

Working Paper #23

**Refugee Rights and Wrongs:
Global Cultural Diffusion among the Congolese in South Africa**

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Abstract

Every day the media is filled with examples of the ways in which contemporary social, economic, and political life transcends national borders. Some researchers argue that these dynamics attest to the emergence of a global civil society, based on a set of universal norms and practices that works in tandem with or may even supercede national politics. Yet we know little about the ways in which global institutions resonate with the everyday lives of individuals and with the organizations that actually serve people on the ground. How do ordinary people learn about and conceptualize these universal rights and how do they claim them? To what extent do NGOs articulate comparable notions about rights, pursue common strategies to achieve them, and by so doing, contribute to this emerging architecture of transnational governance? This paper uses the case of Congolese refugees in South Africa to explore these questions. It examines how individuals learn about and use global norms and practices and how this learning process varies in their home and host-country context. It also explores the extent to which organizations operating both locally and internationally are exposed to a set of global approaches and expectations and how these influence how things get done.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	1
II. Theoretical Debates	2
III. The Congolese-South African Connection	3
IV. The Diffusion of Ideas and Practices Among Individuals.....	5
V. Cultural Diffusion in Organizational Contexts	10
VI. Conclusion	13
<i>References</i>	14

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFDL	Alliances des Forces Democratique pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire
ASD	Alliance to Save the Dialogue
DHA (MHA)	Department of Home Affairs
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DSD	Department of Social Development
JRS	Jesuit Relief Services
LHR	Lawyers Committee on Human Rights
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
RCD-Goma	Congolese Rally for Democracy-GOMA
UDPS	Union for Democracy and Social Progress
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission on Refugees
WITS	University of Witwatersand
ZAF	Zaire Armed Forces

Refugee Rights and Wrongs: Global Cultural Diffusion among the Congolese in South Africa¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

The media is filled each day with examples of the ways in which contemporary social, economic, and political life transcends national borders. There are stories of environmental rights and anti-poverty activists working through Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) networks, rather than national governments to accomplish their goals. Transnational governance regimes, to which nation states become signatories, establish universal protections and regulations for all individuals, regardless of their citizenship. Some researchers argue that these dynamics attest to the emergence of a global civil society, based on a set of universal norms and practices, that works in tandem with or may even supercede national politics (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Rivera-Salgado 1999, Brysk 2000, Khagram, et al 2002). Yet we know little about the ways in which global norms and practices resonate with the everyday lives of individuals and with the organizations that actually serve people on the ground. How do ordinary people learn about and conceptualize these universal rights and how do they claim them? To what extent do NGOs articulate comparable notions about rights, pursue common strategies to achieve them, and by so doing, contribute to this emerging architecture of transnational governance?

This paper uses the case of Congolese refugees in South Africa to explore these questions. Its goal is to put ethnographic flesh on the bones of what is normally a theoretical discussion. The refugee experience is particularly interesting because it provides a window onto two distinct layers of global civil society. First, it sheds light on how individuals learn about and use global norms and practices and how this learning process varies in their home and host-country context. Second, the refugee experience reveals the ways in which organizations learn about and put into practice universal values and strategies. Organizations operating both locally and internationally are exposed to a set of global approaches and expectations that may or may not influence how things get done. We use the case of Congolese refugees in South Africa to explore these processes both in isolation and in relation to one another. We look to the literature on transnational politics, world culture, and global cultural diffusion to guide our inquiry.

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out during mid July and August of 2002. We interviewed forty individuals and held four focus-group interviews (with the number of participants ranging from five to twelve). Only a small number had official refugee status. Most respondents were illegal immigrants who had some sort of interim identification papers issued

¹ The authors wish to thank Ann Beater, Loren Landau, Thomas Cushman, Karen Jacobsen, Sharon Russell and Tara May for their help with this research projects and for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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either by the South African government or by an NGO. We refer to the individuals we interviewed as refugees throughout this paper, regardless of their official status.

