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What Happens to Law in a Refugee Camp?

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How do people living in a refugee camp engage with legal practices, discourses, and institutions? Critics argue that refugee camps leave people in "legal limbo" depriving them of the "right to have rights" despite the presence of international humanitarian actors and the entitlements enshrined in international law. For that reason, refugee camps have become a highly visible symbol of failed human rights campaigns. In contrast, I found in an ethnography of the Buduburam Refugee Camp in Ghana, West Africa, that although people living as refugees faced chronic insecurity and injustice, they engaged extensively with several different facets of the law. I illuminate three interrelated dimensions of their experiences: (1) their development as international legal subjects; (2) their alienation from domestic legal institutions; and (3) their agency within the legal field. The article contributes to the research agenda on law in humanitarian settings an empirically grounded account of the subjective dimensions of legal alienation and mobilization in a refugee camp. More broadly, it contributes to international human rights debates by theorizing a mixed outcome of international human rights campaigns: the emergence of *wards of international law*, people deeply embedded in the international legal system, but alienated from local law.

An extensive patchwork of international, regional, and national laws govern contemporary refuge whether people find sanctuary in postindustrial cities or in refugee camps in the global South (Barnett 2002; Cuellar 2006; Hathaway 1991; Nanda 1989; Wilde 1998). Over 100 states have ratified the major international refugee

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treaties. The United Nations established two agencies devoted to the protection of refugee rights: the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (Loescher 1993; Morris 2004). Yet, critics argue that refugee camps leave people in a "state of exception" or "legal limbo" that deprives them of the "right to have rights" (Adam 2009; Diken 2004; Edkins 2000; Hanafi & Long 2010; Knudsen 2009). For that reason, refugee camps have become a highly visible symbol of failed human rights campaigns. Are these legal mechanisms disappearing without a trace? How (if at all) do people living in the midst of humanitarian crisis engage with legal practices, discourses, and institutions?

Contrary to most refugee law scholarship, I argue that people living as refugees engage extensively with several different facets of the law. Existing debates about law in humanitarian crises have not yet given sufficient attention to legal consciousness and legal mobilization research (Edkins 2000; Hathaway 1991; Mendel 1997). For that reason, scholars have not yet recognized how much even ineffectual international laws and unjust domestic legal practices change the way that people living as refugees think about their social worlds. My contention is that refugee studies scholars would benefit from drawing on the work of legal consciousness scholars because fine-grained observations of the lived experiences of refugees can teach us interesting things about how a person actually reaches and responds to what previous scholars have observed—chronic insecurity and injustice.

What happens in refugee camps matters for scholarly debates about international human rights because refugee protection is a vital form of international human rights activism today (Advocates for Human Rights 2009; Harrell-Bond 2002; Hathaway 1991; Human Rights Advocacy Centre 2008: 18–20). Researchers who study international human rights activism tend to focus on the spectacular successes (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Klotz 1999; Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink 1999) and catastrophic failures (Pogge 2008; Power 2010; Wilson 2005). These debates about international human rights tend to overlook or downplay the unique effects of *mixed* outcomes to human rights campaigns—the compromised legal institutions and small concessions that are not really campaign "successes," but should not be wholly discounted as failures, either. In the article, I use the refugee camp case to theorize one kind of mixed outcome to human rights campaigns drawing upon a case study of the Buduburam Refugee Camp, a predominately Liberian refugee camp in Ghana, West Africa.

In the Buduburam Refugee Camp, I explored the subjective dimensions of law—the ways that people made sense of the legal practices, discourses, and institutions that they encountered (field-

work: March–April 2006; September 2007–August 2008; June–July 2011). As a case study, Buduburam exemplifies the most effective refugee camp policymaking in Africa in that camp inhabitants faced little armed conflict and few legal restrictions on economic activities or migration (Apeadu 1991; Dzeamesi 2008; Kpatinde 2006; Zongolowicz 2003). In 1990, Ghana, a signatory to the major refugee conventions, and the UNHCR, the leading refugee aid organization, established Buduburam in the poor, but centrally located district of Gomoa to provide sanctuary for refugees from the Liberian civil war. By 2006, Buduburam had become the semi-permanent home to over 20,000 refugees. People often imagine humanitarian crisis as transitory, ungovernable violence, but in reality, many conflicts linger for decades becoming "protracted refugee crises" (Crisp 2002; Loescher & Milner 2005). Over the years, humanitarians, hosts, and refugees develop systems of meaning that routinize social life in the midst of perpetual disaster. Such was the case in Buduburam, which became one of the largest and most thoroughly regulated political units in the Gomoa district.

