

## “Your Papers or Your Life”: The Significance of Documents in the Life Experiences of African Refugees in Israel

Hadas Yaron

*The Academic College, Tel Aviv Yafo*

**ABSTRACT:** The article focuses on the role of ID papers in the lives of African refugees on their way to and in Israel. In the article, I discuss the way in which documents both encapsulate the past and relations and therefore enable one's future, as much as they monitor and control the everyday lives of displaced persons. I therefore wish to examine the complex relationships between persons, documents and institutions, and the way power is manifested through them. In the article I thus show how refugees are not only helpless, but to an extent also ones who can together with others shape and change the face of their present and future.

Keywords: documents, fetishism, refugees, Africa, Israel

### Introduction

In the first chapter of *Talks of Refugees* written by Bertolt Brecht a character named “dumpy” shares with its friend named “the big” the following observation:

The passport is the person's most precious organ. The passport is not made in a simple way as the person does. A person could be created everywhere and in the hastiest manner and with no reason—but the passport shall never. This is why the passport is accepted when it is a good one—while the person could be excellent and still not accepted. [Brecht 1996:7-8]

This statement, as with many others in the book, describes the pain and absurdity in the life experiences of refugees in Europe during the Second World War. Having no “good” document, according to Brecht, supercedes the person, as without the right passport, one is condemned to be “handicapped.” In this article I wish on the one hand to draw on Brecht's observa-

tion as to the existential importance of the passport in the life experiences of refugees, while I also wish to develop this observation further and point to the complex relationships between persons, identification (ID) papers and other documents throughout people's lives as refugees. In the article I focus on the life events of African refugees living in Israel and the way they perceive and act with their different documents, on their way to Israel and in their lives in the country.

African refugees started to reach Israel through the southern border with Egypt in large numbers in 2006. At the beginning most of the refugees were Sudanese including refugees from southern Sudan and Darfur, and later also large numbers of Eritreans crossed the border and entered the country. The first wave of refugees were people who had lived in Egypt for quite some time, but in the wake of a violent demonstration in front of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offices in Cairo, the arrests and the other difficulties which featured in their lives in Egypt, made them decide to “take their chances” and cross the border into Israel. Later, African refugees started to travel to Israel from other countries, and some had even planned to reach Israel before they left their home country.

While a few scholars have explored what is defined as “migrant workers” in Israel emphasizing the labour perspective (see Sabar 2008; Kemp and Rajzman 2008; Rosenhek 2000; Willen 2003), dealing with either legal workers mostly from Asian countries, or illegal—mostly from Africa, little research has been conducted on African arrivals as refugees and particularly on the wave of thousands of arrivals from Sudan and Eritrea. Therefore while previous research emphasized the absence of documentation, or the documentation of foreign workers, this research wishes to examine the documentation of Africans in Israel as refugees, exploring their ID documents but not from the perspective of employment.

The number of refugees living in Israel is constantly changing and can only be approximately estimated by human rights organizations. Currently, there are about 17,000 African refugees living in the country. Only a much lower number of refugees from Asian and other countries are claiming asylum in Israel. Many of the African refugees are living and working in various cities in the country such as Ashdod, Eilat and Arad, others are held in prisons mainly located in close proximity to the border, while others are spread in various locations such as shelters and agricultural settlements. African refugees are normally imprisoned upon their entry to Israel. According to the authorities, their detention is aimed at identity verification, thus the need for documentation, medical examinations and providing vaccinations. Other refugees are held in prison for violating their “conditions for release.” Since the current status of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees is defined as a conditional release and their stay in Israel is geographically defined to allowed and forbidden zones, a violation of their conditions may lead to arrest. In general, the legal status of refugees staying in Israel is complicated and highly dynamic, or as many of the NGOs involved would say “chaotic,” as

