiple generations (Palmer and Steadman, 1997). As parents benefit genetically by influencing their children to cooperate with each other, grandparents would benefit evolutionarily by having this cooperation extend to first cousins, as these would be all of their descendents, and thus would increase the fitness, or genetic contribution in future generations, of the grandparents. When this pattern is extended through time, assuming decreasing levels of influence with each generation removed, we get a pattern of cooperation between kin that decreases with genetic distance (Palmer and Steadman, 1997). Sahlins defined this hierarchy of cooperation based on relatedness as “segmentary sociability” (1961, pg. 331).

As the influence of ancestors becomes increasingly removed, the creation of ancestor cults became a means of maintaining this large related social group.

“By encouraging respect for ancestors, ancestor cults promote both respect for living kinsmen and the transmission of traditions between them... By requiring cooperation, ancestor worship rituals thereby encourage cooperation among the participants, who are codescendants of one another.” (Steadman and Palmer, 2008, pg. 57)

By claiming to still be influenced by this ancestor to cooperate with each other, individuals could maintain a larger pool of allies who they could call on for assistance in times of need. This would increase their fitness and lead to further cooperation between even more distant relatives. Continue this practice for many generations and you could get something that looks like Nuer kinship where each individual can go back nine generations to find a common ancestor, thus expanding their ability to get help even from very distant kin (Evans-Pritchard, 1951).

By claiming influence from a dead ancestor, people have a reason to cooperate, and in ever-widening circles. This leads to the transmission of traditions from ancestors to descendants; and after relatively few generations these traditions could be passed to a great number of people, however, traditions are powerful in their ability to be passed on with high fidelity to potentially infinite generations thus reaching vast numbers of descendants even with average fitness of the individuals in each generation. Through traditional knowledge of how to cope with the environment, especially other people, and an expansive network of kin to aid in that endeavor, those people who were adept at kin recognition and kin manipulation had a distinct advantage over those who weren't.

4.3 Traditions

4.3.1 Traditions and Kinship

Those traditions related to kin recognition, and strengthening the bonds between kin, are integral to the evolutionary success of humans. Coalitions, and the “social brain” that evolved to navigate them, are what makes some people evolutionary successful, and others not. The primary source of allies in human evolutionary history has been kin, of varying degrees of relatedness; therefore it’s no wonder that kin are seen as particularly important. Even the best of friends takes a back seat to kin, as Burch (1975) illustrated with his description of kin vs. friend/partner relationships amongst the Inuit. “But even the strongest non-kin tie was considered weaker than the weakest kin relationship.” (p.198)

Kin are also important in enforcing traditions, and helping to maintain them in others. In a social environment where one is surrounded predominantly by kin, traditions are ubiquitous. As Chad, a Chin refugee from Myanmar put it; “We live in Chin state. All people is Chin, so (there) is no need to teach (traditions).” Thus when someone ends up in a new environment where they have no kin in close proximity, like most refugees, traditions are not easily maintained, nor is there a ready group of people upon which to rely. This lack of an integral part of an individual’s support network leads to the loss of traditions (as discussed in Chapter 5) as well as potential emotional trauma (Heptinstall et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2002; Beiser and Hou, 2001). Specifically, the lack of relatives from preceding generations makes maintaining traditions in their absence

difficult. As the receptacles of the most traditional knowledge, a lack of elders not only results in tradition loss but also a weakening of the kin bonds that they would otherwise be encouraged. Two important areas that elders have had significant influence throughout human history have been marriage and religion.

4.3.2 Traditions and Marriage

When it comes to marriage, it is often the parents that arrange marriage for their children, or at least give their blessing to the union (Buunk et al., 2010). Since marriage creates new social bonds between families, and ideally leads to offspring directly related to both families, it is an important component for maintaining traditions. Marriage traditions, especially those related to wealth exchange, like dowry and brideprice, are particularly important in cementing the bond between the families involved (Pamporov, 2007), but can become problematic for refugees who are economically stressed when divorce rates increase (Dunnigan, 1982).

When traditions related to marriage break down, there is a resultant decrease in the strength of these social bonds. Not only the social bonds between the families of the former spouses, but potentially those between parent and child decrease. For refugees, these may be some of the most important bonds they have in the US.

4.3.3 Traditions and Religion

The transmission of religious traditions is an integral part of all cultures, especially as they relate to ancestors (Steadman and Palmer, 2008). When ancestor

worship is the core of religious practice, it is difficult to separate religious tradition from other traditions since both originate from ancestors. Discussed further in Chapter 7, religious traditions also act as meta-traditions (VanPool et al., 2008), providing a vehicle for other traditions to be transmitted. Thus, when refugees convert to a new religion, other traditions can be either lost completely, or weaken significantly.

However, the social bonds that are formed within the new religion can be very valuable. These social bonds, modeled on kin relationships, can be very important sources of support for refugees, both social and financial. Figuring out the importance of the different traditions and the effects of the transition between religions is difficult, and losing traditions can have unforeseen impacts on the social bonds within refugee groups.

4.3.4 Traditions and Economic Advancement

The social bonds that traditions create and maintain can have a huge effect on the ability of a refugee to find and maintain employment, and then to leave a legacy. For other immigrant groups it is often other members of their ethnic group that help them find initial employment, and who offer assistance in times of need (Menjivar, 1995). From the axiom of kinship amity (Fortes, 1969) stems the proscription to aid kin, but when kin are spread throughout the country, this proscription is hard to follow. Even if this concept is extended to include people from the same ethnic group, who often assume a common descent (Palmer et al., 2012), the potential people to call on for help may still be quite small. In my study area there was an estimated 1500 refugees, but the

communities of recent refugees were no larger than a couple hundred people (Diocese employee, personal communication). By not having this community to rely on, the refugees in my sample had to find their own employment (although with help from the local aid organization), and create their own social bonds to advance economically. I discuss the difficulty in doing this, as well as potential factors that may serve to make economic gain easier in Chapter 8.

4.4 Disruption of Traditions

4.4.1 Breaking Tradition

Since human sociality is very flexible, and any given individual only shares a subset of their known traditions with any other individual, navigating social interactions can be a delicate endeavor. However, doing so is a vital component of securing the social and material resources required for success, both personally and evolutionarily. When studying these traditions it becomes necessary to examine the context in which that tradition occurs. So, while it makes sense to follow traditions in a context where things are slow to change or everybody knows the same traditions and to break from that could damage one's reputation, it is necessary to break from tradition in novel situations or where those around you have different traditions and following the old traditions are not likely to increase one's social standing. Refugees find themselves in a unique position of experiencing a rapid change in social environment with precious little time to prepare. This leads to numerous situations in which old traditions, which is all they know, conflict with the expected behavior in their new environment.

4.5 Conclusion

Traditions serve to create and strengthen social bonds, initially between kin, but potentially within the ethnic community as well. Without traditions it is very difficult to know how to deal with other people and thus to function appropriately in society. Loss of traditions can also make it difficult to know how to function within the family unit. Uncertainty caused by new social norms can lead to distress which lowers the chance for economic self-sufficiency. However, the presence of an ethnic community (especially where significant kin ties also exist) provides a transitional structure where a new refugee has an understanding of what behavior is appropriate while he/she adjusts to the new culture. Since the average refugee is only 24 years of age and, according to the responses given by my informants, willing to adapt to American culture, the structure provided by kin and community could be especially beneficial when considering the all-too-brief window of aid that new refugees receive from local aid organizations.

When considering what domains of culture seem especially important for providing that continuity, marriage and religion were far and away the most important areas that my informants talked about. These topics are closely related in that a religious system often dictates who is a marriageable partner, and marriage is a primary means for creating new kin ties, both through in-laws and legitimizing any offspring as new members of the kin-group. Further, it is often through religion that traditions are passed down, so marrying a person from the same religion is very important, and not just for refugees (Call and Heaton, 1997). The importance of having kin present, and

how traditions are lost when they are not, is a primary concern for refugees. During my interviews, the refugees I talked to often expressed a preference for kin in everyday social life, work life, and the environment in which their children were being raised.

Chapter 5 – Kin and Community

5.1 Introduction

“The core is the family.” Steve, a young Iraqi refugee told me this immediately when I started asking about family relationships, and how Iraqis learned their traditional culture. This kinship “core” often includes more than just the nuclear family (parents and their children). It has been recognized that, for refugees, successfully adapting to life in a new country depends heavily on kinship practices and how they interact with government policy (Agbenyiga, 2012; Schweitzer et al., 2006; Dunnigan et al., 1996; Menjivar, 1995; Haines, 1982). This government policy interacts with kinship in three main areas: economic self-sufficiency, geographic distribution of related individuals, and the presence of established ethnic communities and mutual assistance organizations in resettlement areas (Haines, 1982). Another way in which kinship is important to adapting to life in the United States involves the composition of the refugee population, both by gender and age. The resettled refugee community composition creates novel situations that require individuals to use both the existing kinship network (whatever that may be) to their benefit and to adapt their traditional kinship system to the new environment. In these ways, kinship is a vital component to understanding how refugees adapt to a new way of life in the US.

Economically, refugees have to start from scratch. Federal policy requires local aid organizations to provide aid in the form of rent, furnishings, clothing, utilities, and

food for a short time, which varies by location. After that, they have to find a job and support themselves. Having a refugee community, including kin and/or a mutual assistance organization in place, can be a significant advantage over being on their own. Socially, having established kin and community helps with everyday interactions where a translator is necessary, such as at a hospital or when dealing with government entities. For young refugees, especially children, becoming Americanized can lead to conflict with parents and older refugees.

The nature of their traditional kinship structure has a significant effect on how refugees distribute themselves across the country. For Nuer refugees, a structure designed for a highly mobile but often isolated population leads to a similar distribution in the US where they move often to take advantage of economic opportunities. For Hmong refugees, a kinship structure where the focus is on kin-groups clumped into villages leads to them living close together in the US where mutual assistance organizations are particularly effective.

How the presence and absence of kin affect the maintenance of traditions is integral to understanding how refugees adapt to life in the US. Elders, which constitute a disproportionately small number of refugees, are also the repositories of traditional knowledge, and having elders in the kin-group, or even in the community, can be important for shaping the dynamics of refugee life. When kin are absent, which is the situation the majority of my informants found themselves in, exposure to American culture is intensified, and traditions are difficult to maintain. For my informants, the

dynamics of having small communities and few close kin, makes even transmitting highly valued traditions, like respect for others, an uncertain process.

5.2 Role of Kin and Community

5.2.1 Getting Started

For many people in cultures around the world, and for all of my informants, kin includes other relatives than what the average white, middle-class American would normally consider kin. Since the nuclear family is considered the core of white, middle-class American society, they assume that other people share this basic structure. However, the occurrence of secondary migration, often to move closer to kin, and the composition of mutual assistance organizations, which at least initially are often composed of relatives, suggest that the nuclear family may not be the most important social unit for many refugee groups (Dunnigan, 1982, Haines, 1982).

Refugees often arrive with only the clothes on their backs and are dependent upon local aid organizations for the basics right from the start (Shandy, 2003). They are thus often placed into unskilled labor and the service industry positions where they make minimum wage (Holtzman, 2008; Shandy, 2007; Haines, 1982). The need to work, and the long hours that that work entails, makes it almost impossible for refugees to gain additional training to get a better job. One solution is to live with kin while getting training, thus not having to fully support oneself.

An additional advantage to living with kin is access to a mutual assistance organization that may have already been established. Since these funds are rotated through the members (Shandy, 2007; Dunnigan, 1982; Haines, 1982), a member can get a significant influx of money to pay for home improvement, business upgrades, etc. These mutual assistance organizations are usually started with a core group of kin, but may be expanded to include non-kin who are allied with current organization members (Dunnigan, 1982).

These economic concerns are significantly affected by the kinship organization of the population. Some cultures have a kinship structure that allows for flexible movement while maintaining ties to kin; others lack this flexible structure and thus suffer if they are separated (Shandy, 2007). The traditions that are transmitted through kin, and dependent upon the kinship structure, reinforce cooperative behavior (Palmer and Steadman, 1997). The ability of refugees to successfully adapt to American culture thus hinges on the traditions and kinship structures that refugees maintain.

My small sample size, varying lengths of time in the US, and a mix of single and married informants makes estimating kin network size difficult, but I can say that the number of family members resettled anywhere in the US averaged 4.7 (range from 0-20) for my informants from Myanmar, 3 (range from 0-7) for my informants from Iraq, and 11.9 (range from 4-22) for my informants from Africa. This is likely due to the fact that all of my informants from Myanmar and Iraq had been in the US for less than three years (17 of 23 for less than a year), while none of my informants from Africa had been

in the US for less than a year. This may have led to relatively larger functional kin networks for African refugees because many of them have had more time for other kin to migrate to the same community. Haines (1985; and sources therein) reports that among the Hmong and Vietnamese refugees of the 70's and 80's that extensive family ties create a kin group that "functions for a variety of social, political, economic, and ritual activities." (p. 21) While this large kin group has led to a somewhat isolated community of Hmong and Vietnamese refugees in some parts of this country, there are not yet enough Burmese or Iraqis in the local area to create such a community. The lack of extensive kin networks leads to a situation where there is little support for the economic, social, and political activities of these communities. As for ritual activities, my Burmese and African informants either joined American Christian churches or created their own church, and my Iraqi informants didn't participate in religious rituals outside of the home, if at all.

Fewer family members and a small community, coupled with the young age of my Iraqi informants, explains why many of my Iraqi informants were eager to adopt a new way of life, and mostly leave their native culture behind. Comments like Billy's show the ability to change amongst young refugees: "We really don't care that much. But we still have some people, like the old people that still aren't adapted to the new thinking." With parents who are willing to adopt American culture, I expect their children to be Americanized very quickly. However, for refugees that aren't so quick to change, conflicts over behavior can arise with their children.