In Buduburam, I found that many people living as refugees came to see themselves as rights holders under the protection of the international community—a legal consciousness that inspired some to claim rights in large-scale social movement activism in 2007–2008. Yet, the story does not end so straightforwardly with the emergence of refugee activists. Despite some efforts by the UNHCR and host government to promote legal practices in the camp, most camp inhabitants—including protesters—experienced host law as a proprietary resource of citizenship from which they could not benefit.

This paradox—the simultaneous engagement with and alienation from the law—has important implications for debates about the local consequences of international law. It encourages us to give more serious attention to the times when international human rights campaigns produce compromised legal institutions; when legal empowerment raises confused awareness of entitlements. These mixed outcomes are not just midpoints in the trajectories to success and failure, but highly consequential outcomes of international human rights campaigns to be conceptualized in their own right. This article contributes to research on international human rights by theorizing one mixed outcome to international human rights campaigns—the emergence of *wards of international law*, people deeply enmeshed in international human rights, but alienated from local law.

In this article, I explore the emergence of wards of international human rights in a three-part analysis of legal subjectivity in Buduburam. First, I explore how the refugee camp system encouraged people to understand themselves as subject to the law; I focus on the role of the UNHCR, the foremost importer of law to the camp. Second, I examine how people came to understand host

legal institutions. Last, I analyze how refugees made claims for justice during social protests that erupted in Buduburam in 2007–2008. I conclude that what ultimately eluded refugees in this context was not law in all its manifold forms, but two common accompaniments to effective legal practices: security—meaning safety from harm, broadly defined[1]—and justice—meaning fair and equitable treatment.

I use conceptual tools from legal consciousness and legal mobilization research to analyze people's experiences with law in refugee camps. Legal consciousness scholars attend to the subjective dimensions of the law, the ways that law manifests as "taken-for-granted understandings and habits" within a broader ideological and cultural milieu (Silbey 2005: 324). These legal subjectivities exert power by making some relations seem only natural and others unthinkable. These concepts allow us to capture more of the consequences of international human rights campaigns by directing our attention to the ways that people living amid humanitarian crisis interpret and deploy legal resources.

No single actor defines the legal field of refugee camps more than the UNHCR. The first part of the analysis explores how the UNHCR cultivated an understanding of refugees as legal subjects and transgressions as violations of the law. I show that people came to understand the camp as under the protection of international law, the UNHCR, and the international community. They became *wards of international law*—vulnerable people under the guardianship of the international community.

Research on legal consciousness also explores how people use (or do not use) legal practices in everyday life (Ewick & Silbey 1998; Merry 2006). Legal institutions work because people bring cases to the police, follow rules when no one is watching, and mobilize to reform unjust laws (Tyler 2006). The second part of the article analyzes how people talked about or around legal institutions, justice, and security. The "implicit comparison" (Howard 1984) is between refugees and Ghanaian nationals. Many people in Ghana—foreigners and nationals—became alienated from local legal institutions because of widespread corruption and severe resource constraints (Adinkrah 2005; Oduro 2009; Tankebe 2009). But I found that people living as refugees traveled separate subjective pathways to alienation. I identify three such understandings of the law. First, people could conceive of law as a proprietary resource of citizenship. Second, people could consider their fellow

[1] I use the term "security" in the wide-ranging sense to include safety from political violence and protection against hunger, eviction, deportation, and other threats to human dignity. This expansive definition recognizes that structural violence (the kind expressed through social exclusion and poverty), crime, and intimate violence invariably accompany the political violence of war and humanitarian crisis (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 1).

Liberians to be unprepared for legal rights because of the history of violence in Liberia. Third, people could see law as a lesser form of justice (e.g., "God will judge them"). The latter understanding could surface among Ghanaian citizens as well, but the first two derived from people's experiences as refugees.

People living as refugees in Buduburam became embedded in international law and alienated from host law, but what did they make of law? Research on legal mobilization draws attention to the ways that people mobilize law, particularly by claiming rights (Coutin 1998; Merry 2003). At the same time, cross-cultural research cautions us not to focus exclusively on rights talk—people can air grievances in diverse ways (Mamdani 2000). The final part of the article examines how people made claims to justice in Buduburam. Drawing evidence from the Concerned Women protests of 2007–2008, I show that although legal mobilization (like everyday legal practices) provided neither justice nor security, some people did use rights talk to make claims for justice. In so doing, they became wards of international law in a second—but equally important—sense of that word: that of a guardian or keeper.[2] By claiming rights to international law during the social protests, camp inhabitants became part of the international coterie of people who keep international law alive through public manifestations of belief.