although Israel signed the refugee convention there is no relevant domestic legislation and decisive policy. The State of Israel until recently had no solid asylum system and instead all of the relevant procedures were handled primarily by the UNHCR and approved by the State only at the very last stage of the application. As a result, the UNHCR in Israel plays a crucial role in the lives of refugees. Nevertheless, throughout the years Israel granted asylum through this procedure only to 170 refugees. On the other hand, in the absence of a local refugees’ law, the State acts on the basis of local legislation with regards to entering the country instead of international conventions. In the eyes of many of the NGOs the State’s policy is to have no policy at all, thereby putting most of the humanitarian weight in providing the needs of the refugees on voluntary shoulders. The attitudes of the government and public towards the African newcomers are complicated and are motivated by fears and indifference as well as compassion, and a sense of special moral obligation as the Jewish nation. The most telling example in this context is the reaction towards the arrival of refugees from Darfur. In Israeli public discourse, refugees from Darfur are often compared to Holocaust survivors.

The comparison between Jewish persecution and African genocide is not reserved for individuals or NGOs but was in fact primarily the reason why a couple of hundred Darfurian refugees were granted residency by the Israeli Government shortly after their arrival in the country in 2007. In certain cases, this approach also expands to refugees from other African countries. One of the reserve soldiers I interviewed, for example, told me that the journey of African refugees from Egypt into Israel reminded him of the borders his family had to cross illegally in Europe. On the other hand, Government officials in public and also private meetings refer to the African refugees coming from Egypt as “infiltrators.” The term “infiltrators” not only does not recognize the refugees’ need for asylum, but compares them to Palestinian individuals who attempted to enter Israel after the establishment of the Israeli State, and were treated as hostile and dangerous. Therefore while asylum seekers in Israel are associated with Palestinians in the terminology and certain laws enacted in their



*Natan Dvir photograph*

case, their system of documentation and “processing” is separate and different. One should note that the perception of Africans as hostile unfortunately is also apparent among certain citizens. A recent TV show which used a hidden camera followed a refugee from Congo in the streets of Tel Aviv. Certain people not only showed little empathy towards the refugee but one woman even called the police to arrest him since, as she said, it is a “Jewish State.”

I started conducting this research in the summer of 2007 as part of my involvement in an international human rights organization located in Tel Aviv, and later on with other local NGOs. Most of the organizations involved in campaigning and advocating for the refugees are local human rights NGOs such as the “Hotline.”<sup>1</sup> Other organizations involved such as the Kibbutz Movement are operating on a humanitarian basis rather than out of a human rights agenda. As a result, the approach of human rights organizations is a more critical one, focusing on changing policy and providing legal aid rather than humanitarian care. And although cooperation and coordination

is understood to be crucial by the different parties involved, disagreements and competition is often the practice. In this context, my research is an activist one as I am strongly involved and identify with the activities of certain human rights NGOs. As part of my involvement I collect information, write documents and also assist in the immediate needs of the refugees. This choice of position allows me to deepen my research on the one hand, crossing boundaries and being an active part of the reality I investigate, as much as it narrows prospective exploratory avenues on the other. The material I collect through the different activities such as meetings and demonstrations includes information on the Jewish-Israeli and the African side of the matter, the position of NGOs, the State and the public or society as well as the stories and experiences of refugees. One of the important issues, so I have gathered, which concerns policy and the everyday life of the refugees, is their documentation, the type of documents they carry, and the specifics detailed in or the content of the documents.

1. Please see their website: <http://www.hotline.org.il>.

In the absence of legislation and related policies, the types of documents the refugees are provided with vary and change with the ongoing changes in policy. Documents refugees possess include passports, national ID cards, UNHCR cards issued elsewhere, and letters provided by the UNHCR office in Israel, letters provided by the Israeli authorities when released from prison, as well as in certain cases ID cards or letters provided by the Israeli interior office. The different documents determine the refugees' name identity, original citizenship, their legal status in Israel, as well as the period and geographical area in Israel in which they are allowed to be employed. The documents therefore define the refugees' legal ability to move and provide for themselves, while their national identity determines their current status in Israel and, as I will explain later, it also provides, together with the personal identity, the basis for their asylum claim in the future. The documents mediate between the refugees and the authorities—the police who might stop them in the street, as well as their employers when they search for a job. The documents therefore enable and define the refugee's most basic needs and define their status, legal and social identity in the country. However, as I will show, refugees do not remain passive in their relationship with documents, but enact and thus demonstrate what I refer to as their “agency.” For example, refugees choose to present to officials the documents which they believe will assist them best in certain situations, or they may destroy documents (passports in particular) which they believe can cause them damage. In the next section I wish to identify some theoretical terms which could be of help in analyzing the relationships between the refugees and the documents they carry.

