

## Displacement, Belonging, and Land Rights in Grand Gedeh, Liberia: Almost at Home Abroad?

Ingunn Bjørkhaug, Morten Bøås, and Tewodros Kebede

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**Ingunn Bjørkhaug** is a researcher at the Fafo Research Foundation (Oslo, Norway) and a graduate fellow at Noragric, NMBU (Ås, Norway). She has conducted studies in conflict and postconflict settings in Colombia, Liberia and Uganda, focusing on displacement, gender-based violence, children and youth, and ex-combatants. She is currently conducting research on displacement economies in Nakivale, Uganda, and on the Liberian side of the Liberian–Ivorian borderlands. She is the co-author (with Morten Bøås) of “The IDP Economy in Northern Uganda: A Prisoners’ Economy?” in the edited volume *Displacement Economies in Africa: Paradoxes of Crisis and Creativities* (Zed Books, 2014). E-mail: inb@fafo.no

**Morten Bøås** is a research professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). He works on violent conflict in West and central Africa and in the Middle East. He is the co-editor (with Kevin Dunn) of *African Guerrillas: Raging against the Machine* (Lynne Rienner, 2007), the co-author (with Kevin Dunn) of *Politics of Origin in Africa* (Zed Books, 2013) and *Africa’s Insurgents: Navigating an Evolving Landscape* (Lynne Rienner, 2017), and the author of *The Politics of Conflict Economies: Miners, Merchants and Warriors in the African Borderland* (Routledge, 2014). E-mail: mbo@nupi.no

**Tewodros Kebede** is a researcher at the Fafo Research Foundation (Oslo, Norway). His area of expertise includes program evaluation, statistical survey methods, and development economics. He has worked on state-of-the art methods for Fafo’s projects “Impacts and Costs of Forced Displacement” and “Disaster Risk Management in Ethiopia” financed by the World Bank. E-mail: tak@fafo.no

**Abstract:** Conflicts over local land rights between groups considered as “sons of the soil” and newcomers such as refugees can trigger autochthony-inspired violence. However, such conflicts are not always manifested, even when the conditions are in place. The question we explore in this article is whether such conflicts are less likely to emerge if the “other” is from a group with a longstanding bond of interethnic allegiance with the host community. Based on ethnographic data from host–refugee communities in Grand Gedeh, Liberia, we revisit previous attempts to explain economic and social relations between majority and minority groups. Our main finding is that in this part of Africa no prior special status will fundamentally alter the established ways of incorporating strangers into the community.

**Résumé:** Les conflits sur les droits fonciers locaux entre les groupes considérés comme “fils du sol” et les nouveaux arrivants, tels que les réfugiés, peuvent déclencher une violence inspirée par l’autochtonie. Cependant, de tels conflits ne se manifestent pas toujours, même lorsque les conditions de conflit sont en place. Cet article explore la question de savoir si ces conflits sont moins susceptibles d’émerger si l’“autre” provient d’un groupe ayant un lien de longue date d’allégeance interethnique. Sur les bases de données ethnographiques des communautés hôtes–réfugiés à Grand Gedeh, Libéria, il revisite les tentatives précédentes d’explication des relations économiques et sociales entre les groupes majoritaires et minoritaires. La conclusion principale est qu’aucun statut spécial antérieur ne modifie fondamentalement les moyens établis d’intégrer des étrangers dans cette partie de l’Afrique.

**Keywords:** Liberia; Côte d’Ivoire; refugees; sons of the soil; autochthony

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## Introduction

People have always felt a need to belong. This can be in the form of belonging to land, religion, a flag, an institution, or anything else that makes one feel more secure. Having such a sense of security becomes particularly salient during periods of immense social change. The need can be triggered by many different events, but an obvious example is the experience of unexpectedly being displaced, or of being suddenly confronted by a huge group of refugees arriving on one’s doorstep. In the absence of effective state interventions or legitimate state institutions, such situations can create social nervousness, which may bring about social unrest and violence. In response to the perception that the old way of life can no longer be maintained, new narratives may arise to provide an explanation and a solution.

One powerful narrative evoked in a situation such as this is the claim to autochthony, which implies that a person “belongs” simply because that person or his or her ancestors were “here first.” Thus, tales of autochthony promise to restore a sense of belonging by linking identity and space in very specific ways. Such tales often articulate an implicit political agenda in the form of narratives and discursive constructions designed to shape perceptions and inform people’s actions. This has become an integral part

of many contemporary African conflicts, and their expression has led to several violent episodes (Bøås & Dunn 2013; Geschire 2009; Jackson 2006).

The approach in this article is to suggest that the movement toward autochthony-based discourses should be understood as a strategy rather than as a fact. Proving claims of indigeneity is a difficult task almost everywhere, but particularly in an area with vast and constant population movements. However, in the absence of legitimate state institutions and interventions, there may be much to be gained by making such an assertion. This is why the employment of autochthony discourses is not simply a top-down strategy applied by elites to manipulate the lower strata of society, nor is it a bottom-up strategy—a weapon of the weak. It is employed by different actors for different reasons (see Bøås & Dunn 2013), but in this article we mainly focus on how it is employed in poor refugee-receiving local communities.