Below, I elaborate on these claims beginning with a review of existing research on law in humanitarian contexts that situates people's experiences in Buduburam within a broader context of political, institutional, and legal constraints and makes a theoretical case for studying legal consciousness in this setting.

Law in a Humanitarian Context

In contemporary war, crisis often spreads beyond the immediate battlefield to the neighboring environs where people seek refuge. War in Liberia can mean humanitarian crisis in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Ghana. War in Rwanda can mean crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. In part because of these spillover effects, several international, regional, and national legal instruments have been created to alleviate refugee crises. These instruments forge dense legal terrains even in seemingly lawless humanitarian contexts. I group sociolegal scholars who attempt to make sense of these legal terrains into three main paradigms. Doctrinal scholars

[2] "My lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights" (Isaiah 21. *The Holy Bible: King James Version*). The Oxford English Dictionary entry on this complex and contradictory word is fascinating to read.

identify flaws in treaties or in common interpretations of treaties seeking to close the gaps between international refugee law and the reality of chronic human rights violations against refugees (Field 2010; Hathaway & Neve 1997; Kelley 2007; Lomo 2000). Political institutional scholars like the doctrinal scholars draw attention to the gaps between international refugee protection principles and local practices, but they direct readers to administrative or political impediments like poverty, corruption, or xenophobia (Betts 2003; Crisp 2002; Markos 1997; Verdirame & Harrell-Bond 2005). A third paradigm interprets refugees through a poststructural lens as people who exist in a state of what Agamben (1998) calls "bare life" in "zones of indistinction." They argue that refugees are stripped of political identity and excluded from the legal domain through productive forces tied to relations of sovereignty (Diken 2004; Edkins 2000; Elford 2008; Hanafi & Long 2010; Sharma 2009). In the discussion that follows, I draw from each paradigm to sketch an overview of the legal terrain of humanitarian crises and then make the case for exploring a fourth dimension, the lived experiences of refugees, what legal consciousness scholars call the "commonplace of law" (Ewick & Silbey 1998).

The International Refugee Protection Regime and Overlapping Legal Regimes

The international laws, institutions, and practices governing refugee crises constitute a relatively cohesive system known as the "international refugee protection regime" (Barnett 2002; Feller 2001).[3] Two main treaties govern refugee protection, the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (hereafter, 1951 Refugee Convention), which lays out the major rights and obligations in refugee protection, and the *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (hereafter, 1967 Protocol), which extends the mandate of the 1951 Refugee Convention beyond the initial World War II refugee crisis. Regional bodies including the Organization of African Unity (OAU) created largely complementary refugee conventions as well (Okoth-Obbo 2001).[4]

The 1951 Refugee Convention grants refugees equal access to important state institutions including courts (article 16), public relief (article 23), labor markets (article 23), and elementary schools (article 22). It also prohibits host states from deporting refugees to

[3] This regime divides Palestinian refugees from refugees of other nationalities; I focus on the non-Palestinians. For more on the Palestinian case, see Kelly 2006; Hanafi and Long 2010; Hasso 2001; Braverman 2008; Hajjar 1997.

[4] For an interesting analysis of divergences between the OAU Convention and the 1951 Refugee Convention, see Mendel (1997).

the country from which they fled (*non-refoulement*). To enact this legal mandate, the regime includes international agencies lead by the UNHCR with the World Food Program, International Organization for Migration, and enumerable nongovernment organizations (e.g., Oxfam) to work alongside or as subcontractors for the UNHCR. None of these institutions have punitive enforcement mechanisms, but the UNHCR possesses significant persuasive power by virtue of its funding, public relations campaigns, and expertise; it often acts as a surrogate state administering social services, migration programs, or infrastructure in camps (Kagan 2006; Slaughter & Crisp 2008).