### **Documents: Persons, Bodies, Representations**

In the quote with which I opened the article Brecht describes the passport as “person for precious organ,” hence the passport in certain situations could be part of the person's body. On the other hand Brecht also cynically claims that the passport can “supercede” the person; be more important and valuable than the human being it represents. Yet while the first typifies

literary writings, the latter has been investigated in academic scholarship. Scholars who investigate the origins and functions of ID documents claim that documents serve nation-states in surveillance and the “maintenance” of their borders and populations (Scott 1998). According to John Torpey (2000) the invention of the passport in Europe was tied to the facilitation of far reaching mass movement, the creation of capitalist spaces out of local ones and the collapse of the pre-national Empires such as the Ottoman Empire. The passport regime was strengthened during the inner wars period, empowering totalitarian regimes in controlling and “imprisoning” their citizens or, in the case of other nation states, in building a “wall of papers” against migrants and refugees. Other scholars wish to shed light on other aspects of documentation. Gaston Gordillo (2006) describes the role of ID papers from the perspective of excluded native groups in Argentina and the effect of the deprivation of papers rather than their production. In the past, Gordillo says, the absence of “passports” made travelling through space a dangerous activity for native people, putting them in the vulnerable position of being “savages” who could easily be assaulted. For this reason, he explains, native groups today almost “venerate” their ID papers as material objects. A recent research of the anthropologist Tobias Kelly among West Bank Palestinians shows that as much as documents enable movements through space, one's “wrong” documents can impose confinement and closure (see Kelly 2007).

We can see therefore, that papers both enable and disable, and that the absence of papers can free individuals as much as it could be a way of classifying and controlling them. Looking again at Brecht, we can say that papers have the potential to fetishize persons, in being their representation but yet an object superior to them and which could erase them. However, papers could also be objects which encapsulate relations rather than erasing them (Riles 2004), and therefore could also function as body parts which enable our everyday life, as well as enabling us to survive extreme situations.

My focus on documents in this article will consider both of those aspects, namely the fetishism of ID papers as well as ID papers as organs, as part of

one's body or as a reflection of it. My focus on the latter derives from the testimonies of the refugees, and their interpretation. Therefore, while my interviewees do not describe ID papers literally as bodily organs, I found they made such parallels in speech or practice such as in holding documents close to their bodies and in handing them to me upon meeting them in order to explain who they are, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the State.

### **Documents on the Way to, and through-out the Life in Israel**

One cannot underestimate the importance of ID documents on the journey to and in the stay of African refugees in Israel. From the encounters I had and the interviews I have conducted with refugees I found that refugees carry their documents on their bodies almost at all times. In fact, when it comes to objects from their home countries, documents are almost the only objects which they have left as the most precious ones. In most cases refugees are "stripped" of their belongings throughout their travel to Israel by the smugglers and the police in Sudan and Egypt, and also they lose many of the things they brought with them because of the hardship of their journey. One of the soldiers I interviewed, for example, told me that he remembered a photo album probably belonging to one of the refugees who crossed into Israel which was for some reason left and "wandered" around the military post and was later thrown away. Another reserve soldier told me that one night he found refugees' belongings which were caught by the fence in the haste and panic of crossing over and which he collected and gave back to them. Yet in the first encounter with the Israeli military, refugees are requested to present their passports or other ID papers if they have them. And therefore while some of the other objects are replaceable, documents are not necessarily so, and while many of the objects encapsulate the past, documents are the foundation for their future. This is another reason for their special importance, and for that reason documents are guarded close to one's body, often surviving the hardship of the journey.