Autochthony-inspired violence can likewise be ignited by various crises. Economic crisis is one possible trigger; political transformation (e.g., from authoritarian rule to multiparty democracy) is another.<sup>1</sup> Local conflict over land rights between majority and minority groups is yet another potential trigger, as is an influx of refugees who do not return home. What these situations have in common is that one group is singled out as an “other” (understood as an intruder, an enemy, or simply as a guest who has overstayed the hospitality of the host). The assumption is that for order to be restored the newly arrived group needs either to leave or be brought under specific social control (Bøås 2009). This always leads to a dynamic situation of varying degrees of conflict, collusion, and constantly negotiated collaboration between groups considering themselves to be autochthonous to the area in question, and the group(s) these people see as newcomers or strangers. As such, we agree with Brauchler and Ménard (2017) that the legitimation of rights and access to various forms of citizenship must be understood in relation to established mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (in this case, in relation to the “stranger–father” institution, as discussed below). We are not convinced, however, that this automatically leads to a renegotiation of social identities. Whether such a renegotiation takes place will depend on the circumstances. In cases involving refugees and host communities, determinants can include how the control over land, resources, and populations is affected by the emergence of a displaced population among local host communities, as well as how established norms of land and labor allocation are affected by this situation.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between host communities and refugees is an issue that has received scant attention in the displacement economy literature (see Hammar 2014), in terms of research as well as policy. We seek to contribute to this literature by focusing on the issue of autochthony and how it can be used as a strategy on behalf of poor host communities in the Mano River Basin (an area comprising Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea). Based on analysis of data from ethnographic fieldwork (qualitative and

quantitative) among host–refugee communities in Grand Gedeh, we revisit previous attempts to explain economic and social relations between minority and majority groups with differing degrees of belonging to land.<sup>3</sup> Autochthony-based conflicts do not always come about, even if almost all the conditions for such conflicts are in place. The generic question we explore is whether such conflicts are less likely to emerge in their most violent and destructive form if the host group in question has longstanding bonds of interethnic allegiance and solidarity that cuts across national borders.

This is precisely the situation that existed along the Liberian–Ivorian border in the county of Grand Gedeh in Liberia in 2014. In the aftermath of the crisis in Côte d’Ivoire (see McGovern 2011; Banégas 2015), a large number of Ivorian refugees crossed the border to Liberia in 2011, peaking at almost one hundred and fifty thousand. Many of those remaining were of Gueré origin. Other groups of refugees such as the Yacouba had also fled across the border from Côte d’Ivoire to Liberia in large numbers, but owing to differing ethnic and political allegiances in the Ivorian crisis, the final outcomes were different. Most people of Gueré origin ended up siding with then Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, whereas the majority of the Yacouba were seen as supporters of Alassane Ouattara. When Gbagbo was ousted from the presidency in 2011, it was therefore easier for the Yacouba to start returning home (see McGovern 2011; Bøås & Dunn 2013; Banégas 2015).<sup>4</sup>

Most of the people of Gueré origin who fled their homes in western Côte d’Ivoire went to Grand Gedeh, where the Krahn are in the ethnic majority. An ancient bond of ethnic allegiance exists between the Krahn and the Gueré, leading them to identify each other as “ethnic cousins,” and their respective languages are also so similar that they can easily understand one another (Holsoe & Lauer 1976). In the past this ethnic allegiance has been reinforced several times, most recently during the first phase of the Liberian civil war (1990–1996) when the Gueré hosted Krahn refugees in Côte d’Ivoire (Bøås 2015). These previous relationships suggest that the later relations between the Krahn as hosts and the Gueré as refugees had the potential to be cordial and even collaborative. The question, therefore, is whether this past history makes the Gueré refugees in Grand Gedeh into something other than just special guests who are expected to leave when the immediate crisis is over. Will the refugees eventually exhaust the hospitality of their host communities, or are they perceived as local citizens-in-the-making in this borderland of the Mano River Basin?<sup>5</sup>

Based on analysis of data from ethnographic fieldwork (qualitative and quantitative) among host–refugee communities in Grand Gedeh, this article will revisit previous attempts to explain economic and social relations between minority and majority groups with differing degrees of belonging to land in the Mano River Basin.<sup>6</sup> In particular, we investigate the extent to which the Krahn–Gueré relationship differs from the customary Liberian institution of the stranger–father (see Bøås 2009; Bøås & Dunn 2013),

an institution that traditionally regulates the allocation of land resources to newcomers (non-citizens; anybody not born in the community in question) in local Liberian agricultural communities.<sup>7</sup> An additional concern of this article is to analyze the degree to which the Krahn–Gueré relationship is regulated according to standard Liberian practices and how the customary stranger–father institution has informed the reception of Gueré refugees in Liberia. What does it mean to be a “good guest”? How does the refugee relate to the autochthon “father”?

### **The Liberian Stranger–Father Institution and the Ivorian Turotat**

Several studies have noted the highly structured relationships between hosts (the autochthons) and strangers in the tropical forest belt along the West African coast.<sup>8</sup> In the Mano River Basin the names of these social practices and how they are enacted have differed across time and space, and the ways in which strangers are incorporated into rural communities have involved measures that combine inclusion and exclusion. Although long-standing, these customary institutions have evolved over time; they have been affected by colonialism and colonial administrative boundaries, by independence, by modernity, and by the wars and international interventions that occurred in this area. But although they are not practiced exactly as they were a hundred years ago or even twenty years ago, these social arrangements are still functioning and regulate social and economic affairs between those considered autochthons and those who are not.