Staff and summer interns at Jesuit Relief Services (JRS - the United Nations High Commission on Refugees' (UNHCR's) principal implementing partner in Johannesburg) facilitated our initial entrees into the Congolese community. From there we branched out, following leads from community organizations and churches, to gather as varied a sample as possible given our time constraints. About one half of our interviews were conducted in English and the other half were assisted or directly interpreted by a Congolese man who spoke English, French, Lingala, and Swahili. Most interviews took 45 to 60 minutes and were held in the refugees' homes, churches, a health clinic, or the JRS office. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the refugee service agencies and government offices although, despite repeated attempts, we were unable to speak with a representative from the UNHCR. Given the brevity of our field work and the small number of interviews we conducted, our study is only suggestive of possible trends.

II. THEORETICAL DEBATES

This project is informed by at least three, sometimes overlapping bodies of literature including work on transnational governance, politics, and civil society; research on global culture; and the body of work on the diffusion of innovations, ideas, and institutions.

Many contemporary political and civic activities are organized transnationally, using resources, vocabularies, and strategies that address the needs of constituencies spanning borders. Much recent research attempts to understand the ways in which elite and labor migrants remain active in the political and civic affairs of their sending communities even as they establish themselves in the countries that receive them (Levitt 2001, Portes et al. 1999, Guarnizo et al. 2003). There is also a growing body of work on global civil society that highlights how nongovernmental organizations operating across borders effectively advocate for universal concerns (Fox and Brown 1998, Khagram et al. 2002).

These literatures inform this inquiry because the ideas and values professed by the actors in this study are shaped transnationally.³ There is a set of widely-recognizable goals, associated with global modernity, that are promulgated by transnational institutions, the academy, NGOs, and the media. We refer to these here as a "global values package" in which we include such things as democracy, global equity, good governance, institutional building, sustainability, the rule of law, and human rights. But one set of questions this work has not sufficiently addressed is how actors learn about global ideas and practices and how they act upon them. Individuals who migrate carry with them some pre-established compromise between local and global cultural models. When refugees and migrants move, they need to renegotiate this compromise with respect to their new home.

³ Transnational politics also refers to political activism that is structured, financed, and led across borders. Transnational political organization is not necessarily designed to nor does it accomplish transnational political goals. Immigrant political parties, for example, can be organized transnationally in support of a home-country candidate or to bring about homeland regime change.

World-Polity theorists and Neo-institutionalists propose one way of understanding global cultural diffusion.⁴ Much of this literature argues that there is a universalistic or global level of cultural and organizational formation that creates and strongly influences states, business enterprises, groups, and individuals. More and more, actors define themselves and their interests in response to the global cultural and organizational structures in which they are embedded (Boli and Thomas 1999, Meyer 2003). Because the definitions, principles, purposes, and modes of action that constitute and motivate actors comprise a global level of social reality, actors around the world do things in the same way. Although global actors act back, changing, adapting, and restructuring the global polity, some scholars claim that the structural isomorphism that characterizes the “actors, interests, and behavior in the world polity operates increasingly via top-down rather than “bottom-up processes” (Boli and Thomas 1999:5).

Other scholars see global cultural production as an encounter between the global and the local. Instead of conceptualizing the global as macro-level political and economic forces that stand in opposition to local cultural elements, they explore where and how the global and the local meet, and the ways in which power hierarchies, as well as relations of reciprocity and solidarity, shape these encounters (Hannerz 1992, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Ong 1999, Merry 2003). Appadurai’s (1996) notions of ethnoscapas, ideoscapas, and mediascapas bring to light how social actors use resources and construct identities that transcend traditional political and social boundaries and layers.

We see the Congolese case as an empirical example of a negotiated encounter between the global and the local. The refugees in our study are embedded in multi-sited, multi-layered transnational fields that bring global cultural elements into play with local responses. Their experiences reveal both how cultural blending works and some inherent limits to the extent to which it occurs.

III. THE CONGOLESE - SOUTH AFRICAN CONNECTION

Following The Congo’s independence from Belgium in 1960, a series of coups ended with Joseph Mobutu seizing power. He renamed the country Zaire and ruled for thirty years that were characterized by brutality, corruption, and widespread human rights abuses. In the early 1990s, opposition groups from within the Congo, some of which had been working for several decades, joined with international movements, to begin to pressure Mobutu to step down.

