

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LAURA C. HAMMOND, *This Place Will Become Home: Refugee Repatriation to Ethiopia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 2004.

The repatriation of refugees to their homeland should mark the end of a crisis and the resumption of normality for those who were forced to leave. But this was not the case for the Ethiopian refugees discussed in this book. In 1993 they “returned” to a place in many ways more difficult than the camps they just escaped. Ada Bai, the new home of the returnees was little more than a dusty field, to which they were trucked in after the end of the civil war in Ethiopia and years in Sudanese camps. There they had to build new homes, a new community and new institutions, with little help from the outside world and from the still weak national government. These were the same people who had escaped some of the worst imaginable conditions in recent human history (the war and famine of 1984-85) and lived in camps for many years.

Hammond unpacks the relationship between community and place, under conditions when place must be re-created. The new Ada Bai residents, like all displaced people, have not only lost their geographic location, they have lost the cultural meaning associated with it. This is therefore a study of “emplacement” as Hammond puts it, of the process by which people give meaning and identity to place. The ability of the refugee community to build new lives and find meaning in an inhospitable environment is awe-inspiring. But the crushing poverty and the shocking rates of infant and maternal mortality they continue to experience, throw a harsh light on a still very weak refugee protection system. And despite Hammond’s rich experience and great empathy with the returnees, the contrast between the misery of the lives in mud huts and the anthropological apparatus deployed (the critique of sedentarism, the process of emplacement, etc.) is a little jarring. Describing a disastrous material situation using the symbolic tools of western social science often seems unnecessary.

Hammond did much of her fieldwork as a development worker, and she spends large sections of the book discussing aspects of the lives of the refugees, including access to credit, food production and labour migration as coping techniques. Yet she could have asked harder questions earlier in the book. The cultural and symbolic process of emplacement is significant in its own right, but only in the last chapter is the role of the Ethiopian state discussed in any detail, for instance. Ethiopian authorities were eager to repatriate the hundreds of thousands of refugees that has been scattered

throughout the world, but without providing sufficient support, and without reaching an agreement with the UN. To her credit, Hammond strongly advocates that more should and could have been done to help the process of repatriation, and clearly points out some of the weaknesses of the global refugee regime (p.205). But the book would have been stronger if these concerns had been front and center and expressed more forcefully. Still, this is very high quality work, by a skilled anthropologist, on a crucial topic.

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