In certain cases ID documents could also be perceived as the full reflection of a person. For example,

one of the activists told me about a young African who was shot by the Egyptian military and died on the Israeli side of the border and was buried as "anonymous" in a Kibbutz. His mother who is in Israel found it hard to accept that it was her son beyond any doubt buried in the Kibbutz, and said that she wanted to see the papers, which would convince her. Although she had not seen her son's body before burial, she did not request its exhumation to verify his death, but instead the ID papers he carried on his body were as evident for her as the body itself. As we shall see, the connection between body and documents has been elaborated also by the authorities in a more scientific vein through the implementation of biometric registration for all refugees.<sup>2</sup> However, while for the authorities the biometric examination aims at (as is also the case nowadays for example at American airports) directly registering one's bodily details, thus overcoming the power of paper documents, for this grieving mother, the documents were the proof for her son's body. Documentation, as these practices show is closely associated with the bodies of persons who escape across borders, and are subjected to anonymous, violent death. Marginality, therefore as I mentioned earlier, emphasizes the fetishizing relationships between persons and their ID documents.

While documents in the tragic case mentioned above define the end of life and the end of one's journey in an attempt to find asylum, for those who manage to cross safely into Israel, ID documents, as I have said, are the basis for their new life in the country. One's citizenship is of particular importance in Israel since in the absence of an individual-based procedure, asylum claimants have been given protection on a collective basis. As a result certain nationalities are more privileged than others. The Darfurians in this context are in the best position in comparison to others. As the survivors of a genocide the public and government are most sympathetic to this community as I have mentioned, and therefore a group of

---

<sup>2</sup> The Israeli authorities execute a biometric registration for all asylum seekers which includes for example their fingerprints in order to be able to identify people according to their bodily features and not only by their documents. The asylum seekers receive a document from the police stating they were biometrically registered.

a couple of hundred Darfurians received Israeli residency cards. The documents the refugees carry with them as their passports, the ones they present to the authorities, are the basis for the type of papers they could be given afterwards.

The type of documents the refugees hold and the details specified in them have a strong effect on the way they can manage their lives in the new country. The Israeli documents normally state that the person is permitted to live in certain areas of the country—up north and down south. Therefore the documents define their movement and confine them to certain geographical areas. If they are found elsewhere by the police they could be arrested. In addition, the permit the refugees are given is limited in time, and if refugees are for some reason unable to renew their visas they can easily lose their jobs. The type of documents and the details included such as a photograph could also have a crucial effect. For example, one of the refugees I am in close touch with told me he has been unable to open a bank account for a very long time because he does not have a passport, although he has other documents. Not having an account puts his job in jeopardy and makes him an easy target for robbers because of the large amounts of cash he

has to carry on his body. This has been one of the major concerns for this particular young man. Not being able to open a bank account with the papers he is provided often frustrates him. Once while he had a job in Eilat he almost lost his position as the hotel he worked for agreed to pay his salary only through an account, and on another occasion as his room was broken into, he became more anxious about how to protect his money. Yet although documents produced in Israel have a strong effect on the refugees' everyday lives, often as African refugees don't read Hebrew they cannot tell what their content is and what could be their possible effect. One of the refugees told us in an interview that he was brought to the police and then released once he showed his papers, but he cannot tell what is in them, although the papers got him free. Thus, while documents could have such crucial impact affecting one's freedom and preventing deportation, they are illegible to the one who holds them.

Papers enable the State to monitor the presence of African newcomers as much as they facilitate or obstruct the life of refugees. For this reason the documents could be a target for resistance, for the enactment of one's agency. For example, one of the