In 1994, about 1.3 million ethnic Hutus fled persecution to refugee camps in the Eastern Congo. Hutu militia forces followed suit when a Tutsi-led government came to power in Rwanda in 1996. The Hutu militia joined forces with the Zaire Armed Forces (FAZ) to launch a campaign against Congolese ethnic Tutsis, who in turn formed their own militia that was backed by the Rwandan government. The Tutsi militia - *Alliances des Forces Democratique pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL) – was led by Laurent Kabila, who planned to oust Mobutu. In 1997, after failed peace talks with Mobutu, Kabila marched unchallenged into Kinshasa and proclaimed himself president. Mobutu fled to Morocco and died that year.

⁴ Strang and Soule (1998) have written a comprehensive account of this research. We use it selectively to organize and interpret our findings.

Tensions between ethnic groups increased and neighboring countries took sides, placing the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in the center of a complex series of foreign civil wars. In August, 1998, rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda rose up against Kabila's government, which was backed by Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Angola. Rebel forces gained control of the majority of the eastern Congo and, thus, the DRC's bloody civil war began. In July and August 1999, six heads of state and all rebel leaders signed the Lusaka Peace Accords, which outlined a plan to disarm all armed groups, remove foreign forces and create an inter-party dialogue on the political future of the DRC. However, little effort was made by any of the parties to enforce the agreement.

In January 2001, Laurent Kabila was shot and killed by his bodyguard. His son, Joseph Kabila, took power and proceeded with the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in Addis Ababa that October. The dialogue made little progress, but reconvened in Pretoria in February, where an agreement was signed by most delegates. The Rwandese-backed *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie-Goma*⁵ (RCD-Goma) and opposition party *Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social*⁶ (UDPS) refused to sign the agreement and instead formed their own coalition --- Alliance to Save the Dialogue (ASD). In May 2002, a UN panel reported that warring parties were "prolonging the conflict to plunder national resources."

Since 1994, the year of the first free, democratic national election, South Africa in general, and Johannesburg in particular, has become the destination for thousands of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.⁷ Governmental, international, and local institution representatives agree it is impossible to know how many refugees now live in the country (Centre for Policy Studies 1998:6). Official statistics range from 2 to 11 million (Reitzes 1997:1). The post-apartheid government responded by drafting the 1998 Refugee Act. This legislation sought to align national immigration policy with international standards, as well as to facilitate the processing and servicing of thousands of foreign residents (USCR 2000). Backlogs in asylum and refugee claims had so stagnated the system that 23,000 cases remained undecided in 2000.

The number of refugees who had left the Congo was estimated at over 415,000 at the end of 2002 (UNHCR 2003). The Congolese are said to be the largest refugee population in South Africa; an estimated 26,000 refugees are concentrated in Johannesburg but also live in Cape Town, Pretoria, Durban and Port Elizabeth. Most arrived between 1998-1999, although a smaller, more well-established group has been in South Africa for more than a decade. The majority of the Congolese refugees in South Africa are quite poor although according to JRS staff, a small group who were well-off in the Congo, support themselves by maintaining business interests there. There are also a good number of economic migrants from the DRC who have been able to establish themselves successfully in South Africa. Relatively strong, though narrow social networks characterize the Congolese refugee community. Congolese are known to offer

⁵ Congolese Rally for Democracy.

⁶ Union for Democracy and Social Progress.

⁷ South Africa did not accept refugees under apartheid, but it did have a tradition of labor migration. Prior to 1996, whites who entered the country could become South African citizens while blacks remained under a work permit regime. South African law did not distinguish between voluntary and forced migration. The Congolese influx is not the first major wave to enter the country, as many Mozambicans fled to South Africa during the fifteen years of civil war that followed its independence in the 1970s.

each other accommodation or lend money to each other, although long-standing regional and tribal subdivisions determine between whom. Most service providers perceive the community as unorganized and characterized by regional and ethnic divisions which make it difficult for people to agree. There is, therefore, no formal way to mobilize or communicate with the community.

A network of organizations has been created or has expanded their programs to serve refugees. In addition to JRS, there are several other NGOs and church-related groups that provide health care or social services. The South African government's Department of Home Affairs is responsible for the asylum process. There is also a group of advocacy organizations that defend refugee rights but are not direct service providers.