In the Mano River Basin, the structuring of relationships between those who are seen as the firstcomers and latecomers/newcomers (people defined as “strangers” simply because they were not born in the village in question) is generally managed by a customary institution known as the stranger–father. In this region the right to own or use land is shared among a small number of lineages considered to be the autochthons.<sup>9</sup> What this means is that people who were not born in a village can be guests for a time—but this does not alter the basic fact that such people are still strangers. If the guest does not leave after a while, arrangements must be made to incorporate the guest or stranger into the autochthonous community. One such solution is the stranger–father institution, by which the stranger is assigned to an authority figure, or “father,” who takes upon himself the responsibility of ensuring that the stranger behaves in accordance with the rules of the community. In basic terms, this means that any stranger who seeks to settle in a village or community needs to be adopted by an autochthonous father. It gives the newcomer the right to live in a place and a plot of land to cultivate, but it also means that the newcomer locks himself and his lineage forever into a position subordinate to the “father” with regard to decisions about land and land use. It excludes the stranger from participating in substantive decisions concerning land and labor, meaning, in practice, that it is impossible for a stranger to become a full citizen of a village. Another significant restriction in Liberia is that the stranger and his

family will never earn the right to plant so-called life crops such as cocoa, rubber, and coffee, because by doing so one embeds oneself in the soil and makes a permanent connection to it. In order to permanently “lock the land” with perennial crops one must therefore belong to the soil (Bøås & Dunn 2013). Thus the stranger–father institution provides for the integration of newcomers—but only up to a certain point. In Côte d’Ivoire an arrangement similar to that of the stranger–father institution is known as the *tutorat* (the “father” in Liberia is called the *tuteur* in Côte d’Ivoire; see Chauveau 2006; Colin, Kouamé & Soro 2007). In the Ivorian version the newcomer also owes the tuteur gestures of gratitude in the form of gifts, labor, and money, which serve symbolically and practically to perpetuate the land rights agreement from one generation to next. An important difference between the two systems is that there is no restriction on planting tree crops in the Ivorian version. Nevertheless, in both Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire the result of these practices is a hierarchical political system that is supposed to regulate titles to land.<sup>10</sup> This has important implications for the relationship between the Krahn hosts in Liberia and the Guéré refugees from Côte d’Ivoire.

### **The Krahn–Guéré Relationship—A Special Kind of Bond?**

Liberia’s Grand Gedeh County, together with its surrounding areas, has never been an isolated tribal setting; rather, it is a “dynamic theater” where people have been coming and going for centuries (Azevedo 1971; Richards et al. 2005). The county has a history of warfare—referred to as “rolling wars” by some groups in their own historical narratives (Bøås 2008)—with shifting alliances and competition for control over trade routes. It has always been a multicultural and politically diverse region, which suggests that, in objective terms, the current clearly demarcated ethnic groups are more an invention of the Liberian government for its own state-building purposes than they are historically coherent groups with a clearly defined distant past (Holsoe & Lauer 1976; McEvoy 1979; Bøås & Dunn 2013).

Indeed, before the founding of the modern Liberian state, the Krahn were recognized as several small groups of people (clans) whose dialects belonged to the same type of language (Kru), and who lived within the same geographical space. Lineage, clan, and place of belonging were important aspects of traditional life, but the ethnic identity of being Krahn was more elusive (Holsoe & Lauer 1976). There has also historically been a familiarity between the people now called Krahn and those called Guéré. Their languages are fairly similar, and they share a closely related ethnic kinship strengthened by frequent marriages across the border (Bøås 2005). Nevertheless, cross-border marriages do not fundamentally alter the relationship between hosts and strangers. It is women who marry into new communities; their local citizenship is tied to that of their husbands and does not include the wife’s family. If the husband dies, the woman will either remarry in his

community or move back to her original village, although the children of the marriage are considered citizens and allowed to remain.

The constitution of the Krahn and the Gueré in their contemporary forms is tied to the creation of the modern Liberian and Ivorian state and to the West African state system. In Liberia, the position of the Krahn achieved a new national status during the presidency of Samuel Doe, himself a Krahn, and the civil war that followed (Bøås 2005). When the Liberian civil war reached Grand Gedeh in 1990, a large number of Krahn refugees crossed the border to Côte d'Ivoire and found sanctuary among the Gueré population as well as assistance ranging from food to shelter and land.

The current relationship between the Krahn and the Gueré is also a result of the politico-military situation that emerged initially from the civil war in Liberia in the early 1990s and extended into the development of the First Ivorian war in 2002. Liberians who had fled to Côte d'Ivoire ended up on both sides of the struggle between the Ivorian government and rebel forces. According to Human Rights Watch (2003), between fifteen hundred and two thousand Liberians fought for the Ivorian government army and its support militias, whereas about a thousand Liberians were enrolled in the ranks of rebel forces. Ethnic belonging came to shape the backbone of most militias. As we have seen, the Gueré in general supported Laurent Gbagbo, and they made up a large portion of the Front for the Liberation of the Great West (FLGO), which recruited through locally elected Gueré leaders (see International Crisis Group 2003). On the other hand, almost a thousand Liberian Gio fighters from Nimba County belonged to the Ivorian rebel group Mouvement Populaire du Grand Ouest (MPIGO). At the end of November 2002 MPIGO attacked Toulépleu, a Gueré town south of the ethnic border that divides the Ivorian Yacouba and the Gueré. In order to counter the rebel offensive, the Gbagbo government recruited Liberian refugees, almost exclusively from the Krahn group.