5.2.2 Children

While my research was confined to adults, my informants brought up conflicts and issues with their children. This is especially true with regards to how immigrant children quickly become Americanized and adopt the behavior of their peers. They see American children acting up in school, talking back to their teachers and parents, and often with no disciplinary action taken. Tracy told me: "Back home, we used to have a place where the teacher would put his tire (iron). If you do bad thing, your mom would let the teacher beat you. He gotta discipline you until you won't do it again." "We have to obey our husband or parents, you know, not like here in the United States," was what Jane told me. This can cause problems when they try to discipline their children at home and the kids are taught to call 911 if their parents hit them. Then they have to try to explain to the police what is happening, but they often don't speak English very well yet so the language barrier becomes significant as well.

Haines (1985) and Shandy (2003) talk about children having to translate for their parents at school; they are supposed to tell their parents that they are in trouble, but since neither the parents nor the principal understand the other's language, the child can spin the situation so they avoid punishment. Using children as translators can be awkward in medical situations as well. Having to translate that their parent has cancer, or a problem with a taboo part of the body, can be very difficult. I had a couple informants bring a child to help translate during the interviews. While my questions

weren't particularly sensitive and I have confidence that I got accurate information, I have to wonder if the informant left things out that they didn't want their child to know.

In one part of the interview I ask what traditions they want their children to know, and if there are any differences in what they would teach a son versus a daughter. With a daughter translating, it would have been hard to say what he didn't want his daughter to know. Many of my informants (thirteen) didn't express any differences in what traditions they would teach their children. For the ones who did, their preference was predominantly in the realm of protecting their daughters and restricting their freedoms.

Despite these potential conflicts, all of my informants were happy for the opportunities that their children would have in the US. Sam told me that his daughter wants to be a pharmacist, and now he just "lives (his) life for (his) daughter now." In the end, it seems that when it comes to their children, refugees aren't much different than Americans. They want their children to be safe, have opportunities for a bright future, and know about their history and traditions from their ancestors.

5.3 Kinship Structure and Transition to the US

A survey of the available literature gives some important insights on the effect of different kinship structures and how refugee populations maintain them and the subsequent nature of maintaining traditions within this kinship structure. The Nuer have adapted to an African environment where they needed to be able to disperse with the availability of good grazing land, yet be able to come together for rituals and defense

(Evans-Pritchard, 1951). It was this system that allowed them to fend off British colonial interests for such a long time. At first glance, adaptation to African bush land may seem unsuited to the urban jungles of America.

Yet, the Nuer system of segmentary kinship has allowed them to survive the refugee process and maintain traditional kin ties (Holtzman, 2008). The fission-fusion grouping that traditionally served them so well in Africa also serves them well in America where refugees are often initially settled in different states. Unlike the Hmong, Nuer in America haven't made a concerted effort to migrate into large clusters of kin, instead preferring to live at a distance from them. "In other words, Nuer are on the move in the United States, but they are just not gravitating to the same city, state, or regional destination." "Nuer prefer to live with a little distance between them. They like to be close enough to visit, but not too close [so as not] to fight" (Shandy, 2007: p.127). If a fight breaks out, or someone does something embarrassing: "the best and most respectful thing that person can do is get out of sight and go live elsewhere" (Shandy, 2007: p.133).

In East Africa, the Nuer have adapted to a desert/savannah type environment where people seem to constantly be moving to find pastureland with small family units being alone for part of the year (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). The sense of dependence is thus likely limited to close kin, and distant kin are only involved when the situation renders them necessary. I get a sense from reading accounts in Shandy (2007) and Holtzman (2008) that among the American Nuer there is an almost begrudging sense of

cooperation where everything is negotiated and families are always trying to better themselves at the expense of others. They seem to move constantly, often getting assistance from local aid groups, especially churches, then leaving when a better opportunity presents itself (Shandy, 2007; Holtzman, 2008). Shandy (2007) tells of a family that moved from Memphis to New York and back, receiving aid both in Memphis and New York and then leaving without notice. This left the local church members with a sense of betrayal that they helped these people and a sense that they were taken advantage of. This is not the only case where Shandy (2007) reports that Nuer have quit jobs after just a few months and moved to take advantage of cheap housing, education, welfare, and other economic opportunities.

This is clearly contrary to the Hmong, who seem to desire to live close to kin and thus generate large communities of Hmong where mutual assistance associations become very effective (Dunnigan, 1982). There are some key factors that seem to separate the Nuer and Hmong, all related to the adaptation of their segmentary kinship systems to their traditional environment. The Hmong have segmentary kinship that has adapted to highland, mountaintop villages and a sedentary lifestyle of swidden horticulture (Keown-Bomar, 2004). Segmentary kinship served to connect people in distant villages and to create a “social philosophy that emphasized cooperation and mutual dependence” (Keown-Bomar, 2004: p.34). Consequently, Hmong traditions have developed to emphasize this cooperation in a village setting and not nomadic family units like the Nuer.

Karenni refugees from Myanmar have a similar kinship structure to the Hmong, that of a segmentary kinship system with close intra-village ties and more distant kin ties with other villages. Thus, I would expect Karenni refugees to resemble Hmong refugees in creating sizable communities with a high degree of community dependence. However, the local community is quite small, currently numbering only around 100 individuals. I did find through the course of my interviews that most of this population lived in a single apartment complex. I would predict that, given more time and the addition of new refugees to the community, that the Karenni community in my study location would stabilize and become more interdependent.

For the African population in my study area, this community development has partly come to pass. A significant factor in preventing high interdependence is the fact that, although there is a sizable African population, no single ethnic group or nationality is sizable. My informants were a mix of Tutsi from both Rwanda and Burundi and Congolese of two different ethnic groups. In the overall community there are also Sudanese, Hutu, other Congolese, Kenyans, Eritreans, and likely others that I didn't identify. This makes cooperation based on kinship minimal; however, due to social and linguistic factors, these disparate refugees do aggregate into cooperative units like the African Christian Church. It would be an interesting study to investigate the degree of community development that has occurred based on kinship vs. regional affiliation, but beyond the scope of the present study.

Coming from a modern nation, Iraqi refugees are more familiar with the workings of local, state, and national agencies, a modern economy, and modern technology, and thus have more of a nuclear family structure. All of my informants lived either alone or with immediate family (spouse and children), and to my knowledge were unrelated. However, due to the availability of technology such as cell phones and internet communication, they were able to remain in contact with relatives around the world. One might expect that this high level of communication would lend itself to maintaining traditions, but as will be apparent in subsequent chapters, other factors such as age and lack of religious affiliation lead to a lack of tradition maintenance.

5.4 Continuance of Traditions in The United States

5.4.1 Role of Kin

In small-scale societies, traditions are transmitted and enforced by kin. To modern Americans this may seem foreign. While our laws are enforced by judicial systems, police, and government, small-scale cultures lack these formal institutions and people must rely on each other to influence their kin to do what is socially acceptable (Malinowski, 2013; Peng, 2004; Brown, 1951). This system of social control has led to a worldview that is heavily dependent on kin, and thus the dynamics of the kin-group often take precedent over the desires of the individual. As Haines (1985, pg. 20) said “For most of the refugees, individualism per se is less valued than it is by Americans. Rather, the individual is an integral part of ongoing social units, particularly those of the family.” For those refugees that lack a kin-group in the United States, maintaining

traditions is even more difficult, and can be lost as refugees adopt American culture in an attempt to reconceptualize their place in the world.

The elderly, however, are an important repository for traditional information, and they can serve as important teachers of those traditions. For my sample, 14 informants listed grandparents as people from whom they learned traditions, and 11 listed elders in general (non-exclusive categories). In their home countries, one way in which elders transferred their knowledge was through the common custom of parents living with at least one of their children, either continuously throughout life or at least when they become elderly. My Iraqi informants told me that this is quite common in Iraq. According to Steve, “usually when parents get old they go live with the boy. They stay with the son, or the son will stay with them.” Also, in addition to enforcing traditions in their children, they are present to teach their grandchildren.

As for what kinds of traditions my informants were taught, respect was the most common with 17 of 30 informants listing this, followed by religion and cooking with 11 responses, lifestyle (including occupation and living situation) with 10, specific family and kinship relations with 8, and language with 4 (self-identified, non-exclusive categories). Jeremy, a former linguist, told me, “I just want my son to respect everybody.” Grandparents and elders are also important sources of traditional knowledge on everyday things like cooking.

Nine informants listed food/cooking as a tradition that they wanted their children to know. However, only a few stores carried the necessary ingredients. While

their children may not have cared much, the parents were often concerned with their inability to make the food to which they had become accustomed. The local Korean market carried some of the traditional foods, but many refugees were forced to shop at Wal-Mart because of cost issues, and thus could not acquire many of their traditional foods. As anyone who has drastically changed their eating habits can attest, this wholesale change can wreak havoc on a person's digestive tract.

Another major issue in terms of enculturation is the change in the second generation in terms of following traditions. For first-generation refugees, while they do make choices between their old traditions and new American alternatives, they have spent their entire lives learning the traditions of their native culture. This is consistent with the previously cited quote from Chad: "We live in Chin state. All people is Chin, so (there) is no need to teach (traditions)." However, second generation refugees face a situation where they must strike a balance between the traditions that their parents teach them, and enforce, at home and what they are learning in school and from interacting with American peers. This is not an all-or-nothing choice, but when conflicts occur, the choices second generation immigrants make can have serious social and economic effects (Zhou, 1997a,b; Zhou and Bankston, 1994).

This potential loss of tradition worries many refugee parents, especially the loss of the parent's language, which is perceived as necessary for teaching and communicating with their children. This was clearly a concern for Joseph, who told me: "My children don't know African tradition. They don't know how to speak my language.

They don't know how to speak Congolese language, only French and English, but now they start (to) forget French; only (speak) English. That (is a) problem." While this is a problem for refugee parents who want to maintain a connection to their children, their children may not see it this way (Rumbaut and Portes, 2001).

The recognition of kin is one important area that is often diminished in the US as compared with refugees' native culture. Due to the fact that refugees leave the majority of their kin in their nation of origin (and are settled apart from them in the US), their children don't see these kin on a regular basis. Since humans do not have inherent kin recognition like many animals (Silk, 1990), when kin are not present the relationships are not learned. Joseph, one of my African informants told me that in Congo-Brazzaville his son would be taught to call his brother "dad," and he should treat him like a father. Further, his brother's children would become "brothers" and "sisters" to his children instead of cousins. However, in the US, these kin are not present and so his son has not learned these relationships. In a cultural system where kin ties influence everything from marriage to residence to whom one cooperates with and is obligated to provide assistance, the loss of this structure can cause significant turmoil.

5.4.2 Role of the Community

In the sense that ethnicity is a category for people who identify common ancestry (Palmer et al., 2012), the ethnic community becomes an extension of the larger kin network, and can potentially fill traditional kin roles. Many early refugee groups that were allowed to settle where they wanted, and some that aggregated due to secondary

migration, have formed very close-knit communities where they are surrounded by kin, or at least fellow countrymen. Cubans in Miami (Haines, 1985), Hmong in Wisconsin (Koltyk, 1998), Bosnians in St. Louis (Somach, 1995), Vietnamese in Southern California (Hung, 1985), and Soviet Jews in New York (Gold, 1996), amongst others, have formed ethnic communities that enforce traditions and ensure that at least some of these traditions will be passed down to the next generation.

Refugee communities in small towns, however, have a hard time keeping members around, especially when jobs are not readily available. Holtzman (2008) describes this process in detail as related to Nuer/Sudanese refugees. The economic downturn starting in 2008 led to a loss of potential jobs in my study area, and the effect on the refugee population has been significant. I have talked with numerous refugees that are unemployed, largely because they don't have many job skills and there are fewer opportunities in the unskilled labor market. This has led to a substantial number of refugees leaving for better opportunities, leaving the local ethnic communities depleted and making it harder for new refugees to become acclimated. One informant put it this way:

"In [local Midwestern city] they don't have work and cannot speak the language. It's very difficult so they move to another state with the same ethnic group. Most of the people move to another state; that's why we have a small group."

This leads to small numbers of any given ethnic group, making traditions difficult to maintain, but without a compensating level of cultural competence with American culture. The net effect is that many refugees are at a loss, with no one to turn to after the local aid agency has reached its' limit for assistance, likely limited English skills, and

no real job prospects. The combination of these factors cause many refugees to become dependent on welfare (Koltyk, 1998; Holtzman, 2008), and without a support system, they are not likely to become self-sufficient quickly.

In an attempt to become self-sufficient, many refugees adopt aspects of American culture quite quickly, especially in the absence of an ethnic community. My observations of refugee informants and their families/neighbors/friends indicate that traditions surrounding clothing is one of the first aspects of American culture to be adopted. This is likely due to the voluntary agency providing clothing as well as local consignment and low-income donation organizations providing free clothing. However, clothing related to religious rituals and traditional holidays (Koltyk, 1998) tend to be conserved. Nine of my informants reported clothing as a tradition that they wanted to conserve, especially for ritual and significant life event (marriage, birth, and death) purpose; with everyday attire being much less important. However, lack of access to either ready-made traditional clothing, or even materials to make such clothing, make maintaining this aspect of their traditions very difficult, even in important situations.

5.5 Tradition Maintenance with Kin Absent

5.5.1 General Lack of Kin

Since the United States government does not emphasize kin ties further than the nuclear family when resettling refugees, having large numbers of kin close by is rare.

“The overall importance of kinship suggests that one should see considerable continuity

in kin relations over migration and that where such continuity is not possible, problems are likely to arise" (Haines, 1988, p.3).