IV. THE DIFFUSION OF IDEAS AND PRACTICES AMONG INDIVIDUALS

Civil war and unrest have plagued the Congo for nearly five decades. Most respondents had some kind of contact with civic organizations or the government before they left the Congo but they were deeply distrustful of both. They declared, almost unanimously, that widespread corruption would plague any kind of regime and, therefore, they preferred to solve their problems on their own.

Several types of groups stepped in to fill this leadership gap. Churches were a powerful force in the Congo. Nearly all respondents said they belonged to some Protestant or Catholic Church and that going to church provided them with critical social support. If you want to reach the Congolese community, everyone agreed, the best way is to go to church. Furthermore, some individuals worked for diamond and gold mining companies that provided basic services such as health care, education, and law enforcement services. Others claimed that it was Congolese families and neighbors who helped one another when there was some kind of problem. They did not need the government or the police, they said, because family members or those living next door would step in. A number of respondents also waxed nostalgic for the Mobutu dictatorship. They were perfectly willing to be ruled by military police if that would allow them to live in peace.

The extent to which Congolese refugees are informed about life in South Africa before they migrate is unclear. Most respondents said they had only limited contact with their relatives in the Congo because communication between South Africa and the DRC was so poor. Writing or phoning was nearly impossible because the Congolese postal and telephone systems barely functioned. Several respondents, however, used the internet to learn what was going on at home. A strikingly large number had e-mail addresses they used at internet cafes around town.⁸ The vast majority said they watched South African T.V. and tried to read the newspaper but that because they spoke French and South Africans spoke English this was often very difficult.

Most people came from the Congo with some prior exposure to the tenets of global culture. Several people said they learned about human rights in school. Others had learned about them working at jobs with nongovernmental organizations, the police, or health care providers. One

⁸ A sample survey carried out in Johannesburg in 2002 found that the Congolese respondents were in fairly regular contact with people back home, mainly over the internet, suggesting quite a strong flow of information (Landau, personal communication).

woman learned about her rights at the union she belonged to. A number of people knew about the “International Days or Years” sponsored by the United Nations. They knew, for example, that “the 8th day of March is a day that they speak about the rights of women.” They remembered observing these celebrations at school and hearing about them on the TV. A smaller number had also heard about international laws, such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These tended to be refugees with some college education or who were internet savvy. One man who carried a copy of the Universal Declaration with him said that someone had given him the website address of the World Service Authority and that he had e-mailed them and received a pamphlet in response.

Although it is difficult to summarize respondents’ understanding of rights, there were some common themes that came up in many of their answers to our questions. They generally equated human rights with the idea of security and safety. “It is the right to live,” said Freddy Jr. a thirty-one year old male, “the right to grow in society among your people, in general the right to live as a human being.” Many felt that human rights meant that people could live without fear and that it was the government’s responsibility to guarantee this. They believed that people were entitled to a house and a job and to be able to go where they pleased. Others differentiated between what is written and what actually occurs. One man, for example, commented that although The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is very clear, the people that are working (implementing/protecting human rights) don’t know or respect these rights.

A refugee, most respondents said, is someone who comes for exile in another country in search of a safe place. It is someone who has run away from his or her own country because of trouble or because of politics. Refugees, they felt, should have the right to get papers that would enable them to move around freely, to get food, to study. The country that takes you in should be willing to protect you. If not, you should be allowed to settle elsewhere. There was some disagreement about whether refugees should be entitled to the same rights as citizens or whether they should receive basic protections but not necessarily equal treatment.

Some respondents had also heard about women’s rights. They felt that women should be able to do what men do – to work, to go to school. It seemed to them that South African women had made greater gains than their Congolese counterparts in this respect. Here in Johannesburg, women can serve in the government. South African women, it seemed, were also less likely to be beaten by their husbands.

Refugees bring these experiential and cognitive categories with them when they resettle in a new country and use them to interpret what they encounter (Dimaggio 1987). Their cultural understandings influenced what new ideas and practices they adopted and the ways in which old ideas are revised to make sense of the South African context. Andrew, a thirty-five year old male, felt that few people left the Congo with any proper concept of what a government should do. He said, “When I crossed over into Zambia and the military person who greeted me asked how he could be helpful, for me that was something that I could not understand.” He had never had a positive experience with a helpful government official before. In fact, he expected to be asked for a bribe because this had been standard practice in the Congo.