Krahn refugees joined the government counteroffensive for various reasons. Some saw the war as an opportunity for personal enrichment, but most appear to have joined for security reasons. Fighting for the government was a tactical move to ensure goodwill from the Gueré host communities (Bøås 2005; Chelipi-den Hamer 2011; Bøås & Utas 2014)—to prove that the refugees were “good strangers” willing to take up arms in their defense. However, by 2014 the situation had reversed itself. The Ivorians who used to be the providers for what they perceived as the poor Liberians now had to depend on the Liberians’ hospitality. Those who used to be tuteurs (or “fathers”) had now become the strangers. As one of our Ivorian informants expressed it, “We gave them then; now we receive their help” (PTP camp, March 2014). According to another Ivorian interviewed in the PTP camp in Liberia, “If you leave your country, the conditions change. When the Liberian refugees came to Côte d'Ivoire we were friends with them. Some were living in our community; some were living in the camp. It is difficult to be a refugee in a country that we used to host refugees from” (March 2014).

The shift from having been the host to suddenly a guest depending on the goodwill of a host was clearly a transition for the Gueré refugees: “If you leave your country, the conditions change. When the Liberian refugees came to Côte d’Ivoire we were friends with them. Some were living in our community; some were living in the camp. It is difficult to be a refugee in a country that we used to host refugees from” (male respondent, PTP camp, March 2014). The Ivorians used to be the providers for what they perceived as the poor Liberians, but now they have to depend on their hospitality. They used to be tuteurs (stranger–fathers), but now have become the strangers themselves.

Not only have the Ivorian refugees become the strangers, but the way their new hosts use the soil is different from what they were used to in Côte d’Ivoire. The main source of livelihood and income in Grand Gedeh is agriculture. As is the case for much of the tropical forest belt of the Mano River Basin, Grand Gedeh is also divided between lower tropical forests and mid-sized hills composed of valleys, rivers, and streams. In the upland, the main source of cultivation is rice production, while agriculture in the low-lying areas produces yams, plantains, potatoes, sugarcane, and a variety of vegetables. Here, cocoa, coffee, and rubber are also cultivated. The main products, however, are rice and cassava. The cocoa, coffee, and rubber plantations that exist are small household-size fields. Although they are very important to the individual households, these plots are few and small, compared to what the Gueré were used to in Côte d’Ivoire. Arrangements similar to the Ivorian tutorat with regard to cash crops such as cocoa are therefore not feasible. This has been a major challenge to local integration for the benefit of both groups, because although the Gueré are experienced cocoa farmers, plantations in Grand Gedeh are not of sufficient size for their experience in cocoa farming to be of any use.

The events described above have important implications for questions concerning peace and reconciliation in the Mano River Basin area at large (see Bøås & Utas 2014). However, for the purpose of this particular article, the question is to what extent the stranger–father institution has an impact on host–refugee relations in eastern Liberia. In order to investigate this further, we will unpack the roles and the relationship between the hosts and the refugees in Grand Gedeh.

### **Who Are the Hosts and Who Are the Guests?**

When this study was conducted in March and April 2014, the number of Ivorian refugees in Liberia, which had peaked at almost one hundred and fifty thousand people, had been reduced to about forty-two thousand, and 15,400 of these were living in PTP refugee camp (UNHCR 2014). By the end of 2016 approximately 18,500 refugees from Côte d’Ivoire remained in Liberia (UNHCR 2016) and currently, in 2017, the government has started to pursue repatriation for the remaining refugees.



Our study is based on a representative sample of 399 households in the PTP refugee camp in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh. The sample population consists of 1,655 refugees, with children and youth representing more than half of the population (see table 1). Our quantitative survey was supported by qualitative interviews with refugees in the PTP camp, Liberians living near the camp and in Zwedru, and representatives of governmental as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

In terms of ethnicity, 86 percent of the Ivorian refugees are of Gueré origin, while the remaining 14 percent come from many different ethnic groups. The majority of the refugees (87%) arrived in 2011, as one would assume for a group of refugees predominantly of Gueré origin, because by then it was obvious that President Gbagbo would lose the conflict with Alassane Ouattara. Just as this happened, the western part of Côte d'Ivoire bordering on Liberia fell to an amalgamation of rebel forces (the Nouvelle Force and their allied hunter-militias) from the northern part of the country. By and large it was the blitzkrieg offensive of these groups that created the 2010–2011 exodus of people from western Côte d'Ivoire. Ninety-two percent of the Gueré refugees who fled to Liberia arrived in local Krahn communities along the border—for example, along the axis from Toe Town to Zwedru. Many people of Yacouba origin also fled to Liberia but sought sanctuary with their cross-border ethnic allies, particularly the Gio of the neighboring Nimba County. Both ethnic groups were initially welcomed by their respective hosts, who opened their communities to the refugees. However, this study focuses on the relationship between the Gueré and the Krahn.