As stated previously, the average number of kin in the US was 4.7, 3, and 11.9 for my informants from Myanmar, Iraq, and Africa respectively. For all but the African informants, relatives in the US consisted of their immediate families, and maybe a sibling or cousin (although one Karenni man said he had about 20 relatives in the US), and none had their parents with them. Because my African informants have been in the US longer (and the US has been accepting refugees from these countries for longer), they have a greater number of relatives in the US, with only two (both men from Congo) having fewer than ten. However, in trying to assess household composition and nearby relatives, I found that only one informant had more than her immediate family in the same town. In sum, no informant had a large extended family nearby, and only two young informants from Burundi had parents nearby, and they had both been resettled as minors with their families. Basically, my sample almost completely lacked the presence of kin, and had to rely on the local aid organization, and infrequently fellow countrymen, for assistance.

Although many of my informants expressed a desire to bring close relatives over from their home country, many had to start their lives in the US alone. Brian, a young Chin man, wanted his siblings to join him. "I want them (siblings) to come here. If they come here we can live together." For Allen, his parents were his primary concern. "I want to take them (parents), but very difficult. How to take I don't know. I don't have

the money.” “I don’t have friend here.” This last quote came from an informant who only had one brother-in-law living in the US, and absolutely no immediate family upon which to rely for aid, or even basic companionship. The entire interview, I could not ignore the sense of sadness and isolation that this unfortunate Kachin man conveyed.

Many of my Iraqi informants didn’t express the sadness for the lack of family, but they often did express a wish for family to join them, or to at least be in contact regularly. The reason for this, as Jeremy put it, was for getting help when you needed it. “Back in my country, the first one you go to is your brother, and then your friend, and after that to your parents. You don’t go to your parents first.” The importance of all kin, especially as people to rely on for aid, was very prevalent in nearly all of my informants.

Jessica, a young Tutsi woman from Burundi, told me that she had to leave her family to come to the US with her husband, Brad. She sends money back home since her father can’t work and her siblings are in school. This family of three (soon to be four) was living in public housing while Brad and his brothers renovated a house for them to live in. She said it’s hard, but her husband is the only one working so she has to endure. Many refugees, despite living in low-income housing and needing government assistance themselves, send a little money back to their families to help them get by; this is especially necessary for families living in refugee camps where there is very little work, and almost no land on which to produce food (Horst and Van Hear, 2002; Haines, 1988; Ishisaki, 1983).

5.5.2 Effect of Lack of Elders

A significant factor that contributes to the lack of a kin-group is that elderly refugees are uncommon, with those 60 and older comprising just 5% of the international refugee population between 2007 and 2012 (UNHCR, 2013). This can be due to numerous factors including: the population of elderly in nations that generate refugees is low to begin with, the difficulty of getting to a refugee camp and living therein, and unwillingness to leave their homeland. However, due to their greater traditional knowledge, elders are integral in maintaining traditions. They enforce not only their language and customs, but also their standards of respect and personal conduct.

It is no wonder then that elders are commonly revered in cultures around the world (Stone, 2006). It is thus something of an oddity that American culture values youth, with the corollaries of valuing independence and innovation. When people who are used to a traditional system come into contact with people who value innovation and change, the juxtaposition of these systems can cause internal conflict between young refugees and their parents/elders. Since the young are often much more savvy with new technology, and since these skills are valued economically, the young have an advantageous position that is unusual in more traditional cultures where elders are the guardians of knowledge. With this advantage, they develop a mentality of being in charge and capable of their own decision-making, thus disrupting the traditional balance of power (Hung and Haines, 1996; Lipson and Omidian, 1996).

Due to an intense effort to remain in kin-groups, and a religion that still explicitly focuses on ancestor worship and rituals that “help to define the boundaries of the kinship group,” (Dunnigan et al., 1996, p.200) Hmong leaders seem to have been able to blunt the impact of tradition loss, and to maintain the sense of loyalty that had been passed down. However, these leaders are quite young themselves and lack the experience of the elders that stayed behind in Laos. Nonetheless, Dunnigan et al. (1996) present the Hmong as an extremely (by American standards) traditional refugee group that highly values kin, and has been able to retain close contact with kin (especially male) through the resettlement process and the following two decades. They conclude their chapter by saying that among the Hmong, “only immediate relatives can be counted upon to help individuals survive the difficult problems that lie ahead” (Dunnigan et al., 1996, p.209).

5.6 Conclusion

By definition, traditions require the presence of parents, but other kin can also play an important role in teaching traditions and maintaining traditional behavior. The establishment of larger kin-groups facilitates the transmission of traditions and enables refugees to establish themselves economically as well as socially. It can also potentially serve to reduce parent-child conflict by surrounding children with people who share similar traditions and values.

In order to understand just how refugees from different cultures adapt to life in the US, it is important to understand their traditional kinship structure. For Nuer

refugees, a segmentary kin structure allowed for cooperation and aid within a nomadic, semi-isolated family, lifestyle in East Africa. In the US this means that Nuer refugees prefer not to aggregate, but to move around the country seeking better opportunities. For Hmong refugees, and my informants from Myanmar, a village-centered, close kin proximity, segmentary structure aided cooperation within the village, while allowing for trade and alliances between villages. In the US, this leads to Hmong aggregating into communities that provide aid to each other through mutual assistance programs. Refugees from modern nations, like Iraq, have already learned to function in a dispersed, economics-based system. So, while they can, and do, use technology to stay in contact with kin, living as a nuclear family is not unusual.

When kin are present, they help to transmit and maintain traditional behavior within the cultural group. The literature suggests that this is particularly true when older refugees are present and there is a cohesive community. Traditions related to respect, religion, and lifestyle, were particularly important to the refugees in my study. However, they will be harder to maintain since there are very few elders in the communities, unless more refugees arrive to create a sizable community.

A lack of kin, especially older kin, with the traditional knowledge that they have learned, affects every aspect of refugee life. Marriage, religion, interaction with Americans, and economic self-sufficiency are specific areas to be discussed in the following chapters. Small resident kin networks and widely dispersed families units can make finding a spouse difficult. Additionally, when traditional marriage arrangements

are no longer practiced, and divorce is allowed, conflict between families can occur. Having larger communities and more kin with a vested interest in the success of a marriage can reduce these conflicts.

Chapter 6 – Whom Can I Marry and How Does it Work?

6.1 Introduction

Marriage, as a human universal, is saturated with traditions. Given that marriage serves a number of very important functions, though variable by culture and individual, I thought it would be an integral subject to address in my investigation into refugee life in the US. Through marriage, refugee families are brought together, children are born and raised, and traditions are imparted to the next generation. However, for refugees, finding marriage partners can be difficult since individual nuclear families are scattered across the nation, and potential spouses may be rare in the adopted community. For unmarried adult refugees, a preference for spouses from their home culture has been reported (Holtzman, 2008), and in my interviews I encountered this preference almost universally.

When it came to a preference for whom their children married, just less than half of my informants expressed a preference for marriage to someone from their home culture; they also recognized that in the US their preference didn't carry the weight that it might have in their homeland. As with single, adult refugees, the US policy of distributing refugees throughout the country makes finding spouses from their native culture difficult for the children of refugees as well. In addition, these children will have grown up in the US and be influenced by US culture. The potential dissolution of traditional family structure and loss of traditions was a source of stress for some of my

informants and will be discussed below. I propose that resettling larger family units, along with resettling refugees as larger cultural groups could have a positive effect on tradition maintenance as related to marriage, leading to more cohesive family units.

6.2 Functions of Marriage

A prominent Introductory Anthropology textbook lists the following functions of marriage: "...regulate sexual access between males and females, find satisfactory ways to organize labor, assign responsibility for child care, provide a clear framework for organizing an individual's rights and responsibilities, and provide for the transfer of property and social positions between generations (Nanda and Warms, 2007, p.205)."

Another states: "A prototypical marriage... stipulates the degree of sexual access the married partners may have to each other... also establishes the legitimacy of children born to the wife and **creates relationships between the kin of the wife and the kin of the husband** (Lavenda and Schultz, 2007, p.176, emphasis added)."

While many of these may be functional outcomes of marriage, they all depend on the relationship between kin-groups that the new couple represents, especially as kin to the new couple's offspring. The specifics of how marriage is conducted, with whom, how many partners, and other socially imposed rules fill numerous tomes, and are beyond the scope of this dissertation; however, I will say that all of my married informants were in monogamous heterosexual marriages. Given the wide variety of how societies do, and could possibly, organize themselves in regard to sexual access and organization of labor, only the creation of social relationships and new kin ties is a

consistent feature of marriage. As social creatures, humans need social ties to successfully navigate their world, and, more importantly, to be evolutionarily successful in finding a mate and producing offspring. By adding an entire new lineage (or maybe just strengthening existing ties) to one's social circle, that person now has greater access to both social and material resources. Materially, he can now rely on a broader range of family to help him in times of need; socially, he now has a wider network through which to acquire information, and a larger alliance to draw on if conflict arises.

Further, marriage serves to create socially legitimate bonds between parents and children, especially between father and child. Evolutionarily, this is vital to the continuation of the parental lineages, as well as to providing paternal care and the traditions that fathers impart to their children. Whether the cultural rules stipulate that marriages be monogamous, polygamous, or some other configuration, marriage serves as the public acknowledgement of this bonding and the subsequent kin-ties created.

6.3 Marriage Traditions

As a starting point for discussing marriage and the related traditions, I first asked the marital status of each informant. Twenty-one of my thirty informants said that they were currently, or had been, married, leaving nine single informants. When asking if they had a preference for marrying someone from their own culture, 20 said yes, eight had no preference and two did not respond. One of those no responses was an older gentleman who had been in a very difficult marriage, and had no desire to get remarried, nor could he recall if he had had a preference when he was younger. The

other informant who didn't respond was a young Iraqi man who was quite despondent about the whole marriage topic, citing a lack of suitable mates for him.

Far fewer informants had a stated preference when it came to who their children married, which was surprising to me due to the importance of marriage in generating kin relations and in maintaining traditions within the household; only 13 of the 30 informants expressed a preference for their children to marry someone from their own culture. I asked some of these informants if their preference differed for sons vs. daughters, but this was not a standard question. From the nine informants that I did ask, four that said yes had daughters, and the rest only had sons so no preference was possible for their current children. When asked about a preference for their children marrying within their religion, 18 of 30 informants said yes, they would prefer their child(ren) marry someone from their own religious group.

In order to understand how marriage traditions, and subsequent social ties, have changed due to resettlement in the US, a brief discussion of marriage traditions in my informants' home countries is necessary. In the context of marriage serving as the public acknowledgement of bonds, and the creation of social ties between lineages, there are often specific kinds of social bonds that are more desirable (by both the marrying couple and their parents/family) than others. These kinds of bonds are often proscribed by tradition.

Of course, polygamy is not allowed in the United States, nor is marriage between very close relatives. Arranged marriage, as was the traditional practice in Burma, Iraq,

and Central Africa (Farhat, 2011; Kandiyoti, 1988), is legal, and recent reports indicate that it may be on the rise in the US (Bader, 2013). Joseph, a Congolese informant described the traditional marriage system thus:

“To get married, a man will talk to the Bride’s mother, who then asks the bride’s father. Then, if he agrees, the groom’s father then talks to the bride’s father. Then the families meet to discuss an exchange of goods. Then the man gives the woman some money that she takes it to her father to become the man’s girlfriend. Then he gives some (money) to her uncles. Then the bride’s family gives the groom’s family a bunch of meat. Then a couple weeks later, the ceremony happens. The bride’s family brings her, there is a big party, and then they leave her with the groom.”

Similar types of arrangements are made in Burma and Iraq. The bride and groom’s families meet and discuss some sort of marriage contract, often involving the exchange of goods or money. This exchange serves to unite the two families economically. In the case of a divorce, the wife’s family gives the husband (or his family) back some portion of the money or goods. Since the brideprice is often rather large, and immediately incorporated into the household wealth, it can be very difficult to return any of it in the case of divorce. For this reason, it is in the best interest of many family members to see a marriage last, and a couple with marital strife will often get counseling from family members to stay together (Bader, 2013; Stone, 2006).

The cross-cousin marriage is commonly practiced worldwide (Lavenda and Schultz, 2007), with the Muslim world having the highest rates of cousin marriage at up to 50% of all marriages (Farhat, 2013). Only one Iraqi informant, Sam, reported having married a cousin, stating that his wife is “like a 4th cousin,” but he added that marrying within the family is not necessarily proscribed, but is quite common. These kinds of

marriage further reinforce ties within a group of related individuals. When cross-cousin marriage is practiced often, it results in a tight interweaving of related individuals as Chagnon illustrates for the 'ideal' Yanomamo social structure (1997, pg.142). While cousin marriage may be commonly practiced in some parts of the world, I found no indication that any of my informants preferred this kind of arrangement for either themselves or their children; however, marriage within the ethnic group was often preferred and small communities may offer few opportunities for finding mates. How this plays out in future generations of refugees and their descendants is a potential topic for future research.

This desire for marriage within the ethnic group, for either themselves or their children, was stated by thirteen of my informants. Clint, a Kurdish refugee from Iraq, when asked about his advice for his children, said: "I would recommend to them that they marry someone who has more common things together. That [having Kurdish culture in common] will be easier." Brian, a Chin informant from Myanmar, stated: "They (children) can marry anybody, but better with Chin." Nick, a fellow refugee from Myanmar, said: "Kachin is better, because we are the same culture and same language." Tina, a young woman from Burundi, said: "Same culture, same city, so I know him (fiancé) well." In their home country, this wouldn't be much of a problem, but when refugees are dispersed and resettled in the US, finding a spouse with the same cultural background can be difficult.