The ideas about rights that respondents said they held before migrating were quite abstract. They had been exposed to the global cultural package that includes rights' protections and, to some extent, to the institutions that promote and guarantee them. But most said that because these notions had not figured large in their lives in the Congo, they had not given much thought to what they actually meant for their own situations. How, then, do refugees carry out this translation? What kind of relearning occurs in the process of making concepts such as human rights and refugee rights relevant to one's own experience and how do refugees learn how to put rights into practice?

According to almost all respondents, the South African government did very little to disseminate information to refugees. They said they got minimal direction at the government offices where they had to go to get papers. Refugees and service providers said that the task of educating refugees fell almost entirely to refugee social networks and to NGOs. These kinds of contacts enabled refugees to obtain the kind of information they needed to go from the global and abstract to the local and the concrete.

Most interviewees had minimal contact with South Africans. Besides church, there were few places where refugees and native-born individuals encountered one another because most refugees did not work or go to school. Most people did come into contact with refugees from other countries in the apartment buildings where they lived or at church. These relationships were often complicated, however, by the sense that the Congolese were somehow more privileged than other groups and that refugee communities were competing with one another for services.

Congolese refugee social networks, then, became the primary site for information dissemination. These networks functioned in many of the ways that the literature predicts. Only a narrow, limited body of information is disseminated because, as Granovetter (1973) argues, new information is more likely to be introduced when individuals are embedded in weak, heterogeneous networks. In contrast, most Congolese are primarily in contact with other Congolese. The literature also predicts that when senders and receivers of information see themselves as belonging to similar social and status categories (i.e. Congolese or refugee), they feel a sense of shared culture which enhances information spread (McAdam and Rucht 1993, Burt 1987, Coleman et al. 1966). Clyde, a thirty-seven-year old male that we interviewed, who had more contacts outside the Congolese community than most, said he trusted other Congolese more and that he was more likely to feel comfortable with them because they are like him. "In this country there are some realities which make someone scared. Foreigners tend to understand each other better." Individuals and organizational actors also tend to be more responsive to information that is communicated to them by high-prestige actors (Haveman 1993, Levitt 2001). When pastors, or others perceived as leaders in the community communicated information, refugees were more likely to listen. Those who arrived in Johannesburg without any social connections were clearly perplexed about where to go. Alice, a thirty-two-year old widow, said she came to the city not knowing a soul. She had no idea what her rights were or what services were available to her. Most people, however, arrived already acquainted with someone, or the person who brought them to the city introduced them to other Congolese. They learned quickly that they needed to go to the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to get their papers. During the

days and nights they spent waiting on line to be seen, refugees shared information about what they were entitled to and where they should go to get it.

The dissemination of the “rights” piece of the global cultural package is complicated because certain kinds of information are easier to disseminate than others. Much of the literature on global cultural diffusion makes assumptions about what is being communicated that do not hold in the refugee case. First, much of this work treats what is being disseminated as an improvement or an innovation (Coleman et al. 1966). It takes for granted that the senders and receivers of ideas can agree upon what is true and how to transmit it. It assumes that what is disseminated can be easily measured and packaged.

In the Congolese case, there is little agreement about who a refugee is, what he or she are entitled to by law, and where they could go and get these services. Mistrust, rumors, and the expectation of corruption abounded. One NGO staff member called this child’s game of telephone, “pavement radio”—a French expression for word-of-mouth communication—to capture how fast information and misinformation flows and how distorted it often becomes in the process.

One source of confusion revolves around who qualifies as a refugee and about what that classification actually means. Many people asked whether the Congolese had come to South Africa because they really had a well-founded fear of persecution or because they were economic migrants. If they were just afraid for their safety why didn’t they remain in one of the neighboring countries like Zambia or Botswana instead of traveling all the way to South Africa? Service providers, in fact, had developed all kinds of strategies to sort out who was a “deserving” or “undeserving” refugee. They felt that many refugees embellished their stories and that there was a kind of rumor mill that enabled their prospective clients to learn what to include and what to exclude when they presented their cases. A climate of mistrust arose because it was so difficult to agree upon the classification requirements and to verify the facts once these standards had been agreed upon.