The majority of the refugees had hurriedly left their homes without managing to bring many possessions with them, and they came empty-handed to Liberia; many of them had been sleeping in the forest for weeks before their arrival. The result was that, after fleeing through the bush and crossing the border, they arrived in much need of assistance. In the initial emergency phase most of the humanitarian help was provided by local Krahn communities. More than half of the refugees interviewed reported that they had already known someone upon arrival. For many (almost 30%), these were kin members across the border (see table 2), while almost 27 percent knew people who had previously been refugees in Côte d'Ivoire. Other refugees

**Table 1.** Age and Sex Distribution of Ivorian Refugees, in Percent

Age	Female	Male	Total Number
0–14	48	52	835
15–29	56	44	380
30–44	53	47	251
45–59	49	51	137
60+	50	50	52
Total	51	49	1,655

tried to arrange an entry into local communities with the help of refugees who had such connections. Basically they were searching for a tuteur—a “father” to facilitate their resettlement—and 90 percent of their first contacts were of Krahn origin.

This evidence of preexisting cross-border relationships suggests that refugees did not randomly approach a village, but strategically went to villages where they had contacts. Hence, they were utilizing cross-border networks in their search for safety and sanctuary. Those refugees who did not have personal connections still navigated in a fairly well-known social terrain and managed to establish contact with people who helped them when they clearly needed assistance. After a lengthy journey on foot, one of the female respondents, a thirty-year-old single mother of two, spoke of her first time in Zwedru.

When I first escaped to Zwedru I felt lost. I did not know anyone where I could seek shelter. When I arrived at Zwedru I went to the parking lot in the middle of the town and asked someone for help. A crowd of other refugees were gathered together. I met Mary. Mary said she could take care of me and my two children in her home for a while. Mary provided lodging and food in return for help in the household. The pressure on the Liberians was tremendous in the start of the influx. After one month Mary asked me for rent. This was not possible for me to pay, so I found another household that was willing to take care of me. In this household I was able to stay for longer. We developed a good friendship. (Interview, PTP camp, April 2014)

By 2011 the UNCHR had entered the scene and taken over the management of the refugee crisis in coordination with the Government of Liberia through the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC). The latter managed to set up basic social services in the local communities that both the local population and the refugees could utilize. However, when the refugee camps were established, the refugees were encouraged to move to the camps in order to continue to be under the protection of the UNHCR and to access services in the camps. All refugees must be registered by the LRRRC in order to access the services

**Table 2.** Relationship with the First Contact Person

First Contact Person	Frequency	Percent
A family member	33	30
A distant relative	8	7
A friend	19	17
Other refugees from Côte d'Ivoire	17	15
Former Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire	30	27
Other	5	4
Total	112	100

provided by the UNHCR and its implementing partners, although unofficial refugees (those who have not been registered by the LRRRC) are also living in Grand Gedeh in local communities. Ideally we would have also approached this group of refugees systematically, but this was not possible as the inclusion of these people would have entailed resources to conduct a separate study based on a different methodological approach for elusive populations.

The PTP camp is the largest refugee camp in Grand Gedeh. Its name comes from a timber company—Prime Timber Products—that used to have a logging concession in the area. The PTP Company had been out of business for many years when the Ivorian refugees started to arrive in huge numbers in 2011 and the concession area was therefore idle. The reason for the creation of the PTP camp was the government of Liberia's concern that the presence of refugees in local communities might constitute a security threat in the tense pre-election environment that prevailed at the time (see Bøås & Utas 2014). In order to avoid local confrontations, the Liberian government made an agreement with the local Krahn clan known as the Kannah, who claimed ownership of the land, that in return for the Kannah's agreement to allow the building of the camp, the Liberian government would build new houses for the local Kannah community. These were built next to the PTP camp, producing a social landscape where the host population and the refugees live next to each other. Some members of the Kannah clan also secured employment in the camp as security guards, or with the NGOs that were responsible for camp management or other services to the refugees. And, as we will discuss further below, because much of the land surrounding the PTP camp was still wild bush, that situation enabled the refugees access to farmland through the father-stranger institution. This was an arrangement with mutual benefits, as it enabled the landowners to turn their property into productive farmland that would remain so even after the refugees returned home.

As reflected in table 3 below, almost half (45%) of the Ivorian refugees in the PTP camp were experienced farmers, and almost all of the refugees had been employed in Côte d'Ivoire and thus arrived with skills to earn a little money in addition to what the UNHCR provided. Some refugees established small business ventures in cooperation with local partners. Thus they made use of their already established social connections with local Liberian communities in order to secure their livelihoods. Various arrangements were made. Some refugees who had been taken in by a Krahn community before they were required to move to the PTP camp deliberately divided their household, leaving a few of their family members behind in order to secure the relationship between the local community and the family members in the camp. The interviewee quoted above who described the welcome she had received in Zwedru had moved to the PTP camp when the LRRRC required her to do so. However, she kept in contact with her second host family, and the relationships she established during her first months of living

**Table 3.** Household Head's Livelihood Activity before Displacement

Livelihood Activity	Frequency	Percent
Farming	181	45
Agribusiness	24	6
Public sector	36	9
Trade	78	20
Student	52	13
Other	21	5
Unemployed	7	2
Total	399	100

in Zwedru have turned into long-term friendships as well as business ventures.