6.4 Refugee Marriage in the US

When refugees are resettled in the US, only nuclear families are intentionally kept intact. This can make a marriage difficult to finalize. There were two cases amongst my informants where two young people met in a refugee camp in Africa and then subsequently resettled in different parts of the US. One man told me about his daughter who met a man in the refugee camp. His future son-in-law went to Texas, then came back to Missouri to get married, then the couple moved back to Texas with the groom's family. In the other case, the groom was resettled in Colorado, and the bride's family rented a van so they could all travel to Colorado for the wedding. In both of these cases, the fathers told me that they had discussed the marriage with the groom's family while they were in the refugee camp, but since no one had any wealth to exchange there was no exchange of goods. One of the fathers told me that, since no wealth was exchanged, he was worried about the marriage lasting.

As stated previously, thirteen of my informants had a preference for their children marrying within their ethnic group. However, this did not necessarily mean that the rest were ambivalent about their children's (or their own) marriage prospects. Mo, a young Karenni refugee from Myanmar, when asked about his preferred spouse, told me: "I just want my parents to agree." Shane, another refugee from Myanmar, said: "Because we are the same culture, we know how to do. If I'm married to an American, we are not the same culture and religion... it makes it very hard to stay together." However, nearly all of my informants qualified their preference with an understanding

that, in America, they don't have much control over who their children marry. Jeremy, an Iraqi refugee with a young son, said: "I would like (my son to marry an Iraqi woman) but it's his choice." Ali, another Iraqi refugee, said: "In the end, I don't decide, my daughter decide. She must think and decide for herself. Chad, a gentleman from Myanmar, echoed this sentiment: "What they want. I cannot control." Jessica, a Tutsi mother from Burundi, said that she would prefer her son marry a Burundi woman, but knows it's unlikely to happen. "I don't have a choice. It's his choice." Finally, Andrew, a Congolese man, summed it up thus: "I can say nothing, this (is) America."

When I asked *why* they would prefer their children marry someone from the same culture, they all told me some version of: "Same culture, so many same, and life together ... sometimes Burmese and English is very different." The sentiment was that two people from the same culture have the same traditions, and that is the basis for a happy, successful marriage. Jane, a young Burmese woman with particularly good English told me: "If we marry a stranger then we lose our culture." Preference for the children of refugees was also reported for Vietnamese, and Soviet refugees (Simon, 1981a,b).

I did, however, have a couple of informants who went in the complete opposite direction. Shane, from Myanmar, said that: "if they (his children) marry an American it is better for me, because we get more relatives." Joseph, a Congolese man who showed great interest in his children remembering Congolese culture, and had a stated dislike of his son's girlfriend, nevertheless said: "Marry an American, it's good." I couldn't tell if

this was a result of a general liking of Americans or due to the importance of having family members who live close by to rely on. I wonder if these opinions will change when their child marries an American and the spouse's family does not offer help or behave in the way they expect.

One thing that was nearly universal amongst my Christian informants was a strong preference for their children to marry another Christian. "They can only marry Christian." My Muslim, Buddhist, and animistic informants were much less strict in their preference. Whether this is a reflection of the religion, the fact that they are a minority in the US and thus have fewer prospects, or just a reflection of these individuals is a topic for future investigation. "I would leave that decision up to them." was the most common answer from these informants.

Regardless of marriage preferences, resettlement in the United States involves many modifications of marriage traditions, commonly resulting in the loss of traditional practices in marriage arrangement as well as some elements of wedding ceremonies. Freedom of religion protects their rights to practice these traditions, but practical and economic considerations can have a considerable effect.

6.5 Refugee Reaction to Changes in Marriage Traditions

Evidence of this loss of tradition can be found in marriage arrangements. Traditionally, the Hmong have practiced bride price as a way to bind two sub-lineages together (Dunnigan, 1982). The negotiation of the bride price required the involvement of sub-lineage leaders (elders) and served both political and economic purposes. The

binding of two sub-lineages, primarily serves to expand social networks. In Laos, this served to help a new couple find a house and land to farm and to increase the trade network and political support of the leaders; for Hmong refugees in the US, this facilitates secondary migration (migration after initial resettlement) for jobs and other kinds of assistance (Dunnigan, 1982). Marriage traditionally provides a way to link kin-groups and, thus, members of a given ethnic group together, providing support for fellow refugees.

However, the prospect of divorce can create rivalry between sub-lineages and shatter social networks. For this reason, “in order to ensure maximum cohesion among refugees in the United States, national Hmong leaders have recommended that bride price be abolished” (Dunnigan, 1982: p.131). This is clearly a double-edged sword. By abolishing bride price, Hmong leaders believe it would decrease the animosity between sub-lineages that can result from divorce. It would also follow that abolishing bride price would lessen the strength of the ties between sub-lineages, thus decreasing cohesion.

Elders would likely have a better understanding of the long-term effects of abolishing bride price, and would act as additional sources of cohesion. Elders may have alliances that have lasted generations and the bitter divorce of grandchildren may have only a negligible effect on the overall alliance. The fact that that alliance has lasted so long is a testament to the cohesion present between the lineages, and one negative event may not have a large impact. However, for a young couple with young alliance members, a divorce may be the only event that matters. They have not built a strong

alliance over generations, and thus a divorce may easily destroy what little cohesion was present. I would argue that the presence of elders is vital in maintaining traditions and alliances, as well as mitigating problems that the young may exaggerate.

The same issue is facing African refugees now. Traditional marriage arrangements provide a mechanism to enlarge kin-groups, but are impeded by American culture, both in terms of social acceptability and the different kinds of wealth to be exchanged. Many cultures practice some kind of marriage payment, often in terms of goods or services, to cement the new kin bonds between lineages. When this bond is disrupted by poverty (in which many refugees find themselves), traditions erode and bonds weaken; this further decreases the economic benefits of association with an ethnic community.

The result of this confusion is that many refugees try to assimilate to American culture, but often with only a passing understanding of what they are really accommodating. Amongst my African informants, this seemed especially important. Traditions of betrothal became awkward in the United States. Megan told me about her sister's boyfriend. He offered to buy his betrothed wife's father a house, as part of his bride price payment. However, the bride's father didn't feel comfortable trading his daughter for a house. His pride, and traditional thinking, led him to tell his future son-in-law to, "Go and do it on your own." He may have lost help in financing a house, but he retained his pride and integrity.

Changes in marriage traditions also have an effect on who gets married and at what age, with subsequent issues like teen pregnancy and decrease in educational opportunities resulting. Tracy, a young man from Rwanda, told me that women in Africa used to marry late, but with all the death, especially of family members, they are getting married young now. No parents are around to prevent early marriage. "But now, since when people lose people, they lose their family, they are like 'It's quicker for me to get married and have a family.'" Clearly, a lack of parents, coupled with having a family at a young age is going to have economic ramifications for these women.

6.6 Conclusions

The only consistent function of marriage is to create ties between families. While this is also true for refugees, US refugee policy and the circumstances of living in the United States can have significant impacts on refugees' ability to find eligible partners and to fulfill other traditional aspects of marriage, including economic exchanges. It remains to be seen exactly what impact this will have on future generations, but it is definitely a concern for refugee parents. In an effort to reduce divisiveness due to divorce, Hmong leaders have recommended abolishing the traditional practice of brideprice; only future generations will show if this helps or hurts group cohesion.

A majority of my informants expressed a desire, for themselves and/or their children, to marry within their ethnic group. The similarity in cultural knowledge and understanding of what is expected from a spouse are desirable in a mate. However, finding an appropriate mate can be difficult, perhaps resulting in refugees putting other

considerations first. And for a couple of my informants, having their children marry an American was preferable due to the formation of a new alliance with people who may be perceived to be more affluent, or at least live in close enough proximity to reliably provide assistance.

While marriage within the cultural group was preferable to just under half of my informants, marriage within the same religion was preferable for 18 of my 30 informants. This suggests that religion is a more important area of tradition than general culture, and that religious compatibility is more important than cultural compatibility in a marriage. However, recent conversion may be a mitigating factor, and a perception that religious compatibility may be easier to achieve could affect the relative importance of religion.

Chapter 7 – Establishing Social Bonds Through Religion

7.1 Introduction

Religion, like marriage, is often identified as a significant aspect of cultures around the world. It also is important in generating a coherent cultural worldview and the associated traditions. With regards to which religions my informants identified themselves as practicing, 19 of my informants identified as Christian, 6 identified as Muslim, 3 identified as Buddhist, and 2 said that they were Atheist/Agnostic. Not surprisingly, all of my informants from Africa, and all but the three Buddhists from Burma identified as Christian, while my Iraqi informants identified themselves as either Muslim or Atheist/Agnostic. All but five said that they had belonged to that religion all their lives, while three Christians had been converted by missionaries in the refugee camp, one Muslim had converted recently, and one former Muslim had recently become Atheist. While not a standard question, I asked many of my African and Burmese informants at what point in their lineage the religious conversion had taken place; the most common answer was either their parents or grandparents had converted, indicating a fairly recent change from a traditional religion to a modern world religion.

Definitions of religion have often focused on the beliefs and ideas involved with explaining the supernatural (Park, 2006; Kottak, 2000; Haviland, 1996; see Lavenda and Schultz, 2007, for an exception) and the proscriptive behaviors that follow. In addition

to this definition being fatally flawed (see below), it provides little insight into how refugees employ religion and religious behaviors in their transition to life in the United States. By focusing on the religious claims and behaviors of refugees, one can investigate the decisions that are made to create and maintain bonds in a religious context.

Like marriage, the kin-like bonds that religion creates can be a vital asset for refugees to adapt and succeed in a new culture. These social bonds not only provide a sense of community, but also create a set of people on whom to rely for aid. For some refugees, the path to creating these new bonds may involve a wholesale conversion from a traditional religion to Christianity; for others, especially those who were already Christian or converted in their home country, it may be a choice between joining an American church or finding (or maybe even founding) a church with their fellow countrymen.

I investigated the religious traditions that my informants sought to maintain in an effort to see the importance of religion in their lives. By asking not only which traditions were important to them, but also which traditions they wanted to pass on to their children, I hope to provide insight into the role that the religious community plays in the assimilation process.

7.2 What is Religion For and How Can We Study it?

7.2.1 Function of Religion

In a general introductory anthropology textbook, religion is defined as “a set of beliefs and behaviors pertaining to the supernatural” (Park, 2006, p. 315). This basic definition is not uncommon, especially the focus on beliefs and the supernatural. Most explanations focus on understanding the *beliefs* that comprise a religion, and how those beliefs function for both the individual and society. Further, these definitions rely on reference to the supernatural, which by definition cannot be observed. The problem with these explanations is that there is no way to verify any of it. There is no way to know what someone else believes (see Steadman and Palmer, 2008).

Malinowski (1925) proposed that religion serves to provide some degree of certainty in uncertain circumstances, such as ocean fishing in the Trobriand Islands, or to relieve stress in stressful circumstances, such as the death of a family member. Even though he proposed psychological explanations, that magic and religion are the result of emotional states and that “primitive” people need magic and religion to explain aspects of their world that science cannot, he recognized that “primitive man is capable of exact observation, of sound generalizations and of logical reasoning” (Steadman and Palmer, 2008, p.126). To propose that people are capable of making sound observations and at the same time need to appeal to the supernatural for explanations and emotional support is contradictory.

Thus, the only recourse is to fall back on behavioral observations of what people are actually doing and saying during religious events. A thorough discussion of how this works is available in Steadman and Palmer's "The Supernatural and Natural Selection" (2008). For my purposes, the important point is that refugee claims and behaviors have an observable effect on their ability to adapt to life in the US. These claims and behaviors marked them as members of the group in their home countries, but may no longer do so in the United States. Thus, I am investigating just which claims they hold on to, and which they are likely to give up and why. When you consider that the primary function of religion, according to Steadman and Palmer (2008), and which I follow here, is to create and maintain social bonds through the communicated acceptance of claims for which there is no empirical evidence, then the only real consideration for refugees (or anyone for that matter) is what to accept, and from whom, to create and maintain a desired level of cooperation and bonding with other people.

As refugees make their way through the resettlement process, they are also making decisions about their religious views and the opportunities different organized religions present. As religion serves as a meta-tradition, such that it acts as a vehicle through which other traditions are passed down (VanPool et al., 2008), changes in religious views and affiliations can have an impact on other traditions that may not, at first glance, be directly related to religion. Pulling apart the precise contributions of each transforming influence on changing traditions is not possible in the current study, and therefore this chapter focuses on traditions directly related to religion. However, it

should be noted that the effects of religious conversion likely has a significant impact on other areas of a refugee's life and the related traditions.

7.2.2 Religion and Refugees from Myanmar

Historically, my Burmese informants' ancestors were animistic. As Nick put it: "Before, not Christian, not Buddhist; ghosts." Animism is characterized by claims of supernatural forces, or "spirits," that inhabit various things in the natural world such as animals, plants, rivers, mountains, etc. At some point after the fall of the early civilizations that ruled the area, the people returned to a non-literate, agrarian lifestyle and remained that way until the British, and Christian missionaries, arrived. Nick told me that: "Kachin people lost writing. American missionaries came and taught us how to write again." This started the religious conversion process for many Burmese, which may not have gone as smoothly as the missionaries hoped. As with many cultures, the practices of Christianity were combined with traditional practices to create a sort of hybrid religion, and there were certainly some hold-outs that refused to convert to Christianity. "American missionaries believe all Christian. One village, one house, still believe in ghosts" is how Nick described it to me. This is consistent with the position that the primary purpose of religion is to create and maintain social ties. These people were trying to both maintain ties with their own friends and families, and at the same time, create new bonds with the missionaries who provided useful goods and other kinds of aid. This works until there is a conflict between the old and new ways, or when one has to commit to one or the other to maintain important ties.