*Natan Dvir photograph*

young men I came across who originates from south Sudan lost his papers and then his job and later drastically deteriorated into alcohol and other troubles. His arrests were uncommon incidents since his arrival in the country with his family, after living for many years in Egypt. One of the activists who has been in close touch with this young man suggested that it is possible that the loss of documents was not accidental and was this man's way of "rebellious," acting against the restrictions in having no papers at all. Because he lost his papers he had to travel to Tel Aviv in order to try and procure new papers, and could not continue anymore in the odd job he had in Eilat. The loss of papers provided him with a reason to get away and once more fall into the habit of drinking and sleeping outdoors. I believe that in a way, the loss of papers even if unconsciously and in a destructive manner, was this young man's way of enacting his agency to get away from the life which uprooting and seeking asylum offered him. Similarly, in a few cases I have come across, the destruction of national ID papers and passports by refugees who believe their papers could be harmful to them is a way of attempting to overcome the "wall of papers" and to improve their chances beyond borders. Similarly, one of the refugees from Eritrea told me that in Sudan he had no document provided by the government and felt safer than in Israel. Thus, for him, the documentation in Israel is a way for the State to control him rather than a way to guarantee his status and safety.

Nevertheless, I have found that, although documents are tools which facilitate the present and hopefully the future they have an emotional aspect which in some cases can supercede pragmatism. One of the refugees I interviewed told me that he had to escape his country under a false name and for security reasons decided not to carry any documents with his original name. Yet, he said it hurts him that he lost his name and cannot be called by it anymore. For him therefore the new passport allowed him to save himself but with it he also lost his past. Other refugees from Ethiopia I was told by one of the members of the community prefer not to declare they are Ethiopians but instead they are Eritreans although the position of the Eritreans in Israel is reasonable because they themselves choose to define themselves

as Ethiopians. In these cases, asylum claimants wish the ID documents not only to assist them in finding a new life but to "truly" define who they feel they are. Documents for them are not simply a tool, they are not the State's property but are part of them and therefore should be a faithful reflection of their identity.

### Conclusions – Refugees and Dialectics

In this article I have described the complex relationships between persons who are refugees, in this case African refugees, and the documents they carry or have issued to them. As I have shown, in a world in which people are compelled to cross national borders in search of a safe haven, there are different papers—national and transnational—through which they manage and which manage their lives. National IDs cards and passports "bring to the world" other papers, while all of the different papers continue to play an important role in the refugees' everyday lives. In that respect, power is not located in one document only, but in the dialectic relations between persons and their documents. They learn from their personal happenings about policies, the significance and content of their documents and strive to either fight or adapt to them.

In this vein, I wish to claim that documents could be perceived on the one hand as one's bodily organ, or as one's reflection, as much as they could be perceived as an instrument which erases one's past and enables one's future, a vital but sometimes an illegible object which determines important moments in one's life. Therefore, we should note, that while States attempt to monitor citizens through documentation, people produce and selectively use them, destroy and lose them in an inevitable search for new lives across national borders.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Ilan Lonai at Amnesty International the Israel Section who made this research possible. I also wish to thank Alice Nagle and Johnny Bayu at the African Refugees Development Center in Israel for their enormous help and support in this research.

## References

Brecht, Bertolt

1996 [1961] Talks of Refugees. Tel Aviv: Shoken.

Gordillo, G.

2006 The Crucible of Citizenship: ID-Paper  
Fetishism in the Argentinean Chaco. *American  
Ethnologist* 33(2):163-176.

Kemp A. and R. Rajzman

2008 Migrants and Workers: The Political Economy  
of Labor Migration in Israel. Jerusalem: Van Leer  
[Hebrew].

Riles, A.

2004 Law as an Object. *In* Law and Empire in the  
Pacific. S. E. Merry and D. Brenneis, eds. Pp 187-  
212. Santa Fe: School of American Research  
Press and James Curry.

Rosenhek Z.

2000 Migration Regimes, Intra State Conflicts and  
the Politics of Exclusions and Inclusion: Migrant  
Workers in Israeli Welfare State. *Social Problems*  
47(1):49-67.

Sabar, G

2008 We're Not Here to Stay: African Migrant  
Workers in Israel and Back in Africa. Tel Aviv:  
Tel Aviv University Press [Hebrew].

Scott, J. M.

1998 Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes  
to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.  
New Haven: Yale University Press.

Torpey J.

2000 The Invention of the Passport Surveillance  
Citizenship and the State. Cambridge:  
Cambridge University Press.

Willen S.

2003 Perspective on Labour Migration in  
Israel. *Revue Europeenne des Migrations  
Internationales* 19:243-262.