I was able to establish a small business that enables me a more stable income. Someone I got to know when I first arrived to Zwedru comes to the camp with a jerry can of oil. In return for the jerry can I will have to pay 1,800 LD [approximately U.S.\$20]. Whatever surplus I make is mine. Last month I was able to make a surplus of 2,500 LD [approximately U.S.\$30]. (Interview, PTP camp, April 2014)

Although it was necessary for refugees to be registered with the LRRRC in order to obtain basic rations and services, having a local connection was equally important in order to access land for cultivation. It is therefore interesting that almost half (48%) of the refugees in the PTP camp with access to land had obtained it through someone they knew; only 11 percent were provided access to land through an organization (see table 4), while 13 percent had contacted the chief of the village themselves. The stranger–father institution provides a set of unwritten rules and regulations that are implemented by the hosts and the refugees. The benefits are connected to a collective bond that becomes stronger once a relationship of trust has been established. For those without a stranger–father bond, vacant land nearby can represent an enticing resource within reach, but which they are prohibited from using. Those who even ventured on local land without prior agreement risked reprisals. For instance, young Guéré men sometimes

**Table 4.** Who Provided the Land Used by Your Household for Cultivation?

Land for cultivation provided by	Frequency	Percent
Village chief	16	13
The person I know	57	48
A local caretaker person	33	28
Others	14	11
Total	120	100

collected firewood in order to produce charcoal for sale. But this was risky in the absence of a relationship between the landowner and the refugee, as the following story illustrates.

One boy who was a newcomer to the PTP camp had attempted to collect firewood that he planned to use for sale. The owner of the forest caught him in the bush, asked him who gave him the permission to collect firewood. He replied that “for a long time you have not come this way, so we decided to fetch wood.” The landowner told them to get out of there and not to touch anything. He also took the machete from the boy. Now the young boy was idle, just waiting for the bush owner to [continue the] dialogue. His plan was to beg for permission to continue the work by offering the landowner some money. (Interview, PTP camp, April 2014)

The point is that without a stranger–father connection, the uncertainties are very high. Access to land must be built on some sort of trust established by an institution that can give as well as sanction, and the behavior described above was considered trespassing and an abuse of established local practices.

### **The Autochthon Father and the Stranger**

Thus the autochthon father’s acceptance of the stranger depends on previously established relationships as well as individual agreements. To be a good stranger is to respect the rules given by the father. Previous connections or kinship ties facilitate access to land for the refugees, but the refugees also have had to adapt to the local environment. As mentioned, the type of cocoa farming and crop-sharing arrangements that refugees were familiar with in Côte d’Ivoire are not feasible in their current situation. Although 93 percent of the refugees had been food crop producers, the main reason offered when asked why they did not grow perennial crops was that they are considered temporary guests and such crops are, as explained above, only for the autochthonous inhabitants, the “sons of the soil” (see also Bøås & Dunn 2013). This is a situation that will not change, even if they become part of the village through a stranger–father relationship. Even if bonds of cross-border reciprocity exist, these arrangements are largely founded on the ancient practices of incorporating strangers, where the strangers never achieve the full status of local citizens (see Bräucher & Ménard 2017; Bedert 2017; Ménard 2017; Sakti 2017; Geschiere 2006).

In response, the refugees have had to adapt their practices from large-scale cocoa farming to rice production for their own consumption, plus any small surplus that can be sold at the local market. As we have seen, since large tracts of land surrounding the PTP camp had not been previously farmed, some of this land was made available through various arrangements. A common arrangement was for a refugee or group of refugees to “brush”—i.e., to clear—one acre of land for a local farmer with rights to the land. These refugees were thereafter granted one acre that they could develop to produce their own crops. In addition, the refugee or

refugees had to pay the landowner 4,000 LD (approximately U.S.\$50) to rent the land for one year. These arrangements are open ended and variable. If the relationship between the landowner and the refugee remained positive, a mutually beneficial arrangement could materialize; if not, the relationship could become more exploitative or simply end. It is a system of constant negotiation and renegotiation and all refugees, therefore, have to find their own way of negotiating with those who control land.

In general, both the local community and the refugees described their relationship as good, although not surprisingly, not all of the refugees were satisfied with their current conditions. According to one sixty-five-year-old refugee,

In Côte d'Ivoire, I was a big man. I made money and I provided for my family: I had a car, I had a motorcycle, I had everything, I slept anytime. Now I eat cassava leaves without oil. Here the land is big, but they have no cocoa, no rubber, and no coffee plantations. In Côte d'Ivoire, there were large farms with palm trees, cocoa, coffee, and rubber, but now the Burkinabe occupy the land. I have never returned back there. The last time I was there was in March 2011. I took part in the political conflict. I am too afraid to go back; they know I was a Gbagbo representative. If Gbagbo's son wins the election I will be happy to go back there. (Interview, PTP camp, April 2014)

The same respondent complained that the Ivorians had treated the Liberian refugees with more generosity, even though the father–stranger system is not unlike the *tutorat* system of Côte d'Ivoire.