For three of my informants from Burma, the answer was to convert to Christianity in the refugee camp. With Christian missionaries providing aid and Bibles, and knowing they could end up in America, or another Western nation, where Christianity is dominant, they made the choice to convert to Christianity, at least publicly. For others, their parents or grandparents converted and they were raised in a Christian household and never really questioned it. Yet others were somewhat mixed; for Chad, a young Chin gentleman, “My mother is Christian, my father is Buddhist, so I’m mixed.” Mo, a young Karenni man had a more dichotomous view of his religious life: “For my traditional (religion), we only celebrate twice a year so the other days, like Sunday, I go to Baptist church.”

Quite a few of my Burmese informants have had very positive experiences with local Christian churches, which has only solidified their conversion. Susan, a young mother of two, was clearly influenced by the generosity of her fellow American parishioners: “Sometimes the church helps with clothes, school supplies.” This generosity, or even just general kindness and acceptance can have a big effect, especially given the sometimes violent situation in Burma where, according to Dan, “They (government) burned the church. They cut down the cross.” The sense of community and comfort that they get from members of the church makes Christianity very appealing. In their new community, it is important to express a deep commitment to show other parishioners that they are open to their influence, and thus are worthy of their aid.

So, when I asked about their life in Burma they readily dismissed any religious aspect of it. For Allen, “Buddhist holidays are not important, just Christian holidays.” Further, they often made claims that they are so committed to this new religion that they are influencing their children to follow it as well. “They can choose, but I want them to be Christian.” Chad, despite being “mixed” when it came to his religious affiliation, was adamant that “they (his children) need to know (the) right way (Christianity).”

Additionally, more of my informants expressed a preference that their children marry a fellow Christian (10 of 15) than that they marry someone from their home culture (7 of 15). As Blake, a father of two young girls put it: “It doesn’t matter as long as they are Christian.” They also cited examples of conflict within a marriage of people from different religions. In Susan’s view: “Husband and wife together every day, life good. I know my friends who have different religions argue.” For Nick, the effects were more relevant to raising children: “If (parent’s religion is) not same, then after we have kids, they (do) not know what religion to follow.”

Because of this strong desire to create relationships with American Christians, many Burmese only secretly celebrate traditional Buddhist or animistic practices. Often they told me that it was just a part of their culture to celebrate something, and not religious. So, they have this disjunction of traditional (and clearly religious in origin) practices, and their current religious affiliation. This is much like how some Americans celebrate Christmas, often divorcing the social activities with the religious aspects to

have the maximum flexibility in creating, maintaining, and sometimes manipulating social bonds.

For example, half of my Burmese informants said that the Buddhist Water Festival was an important holiday (even the informants who identified as Christian). The Water Festival is a New Year's type celebration held in mid-April in many Southeast Asian countries. As part of the celebration involves pouring or sprinkling water on one another in a cleansing ritual, it has become known as the Water Festival, though it has different names in different countries (Wikipedia, 2014). My informants from Myanmar called it "*Thingyan*." The combination of traditions from different religions is called syncretism.

7.2.3 Religion and African Refugees

This is much the same process that happened in Africa, only in Africa it happened a few generations back. All of my African informants said they were Christian, and other than some minor deviations during services, there wasn't any hint of older religious traditions. Only one informant, Joseph, even mentioned older African religious practices; he acknowledged that some people still make claims about sorcery, "They can kill you just with their voice." He also made a claim about ancestors coming back to help, but combined it with a claim about Jesus being behind it. "In Africa, we have many traditions. If you see somebody help you it is a new member of your family. If you see many people like you, it is the spirit of your ancestor in this man. You do not ask 'why you help me?' No, you say only 'thank you, Jesus!' Because it's Jesus (that) helps you."

The conversion to Christianity could be viewed as syncretism, the combination of two or more separate religions onto one (Greenfield and Droogers, 2001), as with Joseph, or as a rejection of the old ways and embracing the new. Tina, a young woman who spent her entire childhood in refugee camps, told me: “People being Christian – they rejected their tradition.” Much like the Burmese, I suspect that this is how refugees attempt to maintain some flexibility in creating as large and varied a network as possible to cope with a new environment. This way they can both keep any old ties with other people from Africa, and reach out to Americans to create new social bonds. My African informants were all Christian, and with the exception of the women (but not any of the men I saw) wearing traditional African clothing, they celebrated Christmas and Easter much like American Christians.

Some of my informants have been quite successful in navigating both worlds. By being a very devout Christian, Joseph has cultivated such strong bonds with Americans at his new church that they have given him two cars and have brought his family goods and food from their farms on numerous occasions. I don’t mean to imply that this informant was purposefully manipulative; far from it! Every indication that I saw was that he was a genuinely nice guy who was making an honest effort to make friends and be a good Christian. Perhaps this is genuine, or perhaps it is an example of Trivers’ theory of self-deception, described as “information-processing biases that give priority to welcome over unwelcome information” (von Hippel and Trivers, 2011, p.2). The result is that this bias allows for someone to be very convincing in a lie because they

have convinced themselves that it is true. Either way, it allowed for him to successfully adapt to a new culture very quickly.

Other informants have not had such positive interactions with the Christian church. During the Rwandan genocide, there were instances of Hutu militants coming into Catholic churches and killing Tutsi's. Tracy told me about one such incident in which a group of Hutu came into the church and killed a number of Tutsi babies. He said that the pastor just watched as the Hutu militants grabbed the babies by the legs and hit their heads against the walls and didn't try to stop it. This soured him on organized religion, though he still claims to be Christian. For Tracy, religion has become a more private, personal activity:

"I would like to have a church, myself, in the house. Read the Bible, enjoy myself. I don't like all kinds of religions. You're like 'Which one is the right religion?' God looking at. I would like to go to that one. I really don't care about church. The preacher himself, I don't trust him. Any preacher I see around, I don't trust him. Cuz what happened in Rwanda just show me. Plus, when I see the news one day, 'Catholic church, they rape kids.' I'm like, 'OK, that comes back from where I come from. Which one? Then you teaching in church, OH! Come on! I don't enjoy that."

Megan, a prominent Tutsi refugee from Rwanda had left the Catholic faith over the same issue. She had been baptized Catholic, but left the faith after the Rwandan Genocide. "But I don't like that religion anymore. After the war, Catholic didn't do something good to us." She said that the priests and bishop killed people, even each other, and that they killed people in the churches. Due to the actions of people that she once accepted as fellow Christians, and had created social bonds with, she felt betrayed and hurt. Broken and soured social relationships are extremely difficult to rebuild. So in

response, she chose to leave the Catholic faith, and create new bonds with people she felt she could trust. Megan and Tracy, however, had very different views on who could be trusted and how close they were willing to get with the people at their church in the US.

The ethnic conflict between Hutu and Tutsi has spilled over into American churches and has caused rifts. Tracy told me that when Hutu and Tutsi are in the same church they don't make eye contact with each other. He speculated that this may be due to guilt from having killed Tutsi in Rwanda then getting resettled through the UN claiming to be from Burundi. For Megan, the situation is more complex; it started when a group of Tutsi left the local African church claiming that a fellow Tutsi was stealing from the church coffers. The Hutu parishioners, however, stayed and seemed to trust that everything was ok. I was told this after I attended a church meeting where the pastor went over the church finances in great detail to show exactly how much money was coming in and going out. Rebuilding trust was very important as the theft accusations had almost led to the dissolution of the entire congregation.

It is worth noting that my two Congolese informants had joined predominantly American churches, while the Rwandan and Burundi refugees preferred to stay in the African church to be with other people from their native culture. During the approximately four months that I attended church services, I estimate the attendance to be consistently between 30 and 40 people, the vast majority of which did not speak English. This shows the kind of flexibility that refugees have in creating and maintaining

the social bonds they think are important. However, like the Burmese, they had all converted to Christianity by the time they came to the US.

7.2.4 Religion and Iraqi Refugees

The same could not be said of my Iraqi informants. Perhaps because Islam is also a dominant world religion or perhaps because there is a good-sized Muslim population to integrate with, my Iraqi informants never talked about converting to Christianity. However, given that five of my eight Iraqi informants were translators and contractors working with the American forces, and weren't particularly devout Muslims, they tended to be essentially atheist or agnostic to begin with. Sam, a former contract worker for the US troops stationed in Iraq, said: "I do not like to go anyplace that has a religion, because I know that religions make problems." Likewise, my conversations on religious traditions with the other former translators were pretty short because they didn't identify as Muslim. While they may not be devout followers, they recognized the social dominance of Islam. Clint, another former translator, said: "In Iraq, you would not be acceptable socially if you don't share their religion properly."

All eight of my Iraqi informants cited religious strife in Iraq as a cause of the trouble, and the reason why they had to leave. While they said that the average Iraqi doesn't care about the Sunni/Shia divide, the militant groups, al Qaeda on the Sunni side and Jaysh al-Mahdi on the Shia side, very much do, and they instigate violence against anyone thought to be a member of the opposing faction. Half of my informants were forced to leave their homes because they happened to be Sunni in a Shia

neighborhood (or vice-versa) and were being targeted by the opposing militant group; three more were forced to leave as a result of being targeted by terrorist groups for working for/with the American troops. The last informant left for Jordan after his business failed, and then could not go back for fear of being killed. Sam would like to go back to sell his house in Baghdad, but says he'd be shot by terrorists if he tried, and likewise would his brother if he tried to sell it for him.

Consequently, all but one of my informants was highly critical of Islam, and even the local mosque. Not one of my informants said that they went to the local mosque regularly. According to Emily, the only informant who claimed to still be a devout Muslim: "Everybody in this mosque, not good. Mosque, Muslim, salah Allahu akbar (prayer to Allah the almighty), and at night, drink. Which Muslim this? Not good, only like movie." For these informants, it was better to worship at home, with their families, than to go to a Mosque with people they didn't respect.

As a result, my informants did not express a strong desire for their children to be Muslim, or even to marry a Muslim when they were older. When asked why not, Steve, a former translator, responded: "She's in a different society." This implied that he didn't particularly care what religion his daughter followed, and that she would be subject to different cultural pressures in the US, and would have to make her decisions in a new cultural milieu. For his daughter, social bonds within the Muslim faith might not be beneficial, and he didn't want to influence his daughter in a potentially negative way. Ultimately, she would be better off adapting to the conditions in her new home than

following the old traditions. This was also evident when I asked about national holidays; other than the Muslim holidays like Ramadan and the Eid holidays, nearly all additional holidays were established by Saddam Hussein. As part of their religion, my informants still observed Ramadan and the Eid holidays, but no other holiday was worth preserving. The lone exception was “*Nowruz*” which is the Persian New Year and is celebrated in Kurdistan.

7.3 Conclusion

The primary function of religion is to create and maintain social bonds. Like marriage, these bonds, although not actual kin ties are modeled on kin relationships. In fact, religion often co-opts kin terms and uses them to label fellow members as “brothers” and “sisters” in faith. Although it doesn’t create actual kin ties, the use of kin terms is meant to invoke the sentiments usually associated with kin relationships. For people in a new social environment, often with few real kin around, the creation of spiritual “kin” can be very appealing. For refugees, religion can be a very effective way to expand their social network and to find the necessary resources to survive. Likewise, there is a preference for them and their children to marry within the religious community. In order to maintain a flexibility in who they can rely on for help, some refugees choose to join American churches, while others find it more valuable to maintain ties with fellow countrymen and create or join ethnic churches, like the African Christian Church.

While religion can be a bridge to creating new social bonds in the US, refugees still must adapt to life in the US in numerous other aspects. These other aspects, such as work or running errands, often bring them into contact with Americans and other refugees. Navigating these social situations, where different norms dictate the dynamics of the interaction can be very challenging; but in order to create a new life for themselves and their children, they must find ways to assimilate into American culture. Sometimes they are singled-out or even vilified just for not being “American” or for not being able to speak English. Other times they are treated with kindness and respect, but even then the interaction can be stressful due to different traditions related to reciprocity and how to show gratitude and respect. In the next chapter, I will discuss just how my informants have navigated their interactions with Americans.

Chapter 8 – Culture Clash: Dealing with Americans

8.1 Introduction

As refugees try and rebuild their social worlds in the United States one of the most important factors in determining whether or not they are successful is how they interact with other Americans. In addition to choices about religion, refugees must make numerous decisions about everyday things like interactions with co-workers (both male and female), government employees, hospital employees, and police officers. All of these everyday interactions are loaded with traditions (in the form of social norms), and navigating them can be a delicate process. In addition to being able to communicate in the first place, refugees must decipher the relevant norms and appropriate responses.

For older refugees (40+), language acculturation can be problematic (Montgomery, 1996; Tran, 1990) and result in a relatively more difficult transition than for younger refugees. Additionally, involvement with their ethnic community led to a higher level of satisfaction amongst older refugees, but not younger refugees where economic mobility (discussed in Chapter 9) was perceived as limited by low status job referrals from within the community, referred to as the “Gatekeeper Phenomenon” (Montgomery, 1996). This indicates that age, language, and general sociocultural adaptation abilities all interact in how successful refugees are in creating their new life in the United States.

In this chapter, I discuss the interplay of age, language skills, and general acceptance of new cultural norms when refugees have to interact with people outside of their ethnic community, namely Americans and other refugees or immigrants. Since age influences language acquisition abilities (Fathman, 1975) and interactions with Americans will be significantly easier with increased English language skills, it follows that younger refugees will be more accepting of social changes, especially when they are perceived to lead to better economic circumstances. And indeed, this is what I found to be the case; although even my younger informants expressed preferences for maintaining some traditions from their native culture, including marriage within their ethnicity and religious traditions.