Many "normal" legal domains also become part of and, to some extent, reshaped by humanitarian crisis. People working in property law, for example, confront new and sometimes irreconcilable dilemmas in postconflict Kosovo (Arraiza & Moratti 2009) or Rwanda (Day 2001). Humanitarian crisis also poses distinct challenges for criminal justice (Bond 2012; Hagan, Schoenfeld, & Palloni 2006). The UNHCR and host governments may fail to exclude criminals from humanitarian protection as with the Rwandan génocidaires who overran the refugee camps in Zaire/DRC (Lischer 2005; Umutesi 2004). But the UNHCR or host governments could also deny refuge (perhaps unjustly?) to people who acted under duress. Does an Iraqi forced at gunpoint to shoot a colleague at a public rally deserve punishment or sanctuary (Bond 2012)? Does a war crimes trial hold perpetrators accountable or strip collective memory of important nuances (Savelsberg & King 2007)? Labor rights also play (perhaps unexpectedly) a critical role in the lives of refugees; these rights may become governed by complex, multilayered agreements between the UNHCR and the International Labor Organization and between the host states and the UNHCR (Lester 2005). Regional economic agreements like the West African ECOWAS protocol may shape labor rights as much as or more than the guidelines of the 1951 Refugee Convention and OAU Refugee Convention.

Likewise, other international regimes become part of the legal terrain for refugees. A major movement in the field of forced migration seeks to reframe refugee law as human rights protection (Harrell-Bond 2002; Hathaway 1991; Verdirame 1999). They see international human rights as both an independent body of law that applies to refugees by virtue of their being human and also as the most effective rallying cry for reforms to the refugee protection regime itself (Anker 2002; Bhabha 1996; Verdirame & Harrell-Bond 2005). International human rights law can reach more broadly than refugee law to protect people unjustly excluded from the legal category of "refugee" and also target needs overlooked in refugee law (e.g., the right to food) (Betts 2010). One well-known example occurred in Hong Kong, where human rights

activists succeeded in gaining substantial protections for refugees with legal appeals to the Convention against Torture despite the government's refusal to acquiesce to international refugee conventions (Loper 2010). In recent years, legal activists have sought to use human rights instruments that promote socioeconomic rights (Klinck 2009) and prohibit forced labor and human trafficking (Piotrowicz 2012) for refugee protection. Human rights help to make people "peculiarly, matters of international concern" (Beitz 2009: 160). For refugees who have lost the aid of their national governments, international concern has a great significance.

The international human rights regime has become the most important of the other international legal regimes, but humanitarian and development regimes can have consequences for refugees as well. For example, since fleeing war is not in itself sufficient to qualify as a refugee, asylum lawyers sometimes use evidence of chronic violations of humanitarian law (the law of war) to support an asylum case (Sternberg 1997). International development agencies and agreements may also reshape refugee life, particularly in the protracted refugee crises (Chandler 2001; Crisp 2001; Demusz 1998). The UNHCR has a long history of collaboration with development agencies, and one of its key strategies has been to reframe refugees as catalysts for development (Loescher 2001).

Altogether, an extensive array of overlapping international, regional, and national legal instruments may come into play in any given refugee camp. But how do these legal instruments really matter for people?

How Does International Law Matter?

Scholars debate the extent to which international refugee protection instruments provide an adequate legal framework for protection (for opposing views, see Field 2010; Lomo 2000), but all would agree that major gaps exist between internationally recognized rights and most local practices. Few refugee camps have effective police or security personnel to stop criminals, batterers, or armed combatants, so people living in refugee camps suffer from chronic violence (Crisp 2000; Lischer 2005; Milner 2000). Most host states permit discriminatory economic practices against refugees (Markos 1997; Porter et al. 2008; Werker 2007). How international refugee conventions actually matter for local refugee protection presents a particularly interesting puzzle: states that are party to the international refugee conventions do not always offer refugees enforceable rights, but perhaps more surprisingly, some host governments that have not signed onto the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol still grant significant protection for refugees.

Gaps between law on the books and law in action challenge the relevance of international refugee law, like they do any other international legal regime (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui 2007). In Kenya, a signatory to international refugee conventions, refugee protection, ultimately collapsed in the 1990s in the face of declining economic conditions and increasingly large refugee influxes (Abuya 2007: 58, 84–86). In China, a bilateral agreement with North Korea superseded international refugee protection agreements when they forced back North Korean refugees who fled the food crisis in the 1990s (Chan & Schloenhardt 2007). In Ethiopia, national legislation severely curtailed internationally guaranteed rights to movement, education, and work (Markos 1997). From the perspective of legal efficacy, international refugee protection laws had little power in the face of economic or security pressures.