As much misinformation as information also flowed about what refugees were actually entitled to and what agencies were responsible for providing these services. Many Congolese thought that refugee relief programs should look like what they had seen at home. If the UNHCR is working here, they asked, why don’t we see the trucks with the UNHCR emblem that always passed through our city? They did not understand that urban and rural refugee relief services were structured differently and they felt cheated as a result. Several respondents mentioned that they had heard refugees were treated much better in Canada, in London, or the U.S. They had the impression that housing, jobs, and school fees were easy to come by in these places and that people were received with more respect. They had the sense that they were somehow being duped and that if they could get papers to resettle in Europe or North America, their lives would be much easier.

The South African population also had its own set of rumors and misconceptions about refugees. Nearly everyone we spoke with agreed that xenophobia is a major problem in South Africa. Most refugees had been repeatedly called *kwerekwere*, a disparaging term for foreigner. Charles, a male in his early twenties said

“At the Department of Home Affairs, they will tell you, my man, this is South Africa, this is not home. And they have all the power; they can decide not to process your case. At the Department of Home Affairs, most refugees are abused verbally, I was very, very angry but I could not fight back, they would just tell me get out of here. I was afraid of being taken to the deportation center. You can chance the streets that you walk but they are everywhere. South Africans think that refugees are responsible for all crimes in their country.”

Tensions ran particularly high between Black South Africans and refugees because members of each group saw the other as their direct competitors for housing and jobs. Black South Africans felt that refugees were taking their jobs and there were “damn few jobs to begin with.” They felt refugees contributed to rising rates of crime and disease. They also asked why they still lived miserably in the townships while refugees lived in apartments in the downtown neighborhoods of Yoeville and Beara. They did not realize that as many as twelve refugees frequently slept in one room and that many of these buildings had been abandoned by their owners, who no longer felt responsible for providing basic services.

Another source of misinformation and mistrust arose from confusion over organizational mandates. Refugees often had a hard time distinguishing which organization was responsible for what kinds of services. They grew frustrated with the Lawyers Committee on Human Rights (LHR), for example, because they expected them to be able to do the same things as the UNHCR. Since UNHCR funds LHR, they asked, why don't they work the same way? In fact, the UNHCR was accused by some of promoting this view because it enabled them to provide fewer services.

Furthermore, it was often unclear what refugees were allowed to do and what they could not do because of a disjuncture between the rules and the reality. Although school administrators were supposed to waive school fees for those living below the poverty level, it was difficult for them to do this for the many poor South Africans that approached them, let alone refugees. Refugees were not allowed to open bank accounts without proper I.D. documents but some banks would allow them to if they could afford the initial deposit of 600 Rand (an enormous sum for most individuals).

One of the biggest and fundamentally most difficult sources of confusion is about whether refugees are entitled to work. Most people arrived certain they would find gainful employment. In fact, the Refugee Act of 1998 initially permitted refugees to get work permits. But by the time the Act was implemented in April 2000, the government had added a clause disallowing individuals with asylum permits to work. The Department of Home Affairs, which issues asylum papers, felt South Africa was being overrun by foreigners and that it was responsible for keeping people out.

The actual diffusion of global culture about refugee rights and how to protect them is more complicated than the literature would suggest. Most of this research assumes that the ideas or practices that are transmitted are concrete, measurable, and easily agreed upon. These studies assume that there is a single truth or fact that can be formulated in a way that is easy to communicate and digest. Yet, human and refugee rights, and the services and protections one is

entitled to when claiming them, are abstract and difficult to measure. Even who should participate in the conversation, or who rightfully qualifies as a refugee, is the subject of debate. In addition, what the rules say and how they are actually implemented are often purposefully decoupled from each other (Meyer 2003). As a result, as much misinformation as information spreads about rights and the services associated with them. Rumors, mistrust, and confusion make the dissemination of the “rights piece” of the global modernity package uneven and incomplete.

V. CULTURAL DIFFUSION IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

Individual refugee learning does not happen in a vacuum. Organizations that serve refugees are also sites of information dissemination. Global norms and institutions strongly influence these groups, transforming them into places of encounter between local and global practices. They are the second layer of global cultural dissemination we examine.