8.2 Refugee Conflicts with American Traditions

8.2.1 Age Effects

Adapting to a new culture, with different traditions, is going to be a difficult task. Refugees, like other immigrants, have two basic choices: keep their traditions, or change to accommodate the traditions of the new culture. The old traditions provide comfort in a new world, a familiar set of rules for social conduct to follow, and a way of life that you don't need to really think about. For older refugees who have lived their entire lives surrounded by people who generally share their cultural norms, adapting to a new set of norms is going to be more difficult than it is for a younger refugee who has yet to reify the traditions of their native culture.

The average age of refugees entering the US in 2010 was 24 years old (Martin, 2011); and with an average age of 31.8 years, my study population included fourteen refugees in their 20's. These young refugees often expressed an acceptance of American culture, and a desire to separate from the traditions of their native cultures. Billy, a young Kurdish refugee from Iraq said, "We really don't care that much. But we still have some people, like the old people that still aren't adapted to the new thinking." Some, like Clint, another Kurdish refugee, expressed this in terms of their native traditions being outdated. "People, like, 200 years ago, they had to do those traditions. They had to live with that. Nowadays, I think it would not work if you do the same." However, that same informant said, about American culture, "That was one of the (biggest) shocks when I got here." This sentiment is consistent with the logic that a new, changing environment requires new adaptive behaviors, which are not likely to come from the traditions of other cultures.

For example, Jane told me that in Burma: "We have to obey our husband or parents, you know, not like here in the United States. When they are 18 or 19, they grow up themselves and stay by themselves. But in Burma it's not like that. We always stay with our parents and we obey what they said." I was also frequently told that: "In Burma, most men don't cook, just women." And "The kitchen is for women. Men go to a different house, and women bring them food so the men can eat together. Bad men eat alone and inside, but good men eat together." However, in both circumstances I witnessed these informants breaking with these traditional roles due to their current situation in the United States. These examples illustrate the disagreement between the

old ways and the new, and how refugees have to reconcile these differences with their new living situation.

Maintaining old traditions can be very hard in a new culture. I attended a going-away party for a young Burundi woman that was leaving to get married to a fellow refugee in Colorado. One of the other guests, the nephew of a prominent local leader, commented on the selection of food. In a heavy Rwandan accent, he told me about how they ate a lot of goat meat in Africa, and that is what he prefers. However, it is hard to find goat meat in the US, because most Americans don't eat goat meat it is not readily available in the supermarkets. He agreed with me that an ethnic market would be nice to have, but that there may not be enough people (and those people may not have enough money) to support one.

8.2.2 Respect and Discipline

Other conflicts with American culture aren't nearly so neutral. In the course of my fieldwork, I was told numerous stories of refugee parents disciplining their children, and having the child call the police for abuse. Standards of discipline vs. abuse can vary by cultures, and this can be a real issue for refugees. American children are told to call 911 and report abuse, and consequently, American parents have to be careful just how physical they get in administering punishment. Refugees, who don't necessarily know where that line is, have a much harder time (Holtzman, 2008).

I was told two stories that are particularly poignant on this topic. Andrew, an older gentleman from Africa had caught his son and daughter fighting. After he

administered what he thought was an appropriate punishment, a good swat but no weapons and no permanent damage, his son proceeded to call 911 (which he had learned to do at school) and report his father for abuse. The police showed up and after discussing the incident informed him that he couldn't hit his son or he could go to prison. While my informant wasn't arrested, it was a shock to have the police called for what he had thought was a perfectly normal response to his son's actions.

In the other instance, Megan was called to mediate between another refugee couple and the police after the parents, who suspected their daughter of sleeping with a young man, tried to force them to get married and stay in the home. According to Megan, it's tradition for the daughter to marry the first person she sleeps with. "They (the police) need to know. We have our culture, we have our limits." As she put it, it was a "conflict of traditions." She has had to mediate in other situations as well, and frequently has to tell the parents the same thing the police told Andrew, that "they can spank, not beat, spank."

The level of discipline that parents employ often has to do with the level of respect that they expect from their children. Respect was listed as a tradition that they wanted to pass on to their children for 17 of my informants (7 of 15 from Myanmar, 6 of 8 Iraqis, and 4 of 7 Africans). This issue of respect, between parents and children, or Americans and refugees, or American kids and refugee kids, was a big issue for these refugees. This was expressed as a lack of respect by Americans or lack of respect amongst Americans that their children emulated. Tracy, a young man from Burundi, told

me; “I see kids here, in the United States, they don’t obey their elders, they don’t respect their elders. But back home, we respect. No matter what, we gotta respect. When I come to the United States the first time, I see people young age, they are pregnant. Back home, I never go to school with someone who is pregnant.” The difference in urban vs. rural upbringing can also lead to different ideals of respect for adults. Joseph, a Congolese refugee told me the following. “If you live in village you have tradition, you have many things in your head. Kids of city and village different, because all kids live in city have no respect.”

Respect is also a significant issue with coworkers. A lack of English skills, coupled with a very small ethnic community upon which to rely for job opportunities, means that refugees have to adapt very quickly in the workplace. For nearly all of my Burmese and African informants, English wasn’t learned until they actually arrived in the US. Given that they only received aid from the official local aid organization (in this case the Catholic Diocese) for about six months, this made finding a job with a living wage very difficult. In addition to an almost complete lack of job skills for a modern economy, which further complicated their difficulties, the lack of language skills made getting along with their bosses very stressful.

Joseph, one of my African informants, who now has very good English proficiency having been here for a few years, told me about his first job and the issues he had with his supervisor. His first job was as a weaver, but he quit after 1 month because his eyesight wasn’t good enough to see the small pieces on the machines. His

second job was at a local warehouse. He said that his immediate supervisor had a problem with Zimbabwe because the president kicked all the Europeans out. After 1 month, this supervisor sent him home because his English wasn't good enough. He claimed that my informant worked too slowly, but my informant suspected that the real reason was because he was African. Currently, he has a job at a local nursing home and is doing well, but that incident was very stressful for him since he was so new and didn't have many job alternatives.

For Steve, it was a problem with his coworker that led him to quit his job. While working for Wall-Mart one day he was outside smoking during a break. Another employee asked where he was from and what religion he practiced. When Steve told him that he was Iraqi and Muslim, the coworker asked if he thought it was ok to throw shoes at a leader (in reference to the Iraqi reporter who threw his shoe at then-President George Bush). He was offended that someone would assume he agreed with the actions of the reporter and ask him a question like that. He said that he felt disrespected so he quit the job.

8.2.3 Gender and Other Conflicts

Respect is also a significant factor in gender relations and how men and women are expected to treat each other. Megan, a prominent community leader from Burundi, told me this about male/female relations:

“When men talk, women don’t talk. It’s the same in our culture. You have to let the men talk about the problem you got. The man is the top, the head. There’s no way you can talk about something, with (me) contradicting (you). First of all, I have to respect what you say, and let you say it. If I have a problem, I have to (whisper) ‘remember this and this and this.’ And then you are going to say it. The man has the power; which I don’t like!”

In many cultures, including those that my informants came from, husbands/fathers act as patriarch and have the final say on most matters. The role differences between men and women can also result in different norms in how they interact with each other, as illustrated by Megan above. For Jane, the treatment of women in Myanmar was quite poor: “We are the women, we suffer a lot of things.” She also told me about her time in India, before she was granted refugee status and came to the US, where some immigrant women were raped by their bosses, and due to both their immigrant status and the view of women in Indian society, that they had little recourse. She was much happier with life in the US, where she had better economic and social opportunities.

These role differences were also apparent in how my informants responded to questions about whether or not they would treat their sons and daughters different traditions; nearly half of my informants would teach their daughters different traditions, with five of them teaching different traditions related to the household, six related to respect and interactions with others, and six who said they would teach different things but didn’t specify what those would be. The categories for the previous question were not exclusive. The differences in household traditions were all related to the traditional role of women doing all of the cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children.

Teaching different traditions related to respect were directed at more restrictive liberties for their daughters. For Shane, “It’s no good for ladies to drink alcohol.” And for Clint, “If she is open to everyone, people could misinterpret her honesty. People could talk about her and that is a bad reputation for the whole family. It’s not a good thing. (She) should be more uptight.” This view contradicts the ideal that Americans have that men and women are equal and should be treated equally; but it is more consistent with how Americans actually behave where double standards for men and women (especially related to sexuality and social behavior) abound.

The different roles of women in the US can cause some refugee men to greatly prefer women from their native cultures who share their understanding (if not their views) of traditional gender roles. When asked about marrying an American woman, Tracy said: “I need to go to Rwanda and get married. I never marry somebody who’s American who got my skin color. They crazy! They scare me so much!” Similar sentiments were expressed by other single, male informants; they would like to return home to marry a woman from their own culture because they think a wife from their own culture will be easier to live with. Gender roles are clearly linked with household harmony.

Finally, there are things that just aren’t addressed in different cultures. Many of these relate to modern technology. Refugee parents often don’t understand the “need” for their children to have cell phones. They often also don’t understand how social media works, especially how it affects their child’s life at school. Things like hygiene

standards are also often overlooked. In refugee camps, you simply can't shower daily, and things like deodorant and perfume are just not available. In the US, this can create issues for refugees at work or school when they don't shower frequently, or use deodorant. Workers with the local aid organization tried to address this issue, but it can be very difficult to tell someone they smell bad and need to shower more often.

8.3 Social Dynamics

The lack of English proficiency not only makes jobs harder to find and keep, but everyday life is complicated as well. From my volunteer work with an adult ESL (English as a Second Language) class, I know that basic vocabulary, supermarket layout, and driving directions were very important skills to teach refugees and immigrants early in the process. They often seemed to enjoy these classes and were very engaged in learning how to navigate their new environment; the classes about English grammar, like when to say "a" or "an," were met with far less enthusiasm. They also often had problems with pronunciation since their English teachers, if they even had one, back home had thick accents. About learning English in the refugee camp in Thailand, Mo told me: "we can only read (English), never met foreigner." This means that English skills could be highly variable. I helped numerous students who could read English, but could not speak or write it, or who could understand what they heard but could not read or write English. This lack of English proficiency led to a heavy reliance on employees of the local aid organization, who often could find translators or who spoke a lingua franca themselves.

While they often have to rely on the Diocese for aid and information, they recognize that the Diocese is overtaxed and extremely busy. Allen's first year in the US was pretty typical: "At first I asked (a Burmese Diocese employee), but after 6 months I don't ask anything because I think they are very busy." Because of this, many refugees feel like they are on their own very quickly and have to fend for themselves with no significant support network. "I don't have friend here" is what Nick told me when I asked him who he talked to when he needed help.

Yet, despite their English difficulties, the vast majority of my informants seemed glad to be in the US, and generally had a very positive view of Americans. Jeremy, an Iraqi informant, said: "It doesn't matter where you are in the United States, because all the people treat you (with respect). Wherever you go, you will get assistance from any person." Joseph shared this positive view of Americans: "all American, first, nice. Some bad, some good, but first, nice."

This often is because of the positive interactions with Americans at the churches that they now attend. As I mentioned previously, one informant was given two cars by fellow church members who wanted to help him and his family. Others, like Susan, got help with smaller things like clothes, supplies for their children, and rides to various appointments.

In terms of tradition maintenance, it is very hard to enforce traditions when refugee children are surrounded by American children at school, and to a large degree even in their neighborhoods. This leads to children often having better English skills than

their parents. I didn't plan for this, but I had a couple adult men bring their daughters to the interview to translate. For my purposes, this wasn't an issue, but when children have to translate at school or the hospital there is the potential for misinformation. The literature and anecdotal evidence show that when children have to translate they may purposely misinterpret for their parents to keep themselves out of trouble (Holtzman, 2008).

While this can be an issue when communicating with Americans, it can also cause problems at home. Disciplining of children varies around the world, and when those methods are employed in the US, they can lead to accusations of child abuse and intervention by local police (Holtzman, 2008). As I discussed earlier, one informant had the police called on him by his own son when he gave him a swat for misbehaving. He did not go to jail, but other refugees may not be so lucky. Domestic issues can follow the same pattern. When there is a physical altercation between a man and woman, the man does not always understand that that kind of behavior is unacceptable in the US, even though it may be commonplace in his native culture. This can also lead to interaction with local law enforcement, and more cultural misunderstanding (Holtzman, 2008).

8.4 Refugee Community Interactions

For the seventeen informants who had been in the US for one year or less, the local aid organization has been their primary source for almost everything. Numerous informants made statements similar to this one from Dan: "I (would) go to Refugee Immigration Services. We go to them for everything." RIS sets them up with an

apartment when they arrive, pays for rent and utilities for the first six months, and finds them a job. It's no wonder that they become dependent on RIS. Further, the local refugee community is rather small, with little accumulated wealth to start businesses or aid newcomers. Haines (1985), in his discussion of European, Cuban, and Vietnamese refugees, talks about how the establishment of an ethnic community served as a cushion for newcomers to receive aid while getting on their feet. The ethnic community offered jobs, which allowed new refugees to earn a living while learning English and building personal wealth.

The lack of an established ethnic community in my study area means that new refugees are reliant on the local aid organization for all of these functions. Since RIS can only offer aid for a short time, it means that these refugees are on their own before they have a chance to establish themselves. The important consequences of this are social isolation and difficulties in achieving economic self-sufficiency.

Social isolation can make it very difficult for new refugees to adapt to American culture. Since so many of my informants relied upon RIS for almost everything, and RIS is already overtaxed, they had few places to turn. A few of the refugees that had been here longer, or who spoke proficient English, became primary resources for new refugees. For members of the African community, particularly the ones that attend the African Christian Church, Jane was the go-to person for many issues. In addition to having spent the past 15 years establishing herself in the community, refugees went to Megan because of her extensive language abilities, speaking at least three prominent

languages proficiently. When asked who she goes to for help, Jessica told me: “I ask (Megan) because she speaks my language.”