I feel that the Liberians are making life difficult for the refugees; they make us brush the land for them, even me. I am sixty-five years old and even I have to brush land for them. At the end of the season I have to give them fifty kilos of rice. They benefit from our presence. This is very different from the African tradition. In the Ivory Coast we welcomed them good. However, we can accept the conditions, because Liberia is so poor. It is God's way of doing things. (Interview, PTP camp, March 2014)

Nevertheless, even though most of the interviewees were not sanguine about the situation and knew that some local hosts were more welcoming than others, there were few open conflicts between the communities. "It depends on who you are dealing with," said one forty-five-year-old male Liberian who was an autochthon land owner; "If you know them, it is different" (interview, village bordering PTP camp, April 2014). Most of the Ivorian refugees perceived their arrangement as a temporary solution and did not complain about their subordinate position in the stranger–father relationship. Becoming part of a Liberian community on a permanent basis was rarely a preferred option, and they tolerated their position precisely because they did not think of it as permanent (see also Skinner 1963). For many the temporary nature of their condition made it easier to accept life in a refugee camp, where, surrounded by their kin, they at least enjoyed

a strange kind of autonomy that they might not have had within the local communities. However, what is intriguing is that the stranger–father institution was still in operation, even when the refugees moved into an established refugee camp with fences surrounding them. This is the case because—camp or no camp—access to land was important and the established cultural institutions provided such access.

At the same time, as we have seen, for many of the Liberians living in and around the camp, the presence of the refugees and their value as a labor source meant that their presence was mutually beneficial. One of the refugees, a forty-two-year-old man, expressed with particular clarity the complex nature of this situation, as well as the complicated emotions of the refugee: his capacity to work amicably side by side with a landowner but still not feel entirely welcome in the community; his resentment about the loss of his former status and his longing for home combined with an appreciation for the camaraderie of the farmwork and the improving conditions year by year.

I used to have twenty acres of land back home. To be a farmer was a predictable life. I could build a house for my family and made good money. I provided education to my children. Here I rent land to do some farming, but I plant rice instead of cocoa. I met the landowner through his children, but I negotiated directly with the father. The rent has changed some because the relationship has developed. The first year I had to brush two acres and pay 2,000 LD [U.S.\$25] for half an acre of land. The next two years I only had to brush two acres of land for rent, but this time I brushed it together with the father. The last year I also brushed, but this time we were fifteen people who shared the work of brushing the land. Every year the conditions improve some, and each year we are able to harvest about two hundred bunches of rice. I do not feel that the relationship to the landowner is challenging, however, not everybody welcomes you. They do not understand the situation. (Interview, PTP camp, March 2014)

All in all, then, the subordinate position of the stranger in the stranger–father arrangement, and the opportunity to cultivate a plot of land, was acceptable to most of the refugees. At the least, there were few preferable alternatives, since there are no large-scale businesses inside the PTP camp and few opportunities for employment. The camp does have a market where the family members sell petrol, clothes, vegetables, cookies, oil, and other small items to Zwedru inhabitants who visit on market days. One of the couples in the PTP camp had not worked in agriculture in their previous life in Côte d’Ivoire and therefore had to adapt to camp conditions without dependence on the land. They were among the first refugees to arrive at the camp, and the husband secured a contract with one of the NGOs building the camp. This provided enough startup capital for the wife to start a small business making and selling pastries, both in the local market and in the camp. Nevertheless, the husband who used to be busy at home now finds

himself idle. While his wife is busy preparing and selling the pastries, he does some laundry and sends his children to school, but this thirty-eight-year-old man is looking for some additional work: “I feel that every day has many hours to kill. I worry a lot. I am not in a good place. If you leave your country, the conditions change. It is difficult to be a refugee in a country we used to host refugees from. Now I have to learn how to farm” (interview, PTP camp, March 2014). This respondent did not have a stranger–father to rent land from, and found it challenging to negotiate with the local landowners, illustrating the importance of local connections. He was an outsider, a stranger without an autochthon father, dependent on the income provided by his wife. His feeling of exclusion was reflected in his perception of the community: “I am afraid of going into the community. Liberians accuse us of doing bad, meaning we were involved in rebel activities. . . . Police accuse us and tell us that you treated us bad, now we do that to you. It is better to stay in the camp.”

### Always a Stranger?

At the time of the study, all of the smaller refugee camps had been closed down and most of the refugees remaining in Grand Gedeh who had been living in the community or in any of the smaller camps were moved to the PTP camp. The food rations had been reduced to rice and salt, making it necessary for the refugees to develop a higher degree of self-reliance and making connections to an autochthon father to provide the land needed for self-sufficiency even more important. As some refugees started returning to Côte d’Ivoire smaller camps closed and the PTP camp expanded, establishing two types of refugees: those who were relatively settled, having arrived in this camp first, and those who were newcomers, having been transferred from other camps. Increasing numbers of refugees created new challenges with regard to access to land. Refugees relocated from other camps were obliged to find new “fathers,” as their kinship ties and access to land were connected to their original camps. A seventy-year-old male refugee who had been transferred from Dougee camp said,

The Krahn in Dougee town was different. We have some relatives there, we speak the same Krahn. Krahn here in PTP do not speak the same Krahn. The Krahn in PTP are Kannah, whereas the Krahn in Dougee is Kahowlue. Kin ties are important, if you have friends and family nearby, there will be no problems. (Male respondent PTP camp, April 2014)

He claimed that land in his original camp had been easily available, even free, whereas here the refugees had to pay. These relocated refugees became strangers once again and had to start searching for new stranger–fathers.