Post-apartheid South Africa was anxious to re-join the world community and to demonstrate to its neighbors that it had become a society that treated blacks and whites as equals. The government acceded to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Organization of African Unity refugee protocol in January of 1996. It also invited in a number of nongovernmental organizations and foundations to help address the economic and social challenges it faced ahead. How should the political and social service system be reformed to meet the needs of the “new South Africa?” What kind of legal system should be put in place to regulate population movements? That South Africa was in the process of reinventing itself at the same time that it faced a massive population influx brought about the convergence of several global cultural influences which shaped subsequent developments. Again, while many of these developments are in line with the literature, others represent unexpected outcomes that highlight the limits of global cultural homogenization.

Much organizational analysis identifies the state and the professions as the principle change agents that spread new practices and facilitate particular lines of innovative action (Baron, et al. 1986, Dobbin, et al. 1993). The change agents in this study are supra-national and international organizations, such as United Nations’ agencies and international NGOs, which also carry global norms and practices that refugees are exposed to. These values of human rights, equity, and transparency, and the institutional arrangements associated with them, influence South Africa’s response to its refugee population. Several factors explain the convergence in organizational discourse and practice we observed.

Coercive, mimetic, and normative processes cause institutional isomorphism and help explain why organizations tend to look and act alike (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Each of these is at work in the South African case, emanating from local and global sources, since many organizational actors belong to national and international networks. According to a professor at the University of Witwatersand (WITS), South Africa experienced normative pressure to make its domestic laws consistent with international standards after it signed on to international conventions. Coercive forces were also at work because South African organizations working on rights issues in general depend on international funders which want them to abide by global standards of practice. Furthermore, when populations are culturally-defined as similar, they tend

to inspire similar responses (Strang and Chang 1993). There is a globally-recognized strategy for aiding urban refugees that was therefore put into place in South Africa.

That institutions working on different sets of problems respond similarly also occurs because organizations that work closely together frequently import strategies from other fields. According to Morris (1981) and McAdam (1988), social movement actors commonly draw inspiration and strategies from other movements. We observed this frequently in our conversations with NGOs and government agencies.

First, the borrowing of ideas and discourse was observed. Respect for rights and racial equality were high priorities for most of the staff we interviewed. These principles had already been a central concern to some respondents and were readily taken up by others who wanted to demonstrate that South Africa was capable of assuming its place among democratic nations. A staff member from the Department of Social Development (DSD), in charge of protecting unaccompanied refugee children, claimed that everyone had become very rights oriented with the arrival of the new South Africa. “The whole of South Africa,” she said, “has become very aware of rights and trying to create a society where we can be as sensitive to rights of people as we can.” Documents such as The International Convention on the Rights of Children made her job easier because protecting children became an important priority when the new South African constitution was written.

Borrowing ideas and discourses also happened because many NGOs belonged to international organizational networks that disseminated global culture and values. The Human Rights Committee, for example, is an international watchdog organization that is funded by HEX (a religious NGO), the Open Society Foundation, and the European Union Foundation for Human Rights. One respondent, a lawyer, spoke about the models of practice he learned through his connections with the Lawyers Committee on Human Rights’ international network, and the colleagues he meets at international conferences. When he worked on the Refugee Act of 1998, he lobbied hard for the inclusion of international best practices. He also worked to ensure that the new South African constitution was consistent with international conventions.

In the South African case, then, the tenets of global culture, and particularly the rights piece, receive support from many corners. Refugee relief workers are exposed to these ideas and practices through the UN and NGO networks that they work with or that fund their activities. Global values and practices also spread through the many agencies working in the country to bring “modern, democratic, liberal practices” to its political and legal systems. Both domestic and international actors espouse accountability and legitimacy, the rhetoric of rights, and racial equality. Because there is synergy between the ideas and practices flowing through these multiple, sometimes overlapping networks, they mutually reinforce each other.

But several factors limit the extent to which global cultural convergence actually occurs, even when it is fostered by multiple organizational catalysts. Most important are local socioeconomic conditions and history. Some respondents suggested that South Africans have had so little experience sharing borders with friendly neighbors that they are particularly receptive to misinformation about population flows. They even suggested that the government purposefully fuels this confusion. They cited a study by the Human Sciences Research Council, a quasi-government agency, which exaggerated the numbers of illegal workers in the country. Although

the report was later retracted, and the data it was based on declared flawed, the perception of an uncontrollable influx still holds. “Liberal, democratic nations have control over their borders, live peacefully with their neighbors, and are willing to shelter a certain number faced by involuntary exile,” a staff member at the LHR said, “but South Africa’s history and national perceptions about its ability to determine its own sovereignty work against that.”