Some refugees are able to relocate closer to family, or to a place with a larger community, as Holtzman (2008) describes for Sudanese refugees in Minnesota. Jane, a Karenni refugee reflected on why the local community was so small. “In (the study area) they don’t have work and cannot speak the language. It’s very difficult so they move to another state with the same ethnic group. Most of the people move to another state; that’s why we have a small group.” Her ethnic group consisted of 27 Karenni refugees, most of whom lived in the same apartment complex, and she estimated that just over 100 Burmese refugees lived in the area, with many of them having arrived within the past couple of years. This hardly makes for a robust community where assistance can be offered from established members.

This isolation has additional consequences. I observed a very close-knit community trying to preserve their culture, especially their language, against pressure from a dominant American culture. This created an even more isolated community. Some of my informants were clearly distraught over their isolation, and seemed very depressed about their current situation. One young Burmese man had no family and claimed to have only one friend. He had not been incorporated into the community, I suspect because he kept to himself.

This creates a conundrum for US refugee policy. With the goal of making refugees economically self-sufficient, while not overburdening the resources of any

given community, the state and federal governments are in a tight spot. If the community is too small, the refugees don't have enough people to create a mutual aid group and the full economic burden falls on the local aid organizations. If the community is too large, they can become insulated and create an exclusive enclave within a larger American community. This scenario is what happened with Cubans in Miami, Jews in New York, and Vietnamese on the West Coast (Haines, 1985). It was the experience with these refugee groups that prompted the current policy of scattering refugees across the country.

8.5 Conclusion

Despite all of the potential for misunderstanding, most of my informants were happy to have gotten resettled in the US. They still have numerous issues when it comes to dealing with Americans, and knowing what is acceptable and what is not, but they are also good at observation and following the social rules set by their American neighbors. "I just watch and try to do it the same way," said a young Burmese man. They try to emulate their American neighbors, but with their own cultural twist.

For instance, when it comes to cooking traditional food, there is not a market that sells African foods. So, my African informants got some of their ingredients from the Asian market, but went to Wal-Mart for most of their groceries. "Go to Wal-Mart to get rice, oil, and vegetables. For everything else, we go to Hong Kong Market." However, one of my African informants told me that American food is too sweet and too salty

compared to African food. He also lamented the fact that it was hard to find goat meat, which he was used to in Africa.

These issues can make it hard for refugees to settle in and get used to their new communities. Other refugees can be helpful, especially when it comes to language issues. Most of my informants had mediocre English skills, but were learning fast. However, they all said that they wanted their children to speak their language, especially in the home. As Megan told me: “Inside it’s her (mother’s) country.” This can lead to issues when the children gain English proficiency before their parents and are relied upon for translating.

Megan has also been trying to get a job with the local hospital to translate for African refugees, most of whom speak Swahili as a lingua franca. So far, she has been unsuccessful, as the hospital wants her to translate for free, something she is not exactly keen on doing even though she often does translate for refugees when she brings them to the hospital for appointments. Another refugee, Jane, wants to open a Burmese language Center, but with so few Burmese in the local community, there isn’t enough clientele to make it successful, even though it would be very useful.

This brings me back to the issue of a critical mass for refugees to form communities where they can rely on each other for aid instead of the local aid organization. I suggest that putting money up front to help refugees start businesses, for which they can hire newcomers until they can get on their feet, may be a better allocation of funds in the long term. Like a lottery winner, the “lump sum” can be

parlayed into lucrative investments better than a yearly pay-out. This could have problems in and of itself, and further study could elucidate the particular issues, but I think it could be much better than the current system of helping refugees just get by.

This brings me to the dominant subject of Chapter 8, economics. I've discussed the social setting in which my informants are operating, including their kin networks, social services, and local communities. All of these factors are involved in how refugees earn a living and try to build a future for their children.

Ch. 9 – Finding a Job and Getting Ahead

9.1 Introduction

Due to low English proficiency and a lack of relevant job skills, the first job refugees obtain is nearly always through the local aid agency, and often for very modest wages as warehouse or hospitality workers. The result was often that my informants, and their spouses, worked multiple jobs in order to afford basic expenses. Holtzman (2008) reports a similar pattern amongst Nuer refugees in Minnesota. While government assistance can help offset early expenses, it is not a lasting solution, and the expense of childcare can make it difficult to make ends meet, even with assistance (Holtzman, 2008). Education is seen as a way out of this situation, but combining school with multiple jobs is often impossible. I frequently encountered students in my ESL class that quit coming to class once they found a job; and while education is desirable, a job is essential.

Upon arriving in the United States, the refugees in my sample had only a short time to get settled before they had to find employment, and once aid from the local agency is terminated at six months they are financially responsible for themselves. While interactions with Americans, especially as bosses and coworkers influence refugee happiness, a much more important aspect of rebuilding their lives is making a living and taking care of their families financially. Economic concerns also have substantial influence on how refugees are able to educate their children about their

native cultures, and which traditions they are able to functionally maintain. For example, a refugee may feel more comfortable in traditional clothing, but the only thing available, either from donation or in their price range, is typical American garb like jeans and t-shirts. Finding traditional food items and other things desired for traditional celebrations or observances can also be difficult and expensive. Therefore, both desire and expense go into which traditions refugees are able to pass on to their children.

While traditions associated with marriage, religion, language, and kinship tend to be more highly conserved, there are other areas where traditions are lost rather quickly. This chapter gives a short discussion of those areas where refugees seem almost eager to adopt an American way of life. This can be seen with the children of refugees very clearly. Since many of these children were either born in the US or were quite young when they immigrated, they don't have the connection to their traditional cultures like their parents. This can create conflict when they adopt the attitudes and behaviors of their American peers, and those behaviors are not in line with what their parents want. Since my research has only dealt with adults, I can only present the issues as they have been conveyed to me, but future research with the children of refugees could illuminate these issues from their perspective. Finally, I will give my perspective on the major issues faced by refugees and potential solutions drawn from both the refugees themselves and community leaders. While by no means complete, this will serve as a catalyst and reference point for potential future research.

9.2 Economics

9.2.1 Economic Self-sufficiency and Refugee Policy

One of the stated goals of the Refugee Act of 1980 is economic self-sufficiency in a timely manner. This may not seem to be very difficult for refugees with job skills from their country of origin. However, even though early refugee groups such as Cubans, Russian Jews and early waves of Southeast Asian refugees in the 70's and 80's were highly educated with higher levels of professional and white-collar workers than the general US population, there was still a period of years where the unemployment rates for these groups was significantly higher than for the general US population (Haines, 1985).

9.2.2 Finding (appropriate) Jobs

Haines (1985) reports that those refugees lacking education or job skills “such as the farmers and fishers who constitute a small but significant portion of recent flows from Southeast Asia – face greater difficulties as they adjust to life in the United States” (p.19). This is true of all but two of my twenty-two informants from Myanmar and Central Africa where they were farmers, fishermen, housewives, unskilled laborers, or left their country of origin as children, and lack any relevant job training or formal education. This means that the only jobs that they qualify for in the US are low-paying factory, warehouse, or hospitality positions with little upward mobility. The lack of job prospects, coupled with minimal English language skills, inhibits economic self-sufficiency.

One major difficulty for those that do have training is finding a job where that training is recognized. Many degrees and certificates from foreign countries do not translate into comparable American degrees and certificates. This means that some very highly skilled refugees are unable to continue their careers (at a high pay level) and must take jobs as unskilled workers, often for low wages. This is especially true of all eight of my Iraqi informants who were previously employed as translators for the US military, construction managers, journalists, engineers, business owners and artists who must now work in factory, warehouse, and retail jobs to make a living. Further, to regain their certification they must pay for a second education in the US, one that is very expensive on their current pay-levels, and largely redundant.

All of my informants from Iraq, Myanmar, and Africa with college experience or vocational training expressed frustration at not having their training recognized in the US. One Iraqi informant, Steve, told me that he had earned a computer-related associates degree in Iraq but had to quit school because of ethnic issues: "They start doing problems with me; like, you know - You are Kurdish, you are whatever, so I have to leave college and go do the military thing." When he got to the US he wanted to take classes but could not afford the time or money to take classes, especially classes that simply repeated the classes he had already taken in Iraq. Andrew, for example, had trained to become a welder in Gabon, but that training was not recognized in the US, so now he has a low-level job in a local warehouse.

Jane, a college educated woman, was forced to leave Myanmar when it was discovered that she was actively working for workers rights against the views of the current government. When she went to college someone told her about the ILO (International Labor Organization). She wanted to educate people about human rights, specifically forced labor practices which are a big problem in Myanmar, but the government didn't approve. She distributed pamphlets about the ILO for 3 months before she was found out, and if the government soldiers caught her she could have been arrested. In December 2005, soldiers came to her house looking for her in connection to the pamphlets. Her mother sent her sister to tell her the soldiers were searching for her. Upon hearing that she was wanted by the government, she fled to the Burma/India border, and in January of 2006 went to New Delhi. She applied through the UN for resettlement and lived in New Delhi for four years before she was resettled in the US. During that time, she met her first husband, who had been in New Delhi for 11 years. She continued to fight for workers' and women's rights, and even worked in a women's health clinic with the WRWAB (Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma). Despite her college education, she is currently employed at a local warehouse, although, as reported previously, she hopes to open a Burmese language center to help the over 100 Burmese refugees in the area.

A major focus of US refugee policy is to get refugees to become economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible. To this end, the voluntary agencies try to find new refugees jobs very quickly; often within the first month of resettlement. In the past this has been relatively successful. However, with the recent economic recession, jobs have

been difficult to find for many Americans, and even harder to find for refugees who often lack sufficient English proficiency to adequately communicate with an employer. This can create difficulty, and added expense, when translators are required or the refugee misunderstands employer's assignments.

Due to their lack of vocational skills, many refugees are only qualified for unskilled labor type jobs, like the local book warehouse, cleaning hotel rooms, and janitorial jobs at the local hospital. Many of them, if they had a job in Africa or Burma at all, were farmers and fishermen, and the women were almost exclusively housewives. Haines (1985) said that, for the refugee groups at the time, most refugees were from the elite and upper classes and thus had valuable job skills. For them, finding a job in America wasn't an "if" but a "when" and "how good." For my informants, this was not the case. Many are barely scraping by, with roughly the same salary as a graduate TA, but having to support a family. The monthly salary for one Burmese man was about \$1000 per month. Half of that went to rent, and the other half to food and bills, leaving virtually nothing to invest or save in case of emergency or to build wealth for his children's future.

Further complicating the issue is a lack of appropriate jobs that match a refugee's skill level. The first wave of refugees is often comprised of highly skilled workers or other members of an elite class that are highly educated or trained (Haines, 1985). My Iraqi informants are part of this first wave and often do possess extensive training. A number of them have college degrees and speak fluent English. This should

qualify them for high level jobs. However, their college degrees or training often do not transfer or are not considered equivalent to American degrees or training. One informant, Steve, held an associates degree in a computer-related field, similar to MIS, yet could only find work cleaning hotel rooms, a job he found rather demeaning. He was further frustrated with the college system that refused to recognize his previous coursework and is forcing him to pay to take classes that he has already completed in Iraq. This was not an uncommon complaint; highly skilled refugees are not able to find the kinds of jobs that they are qualified for because of the perception that foreign education is not as good as American education, despite the fact that the US has been middle-of-the-pack in international education rankings for the past 20 years (OECD.org, 2012).

While my Iraqi informants generally had modern world skills, experience, and English proficiency, they still started with nothing and some had skills that didn't translate well to a downturned American economy where industrial and construction jobs were hard to find. One informant, Sam, was a contractor with the US Army, and had a very difficult time finding an appropriate job, especially given that his English skills were pretty basic. He complained that refugees start over, with nothing from past work and SSI (Supplemental Security Income/Welfare) cuts them off too soon. Since he has no savings or assets, being cut off is too harsh. If they give him SSI even though he works he can build a life much quicker. "They (social services) push you not to work, since they give you money if you don't work, but cut you off when you work. (This) breeds a lazy mentality (and) makes it very hard to improve your life. I could be dishonest and keep

food stamps, but (I have) too much pride and want to teach my daughter the right way, so I gave up social assistance. They should give more to refugees who work, like 'If you work, we help you more. You can't build yourself.'"

However, for many of my Iraqi informants, it was more of a pay-scale, or equivalent job, issue than finding a job at all. Half of them were translators for the military, often with university educations, and now, because their education degrees don't transfer, they are forced to work in retail and unskilled labor jobs to pay rent. These Iraqis have very good English skills, and with some help in re-acquiring an equivalent American degree, could be very competitive in the current job market, as slow as it currently is. Some have tried to take classes at local colleges, but were all forced to stop due to time and financial constraints.

All of this leads to burdens on the local aid organizations, both private and public. Since these refugees can't support themselves and their families, they have to rely on the Diocese and Social Security/Welfare to feed themselves and their children. One Diocese worker, who wished to remain anonymous, told me about how the Diocese has had to scale back aid to refugees because they are getting more refugees with less funding from the state. They used to pay rent and utilities for almost a year while the refugees learned English and found stable, good-paying jobs and were able to support themselves. Now, due to budget cuts, they can only pay for about six months of rent, and three months of utilities. This has led to refugees quitting English classes, which I have personally witnessed as a volunteer, even though they didn't have jobs that paid a

living wage, and with little opportunity for upward mobility. I can only speculate that this leads to a sort of “log-jam” at the bottom, making it even harder for new refugees to find work.