Table 5 shows the perception of refugees in the PTP camp concerning how they were received when they first arrived compared to their status in the present. The majority of refugees (73%) reported that at first they were



**Table 5.** Perceptions of Ivorian Refugees

Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Sample size
We were welcomed by the local community when we arrived initially.	8	8	11	65	8	392
We are perceived as having stayed too long.	7	29	22	40	2	389
We are a burden to the local community.	11	40	16	29	4	392

welcomed by the local community. However, sometime later they believed they were perceived as having stayed too long in Liberia. Most did not consider themselves a burden to the local community since they lived in a managed refugee camp. However, 33 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were considered a burden by local communities. It appears, therefore, that in Liberia they will remain outsiders, strangers, despite the cultural and ethnic ties they share with their neighbors. This condition mirrors a situation described by Peil (1979:125) in the context of Ghana:

He may speak the local language. . . . He may have many friends from various groups, including the hosts, and be indistinguishable in dress or behavior from others in the neighbourhood; but there is almost always a reserve, an attitudinal and emotional distance which makes it clear that he remains at least partly a stranger.

## Conclusion

The Gueré refugees from Côte d'Ivoire are not "almost at home abroad," nor are they local citizens-in-the-making. Initially they were generally well received, in large part, we would argue, because of ties of ethnicity and history to the Krahn in Liberia. The special bond between these two groups may have substantially reduced the likelihood of immediate conflict and violence. However, because the refugee situation turned from being an immediate crisis into a protracted problem with no immediate end in sight, local Liberian perceptions may have changed. The relationship between these two groups has centered on the principles of the integration of strangers in terms of the stranger–father institution. Even though the refugees of Gueré origin were seen as special guests—refugees of a different social status from that of any other stranger—they were still guests in the local communities. Any guest, no matter how special, should also eventually leave.

Based on the perception of having overstayed their welcome and become a burden to local host communities, many of the Gueré refugees themselves believe that their Krahn hosts have fulfilled their part of the bargain of

cross-border alliance, support, and sanctuary. Many Krahn sought refuge in Côte d'Ivoire during the Liberian civil war, and they were grateful for the support they had received. However, when the war ended, they returned home, and many of the Gueré refugees think that since the war in Côte d'Ivoire is over, their Krahn hosts think that they should do the same.

Thus, we suggest that in this part of Africa even if the strangers can be welcomed for a time and made to feel at home, they are not likely to become citizens. As long as the dominant mode of production is based on access to land, and land is seen as the essential commodity that represents a link to previous generations and to current as well as future survival, the integration of strangers and the question of local citizenship will continue to be based on the old practices of land use and distribution. In Liberia the stranger–father institution accommodates newcomers but simultaneously excludes them, because it effectively locks strangers and their relatives into a permanent position as second-class citizens without full rights in relation to the most important economic asset: land. Currently, no special relationship appears able to alter the status quo, even if the relationship is built on a well-established cross-border alliance of support and sanctuary.

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## Notes

1. See Skinner (1978); Richards (2005); Kuba and Lentz (2006); Geschire (2009); Bøås and Dunn (2013); Sakti (2017); Ménard (2017).
2. See, e.g., Bøås and Bjørkhaug (2014); Hammar (2014); Hammar and Rodgers (2008); Kibreab (2004); Werker (2007).
3. See Bøås (2009); Bøås and Dunn (2013); Chauveau (2006); Chauveau and Richards (2008); Azevedo (1994); Fairhead (2010); Højbjerg (2007); Murphy

and Bledsoe (1987); Shaw (2002). The research for this article was carried out in Grand Gedeh, together with colleagues from the University of Liberia, as part of a larger project on the “Economic Conditions of Displacement” financed by the Norwegian Research Council.

4. Even if some of them may have been willing to return to Côte d’Ivoire, this was not possible after the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. The government of Côte d’Ivoire closed the border from August 2014 to April 2015 and policed it quite effectively (see BBC 2014).
5. See, e.g., Kibreab (2004); Werker (2007); Hammar and Rodgers (2008); Hammar (2014); Bjørkhaug and Bøås (2014).
6. See Azevedo (1994); Bøås (2009); Bøås and Dunn (2013); Chauveau (2006); Chauveau and Richards (2008); Fairhead (2010); Højbjerg (2007); Murphy and Bledsoe (1987); Shaw (2002).
7. The name of this “institution” varies among different counties and communities, but the practice is by and large the same across Liberia as well as in Côte d’Ivoire.
8. See Azevedo (1962, 1989); Bøås (2009, 2015); Bøås and Dunn (2013); Cutolo (2010); Højbjerg (2007); Kopytof (1987); McEvoy (1979); Murphy (1980).
9. On the stranger–father institution, see Azevedo (1962, 1989); McEvoy (1979); Murphy (1980); Kopytof (1987); Højbjerg (2007); Bøås (2009, 2015); Cutolo (2010); Bøås and Dunn (2013). On the concept of autochthons and autochthonous lineages, see Richards (2005); Chauveau et al. (2006); Chauveau (2006); Colin, Kouamé, and Soro (2007); Chauveau and Colin (2010); McGovern (2011); Bøås and Dunn (2013).
10. Of course, in practice this was less often the case, as people locked into this position had constantly tried to renegotiate their relationship with host communities, either through economic arrangements (as traders having the possibility of offering credit) or through more violent means. See, e.g., McGovern (2011:73), who sums up Yves Person’s three-volume work on Samory Touré with the following sentence: “Samory was the product of a collective decision by the Mande-speakers living along the forest-Savannah frontier to renege on their bargain with their hosts and add political domination to their economic predominance.”