A more insurmountable obstacle to global cultural adoption is that many of those who would need to put these ideas into practice, and move South Africa beyond rhetoric to a new reality, are unwilling or unable to do so. There are remnants of the “old South Africa,” deeply entrenched in the country’s labor force, who balk at greater equity and inclusiveness. Although the ethos espoused may be different, many of the “street-level bureaucrats” who are the public face of government agencies have not changed their views. “There are,” according to a staffperson at the DSD, “many old-style workers within the new South Africa and this definitely limits the possibilities for change.” She believes it will take several generations before the old modus operandi disappears entirely. In South Africa, then, the disconnect between the norms that have been put in place and the service providers who fail to act upon them thwarts the global cultural dissemination process.

In addition, the South African refugee relief apparatus was initially established to repatriate former exiles so they could return quickly and become part of the new government. The UNHCR developed a close, cooperative relationship with the government as a result. According to several respondents, the UNHCR has been reluctant to take anti-government stances and to advocate effectively for refugees. It has not developed its own plan for counteracting what they feel has been the government’s half-hearted overtures toward the refugee population. The fact that the UNHCR, one of the principal carriers and catalysts of refugee rights and practices, has stopped short of fulfilling its role creates additional obstacles to global cultural adoption.

Mistrust of government and law enforcement that is still pervasive among South Africans and refugees alike also creates barriers to global cultural diffusion. Most respondents perceive South African institutions as weak and biased. How could agencies like that, they ask, ever act as effective guarantors of equal rights? Prospective clients even approach organizations that try to espouse the values and practices of global modernity with mistrust.

Finally, the South African government faces real political and economic obstacles to the implementation of the refugee rights piece of the global values package. In 2001, the country’s unemployment rate was estimated at 37%. The prevalence rate for HIV/AIDs among the adult population was estimated at 20% in 2000 and over 300,000 people are said to die each year (World Fact Book 2002). Although the country is abundantly endowed with resources and has well developed financial, legal, communications, energy, and transport sectors, growth has not been strong enough to cut into high unemployment and daunting economic problems that persist from the apartheid era (World Fact Book 2002). Government and NGO officials alike agreed that it was nearly impossible for South Africa to fulfill its commitment to refugees since there were so many needy among its own. The perception that the government gave more to refugees than to black South Africans would seriously undermine any political coalition.

In sum, multi-sited, multi-layered organizations are also channels for cultural diffusion. The influx of refugees into South Africa coincided with the country's re-entry into the world community. South Africa wanted to signal to other nations that it had become "the New South Africa" which respected global values including protecting refugees. Many NGOs working in the country espoused values that were also supportive of refugee relief. But while these conditions would appear to favor the adaptation of global culture, local conditions and practices impede its wholesale acceptance. The economy, racial inequality, a lack of institutional will, and government corruption restricted how far the translation of the global to the local could actually go. The adaptation of "modern" forms and norms is decoupled from actual practice so that the South African government can look like it has undertaken reforms without actually doing so (Meyer 2003).

VI. CONCLUSION

Transnational actors who promote a package of democratic, liberal, modern values face inherent obstacles to their diffusion that are brought to light by the Congolese refugee experience. First, global cultural diffusion becomes more complicated when what is disseminated and to whom is not unclear. In the Congolese refugee case, as many falsehoods as facts about refugee rights and the services they are entitled to are communicated and there was often little agreement about what rights actually are. This experience suggests an important corrective to the literature on cultural dissemination which assumes that in most cases, what is communicated is true and easy to package. The Congolese refugee experience also highlights the limits of global cultural adaptation. Even when institutional actors operating at multiple levels promulgate global ideas and practices, local realities limit the extent to which they take hold. Local actors "talked the talk" of global modernity, and had appropriated many of its trappings, but local conditions made the "rights" piece of the global values package is less amenable to hybridization than other global cultural forms. Not all elements of global culture as equally adaptable as others.

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