Additionally, even though refugees are, by definition, in fear for their lives, it often takes years for them to be resettled. Joseph, an informant from Africa, had worked for a recently deposed president as a local official, so he had to flee to Gabon in 1998. It wasn't until 2007 that he finally came to the US. He clearly feared he would be killed if he went back. In reference to the new President, he said: “He like to kill people.” He had his first interview with the UNHCR in 2005, his 2nd in 2006, 3rd in 2007 along with a medical exam. Then he underwent a short cultural orientation. He had to sell his camera equipment to get money for airfare for his family: a wife and six children. His daughter came to the US first, in September of 2007, then he and the rest of his family came two months later, in November of 2007. At first he was supposed to go to Seattle, but his daughter was redirected to Missouri after she initially arrived in New York, so the rest of the family was also redirected to Missouri as well.

As is apparent, economic support is difficult to find for refugees in this downturned economy, yet the local agency is tasked with placing them nonetheless. Obviously, having more money available for assistance while they learn English and/or train for relevant job skills would be optimal, but this is not the case. So, what can be done? As discussed in Chapter 5, the presence of kin can help refugees settle in faster,

and can possibly help with job placement and economic support. However, US policy on refugee placement currently makes placing distant kin together difficult.

9.3 US Refugee Aid Structure

As previously mentioned, one area that the federal government does oversee is the general disbursement of refugees within the US. The general policy is to spread refugees throughout the country (nuclear families are kept intact) so as to lessen the economic impact on any given community. However, secondary migration (the movement of refugees after their initial resettlement) and the placement of immediate family members can lead to local concentration of refugees (Haines, 1985 and references therein). US policy is to place immediate relatives in the same location (Haines, 1985), however, the kinship systems of cultures to which many refugees belong, includes relatives who are further removed than immediate family. These relatives may be important within their native kinship systems, but due to Western standards, these kin are not always placed close to their kin, and sometimes not even brought to the US at all. As discussed in Chapter 5, while most of my informants had their immediate family with them, many did not have any family beyond that.

Haines (1985) makes numerous statements that refugees have traditionally been the elites from their countries of origin. I think this has changed with the switch from communism refugees in the 70's and 80's to war and authoritarian government refugees in the 90's and 2000's. Nearly all of my informants from Myanmar and Africa

were farmers, fishermen and unskilled laborers in their countries of origin, and have found work in an industrialized society difficult to adapt to.

As per US federal policy, it is up to local aid organizations to provide assistance to new refugees. While they do have travel costs reimbursed, living expenses are born by the local aid organization and the community. For all 30 of my informants for whom this was their initial resettlement community, this was a service of the local Catholic Diocese. This local agency that aids refugees in my study area often provides a completely furnished (often with donated furniture) and stocked apartment complete with food, basic grooming tools and even soap. They then pay rent for this apartment and some of the utilities.

However, as mentioned previously, due to budget limitations, the Diocese has to limit the time frame for which they pay for these living expenses to about 5 months. I was told that this time frame used to be longer, but due to budget cuts and decreased funding from state and federal sources, they have had to stop paying rent and utilities sooner than they would like. This has put the burden of paying for these expenses on the new refugees. For some, namely those with proficient English skills and some job training, this is not particularly cumbersome, assuming they have found a decent job. For others, especially those with limited English skills, this is a huge burden, and limits their capacity to find appropriate and sufficient employment. The result is an economically stressed population that faces an even steeper uphill climb in terms of building financial stability and providing for their children.

9.4 Conclusion

“Tradition is good.” “We must follow the older people.”

Refugees span two worlds. They grow up in a culture that can be very different from the United States, and yet they have very little time to learn and adapt to American culture before they are expected to be essentially self-sufficient. They have to resolve conflicts between their native traditions, which is often all they have ever known, and what is expected of them in the US. Often they are left to their own devices to figure out what to do. “I just watch and try to do it the same way.” This was the strategy for Shane, a young Karenni refugee; and for the most part it worked pretty well, except with food. It looked so foreign, and potentially harmful to him. “(I) could not eat American food. (I) didn’t know it was OK.” Eventually he got desperate enough to try it and found that he actually liked American food, but this illustrates that even things we take for granted can be daunting to a newcomer.

Children adapt to a new culture much faster than most adults. It often only takes a few months for them to learn English and to adjust to American schools. My experience as an ESL volunteer showed just how slowly some adults learn a new language. I helped a few people for months who seemed to progress at a snail’s pace. It was often easier to let their children translate, which can lead to the problems discussed above. This can be exacerbated when the refugee moves from a rural to an urban setting. As Joseph said: “If you live in village you have tradition, you have many things in your head. Kids of city and village different, because all kids live in city have no respect.”

In a village setting, there are a lot of family members present to enforce traditions, and ensure that young people behave in culturally appropriate ways. This can make the transition to a city filled with strangers very shocking. With family around, it can make the transition easier, but the US policy is to disburse all but nuclear families, which makes the extended kin ties that are present for many refugees much harder to maintain. The presence of elders, likewise, could go a long way in maintaining ties and helping refugees settle in better.

Attempts to maintain and build kin ties through marriage can also be very difficult, especially when people who meet in a refugee camp are sent to different parts of the US. They also often lack the economic means to uphold traditions like brideprice or dowry. For my African informants there is a further complication caused by identifying them as African-American with all of the stereotypes and bias that that designation entails. They are often lumped together even though they have very different values. As stated earlier, Tracy found this lumping together worrisome when it came to marriage: "I need to go to Rwanda and get married. I never marry somebody who's American who got my skin color. They crazy! They scare me so much!"

Because marriage and religion serve to create and maintain social ties the associated traditions are maintained with greater fidelity than other cultural aspects like food and dress. For refugees, it would therefore seem to be the best course of action to create the ethnic communities that serve to buffer newcomers to the shock of American culture, and to provide a mechanism for a gradual and successful acculturation. This, of

course, must be balanced with the strain that destitute newcomers put on local government and community resources.

However daunting the circumstances, my informants were generally happy to be in the United States. Maybe it's the knowledge that they are in a better place, or that they have a chance to thrive where before it was only adversity. Megan, a Rwandan woman who I found to be inspiringly positive, summed it up thusly:

"It changed my life completely. I'm always laughing. I'm happy. I don't want to lose my time. If some bad thinking comes, it's over. Few minutes after, I have to erase it because I don't need that. Sadness is something you want. There is two choices, life or death. If you cannot take it, then you know what, die! You know, sometimes hurts can make you feel better."

Chapter 10 – Conclusions

10.1 Introduction

Sociopolitical conflict is likely to displace people and produce refugees for the foreseeable future, and as long as the US remains a wealthy, stable nation, it is likely to continue to accept refugees. How those refugees are treated in terms of resettlement and resources that are made available is important in both a humanitarian and economic context. Currently, US policy is to disperse refugees throughout the nation, with efforts to keep families intact limited to nuclear family units, and with economic support for these refugees coming predominantly from local aid organizations. However, this policy fails to recognize the importance of kin for economic and social support.

This all creates a situation that is far less than ideal for achieving the stated goal of the US federal government, which is to get refugees financially stable as quickly as possible. For other immigrant populations, financial stability is achieved through contact with family and a larger ethnic community (Menjivar, 1995), where they can often reside while they find employment, learn the language, and otherwise learn and adapt to American culture. Integral to the functioning of these ethnic communities, and the kin-groups that comprise them, are shared traditions.

Therefore, in an effort to understand what traditions were important to refugees, and presumably to their well-being, I conducted semi-structure interviews with a total of 30 refugees from Myanmar, Iraq, Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi. Specifically, this is important for understanding how refugees structure their social environment. More broadly, understanding how refugees maintain traditions, and how those traditions influence their ability to adapt to their new environment, can inform current refugee policy to maximize the chances for successful resettlement.

In my study I found that my informants were often resettled without any kin beyond a spouse and dependent children, and that this created a situation where they were isolated and lacked social and economic support. They identified traditions related to language, social behavior (namely respect for others), food, and kinship to be important areas of tradition to maintain (20, 17, 9, and 8 responses, respectively). Additionally, 13 informants wanted their children to marry someone from their native culture, and 24 informants wanted their children to practice the same religion. Because marriage and religion both serve to maintain social bonds, maintenance of those bonds within the culture is clearly important to refugees. Respect for others was cited by my informants more often than any other aspect of tradition. This speaks to the importance of treating people appropriately, which is an important factor not only in maintaining social bonds within the ethnic community, but also potentially in obtaining employment and dealing with people in novel situations.

The limitations of my study include not having a random sample and thus perhaps not being representative of the overall refugee experience of refugees recently resettled in the US; especially in regards to the number of female informants that I interviewed. Additionally, the context of my study was with refugees from a variety of backgrounds in a medium-sized Midwestern city and thus is likely to present different issues than specific refugee groups and refugees in large cities in other parts of the country might have. However, my findings did not contradict the general literature in any significant way, and thus the current study can be assumed to not be an outlier.

10.2 Interaction of Policy, Traditions, and Kin

The presence of kin, and by extension an ethnic community, can act as a stabilizing and supportive structure for refugees to aid in both economic success and social integration while also providing psychological support (Miller et al., 2002). A primary means through which refugees can provide psychological support is through maintaining traditions. This creates an environment that is familiar, and social norms that new refugees understand. It has to be incredibly traumatizing to be thrust into a situation where people behave in completely unfamiliar ways, as Chagnon (1997) describes when he first arrived in Yanomamöland and was confronted by aggressive and demanding Indians that behaved in ways that would be unacceptable for most Americans.

It is US refugee policy to disperse refugees across the country to minimize the economic impact on any given community that might otherwise experience a large

influx of refugees who are dependent on government aid, including welfare, and local aid organizations. However, by doing this, the federal government also disperses the social support network of refugees. This leaves refugees in small, isolated communities that are unable to support each other and makes refugees almost completely dependent on local aid organizations that, like the one in my study area, are becoming increasingly unable to provide assistance due to decreases in available funds. These small communities then lack sufficient numbers to build their own support structure, including ethnic businesses that can employ newly arrived refugees while they learn English and build sufficient wealth to live on their own. The result is that once aid from the local organization runs out, refugees are stuck in the cycle of poverty that plagues low-income Americans, and all of the social problems that are associated with it (Pick et al., 2010).

As stated previously, economic self-sufficiency is a primary goal of US refugee policy (USDHHS, 2012a). Seemingly, this is to be achieved through monetary aid from local aid organizations and hard work. However, economic success in the US is greatly aided by education and a social structure, including kin, that supports its members. Refugees often lack sufficient formal education to achieve even mid-level employment (and the education that some do have is often not recognized) as seen by the fact that only four of my informant told me that they were employed outside of low-level warehouse, retail, and hospitality jobs. With no time and little opportunity for education, many of my informants, like Sam, felt stuck in their jobs making just enough to stay afloat but not enough to build any wealth since they are quickly cut off from

government benefits. “They should give more to refugees who work, like ‘If you work, we help you more. You can’t build yourself.’”

Traditions surrounding marriage, religion and social behavior act to maintain social bonds. In addition to language, these were important areas of tradition maintenance for my informants. This provides the means for refugees to create and maintain the kin ties and ethnic communities that can help to provide the vital support that they need for success in the US. However, as seen with refugee groups prior to 1975, such as Jews in the 40’s and 50’s and Cubans in the 60’s and 70’s, ethnic communities in excess of 10,000 people can become enclaves that insulate refugees and prevent them from integrating into the larger American culture. Clearly, there is a balance that needs to be struck between the two extremes: large enclaves and isolated individuals.

10.3 Recommendations and Future Research

The hardships that refugees face are numerous, and to provide every kind of assistance that they might desire would be a daunting task, and likely financially prohibitive; and some of the burden of adapting to a new culture has to be borne by the refugees themselves. However, there are certain things that can be done to greatly enhance their ability to become economically self-sufficient, culturally integrated, and psychologically healthy.

My primary recommendation is to resettle refugees with consideration for keeping extended kin-groups intact. This would include resettling refugees with

members of their families beyond the nuclear family, such as with adult siblings, cousins, and aunts and uncles. When multiple extended families are resettled together a healthy support network is more likely to form and economic success is more likely. While the ethnic community should be sufficiently large to enable the maintenance of the traditions that my study found to be important, the precise size of these ethnic communities will depend on the size and nature of the host community and the ability of the local aid organization to provide the initial aid.

It could also be advantageous to provide initial waves of refugees with the means of establishing small businesses where they can employ later arrivals. This could take the form of small business loans for the express purpose of creating ethnic businesses for refugees. The implementation of this program would also require additional research.

Finally, while refugee children are provided with educational opportunities through public schooling, adult refugees often are not. Thus gaining the education necessary for upward job mobility is extremely difficult, especially when they have to balance any education they might want with long hours at work and family obligations. Providing educational loans, or even establishing grants and scholarships for refugees could help with this problem, and eventually help with the previous issue of economic self-sufficiency and establishing successful ethnic businesses.

10.4 Conclusion

While the majority of the current literature focuses on a specific group of refugees, and often a specific issue they face and in a specific location, the current study has a more general focus. This allows for a broader understanding of refugees, and how they undertake the task of creating a new life in the US. It also provides additional information on how US refugee policy affects refugees from different cultures with an eye towards improving overall treatment of refugees during and after the resettlement process, namely how traditions affect the social and economic success of refugees.

By maintaining important traditions, refugees are able to provide social structure to their children and to each other, which helps with economic self-sufficiency and emotional health. By studying how and what traditions are maintained, the current study provides additional evidence for the role of kin and community with regards to how the US resettles refugees. This is important not only for the wellbeing of the refugees themselves, but for the host communities in which they are resettled. Everyone involved has the same goals; the federal government, local aid organizations, and the refugees themselves all desire economic self-sufficiency and social integration. Through studying how refugees navigate the resettlement process and how they establish themselves in their new country, adjustments to refugee policy and local implementation can make the resettlement process even more successful.

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