Protection in the absence of commitments to international refugee protection law challenges the relevance of that law in a different way. India, which refused to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol on the grounds that these instruments were Eurocentric and inadequate, nevertheless grants sanctuary to an enormous number of refugees, and the UNHCR is at least partially involved in humanitarian administration there (Saxena 2007). Some other states sign bilateral agreements with the UNHCR or conflict country that includes refugee protection as in the case of Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Zieck 2008).

To focus only on the most basic questions of protection or violation—Does the state enforce international refugee law?—produces not only a contradictory but also an incomplete account of the ways that international refugee law influences the humanitarian legal terrain. I am arguing that we need both a broader perspective that situates refugee protection in international relations and a narrower perspective that grounds refugee protection in lived experiences if we are to grasp the mixed outcomes that international campaigns have for people living as refugees.

Refugee Protection and International Relations

Global inequalities between the North and South underlie many of the shortcomings in refugee protection. The original 1951 Convention, which was designed for the World War II refugee crisis, established rights and obligations dependent on a host state that possessed strong public relief services, rule of law, state-regulated labor markets, and secure borders (Hathaway & Neve 1997). The UNHCR can hardly pressure a host state to provide for the welfare of refugees in remote borderlands when the state does not even have government offices in that part of the country. In the face of these limitations in state capacity, the UNHCR adopted an

"assistance" approach to refugee aid, offering independent social services, infrastructure, migration programs, and even security forces (Loescher 2001).

Once established, the UNHCR continued to use the parallel model even in settings of greater state capacity like Ghana. These parallel systems—refugee camps—became the primary means of administering sanctuary in the global South. Meanwhile, states support the encampment strategies because it allows them to conserve scarce resources for their own publics, and because some government officials believe that segregating refugees in camps helps contain security threats (Hartigan 1992).

Today, practitioners and scholars speak of shortcomings in "burden-sharing" between the global North and South as undermining refugee protection (Betts 2003; Suhrke 1998). Most policies in the global North aim to contain humanitarian crisis to neighboring countries to keep refugees from reaching Northern borders (Aleinikoff 1995; Shacknove 1993). Most policies in the global South aim to preserve resources for citizens at the expense of refugees (Aukot 2001; Markos 1997). At the same time, the refugee protection regime, like all international aid regimes, carries legacies of colonialism that exacerbate tensions between the international community and Southern host governments and foster exclusionary policies in the camps themselves (Barnett 2011: 60–64; Hyndman 2000: xvi). Camp administration does not generally treat people living in refugee camps as competent adults in unfortunate circumstances, but rather as uninformed and potentially belligerent populations who lie and mistreat vulnerable peers to gain access to resettlement, food, and other forms of scarce humanitarian aid (Agier 2011; Harrell-Bond 1986; Horst 2007; Hyndman 2000). These global pressures and long-standing inequality regimes become institutionalized on the ground through exclusionary policies that leave people living as refugees few legal protections and few life chances.

Yet, some acts of justice and compassion do filter through to the lived experiences of refugees despite these broader political and institutional pressures. Even in the infamous post-genocide refugee crisis in Zaire/DRC, Umutesi (2004) offers a first-hand account of some hosts and international allies who tried to support and protect her. Legal empowerment activists have begun to institutionalize legal aid for refugees in the global South (Harrell-Bond 2007). Several voices against the use of refugee camps have emerged not just in the global North (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2009), but also in refugee-hosting countries in the global South (Editorial Staff 2012; United Nations 2012). What this means is that most people living as refugees do not confront the unrelenting, monolithic systems of exclusion that scholarly work

tends to convey. The puzzle remains: What do people living in these settings make of this complex field?

The Problem of Subject

People living in refugee camps may share a few life experiences beyond their initial flight from danger and subsequent effort to find sanctuary. They may differ in country of origin, class background, political, ethnic, or religious affiliation, health, family status, or ties to the host country. Most work on humanitarian crisis tends to offer nuanced analysis of the legal, political, or institutional systems that constrain people's life chances, but rely on relatively simple refugee archetypes. A "refugee woman," for example, is a mother seeking to protect her family and herself against war-related violence, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation; she is marginalized by her patriarchal society, but also a figure of economic and personal empowerment (Ager, Ager, & Long 1995; Bartolomei, Pittaway, & Pittaway 2003; but see Martin 2004). Few accounts make analytic distinctions between the women who are political activists with extensive transnational social networks, and those who remain largely apolitical and isolated. This lack of attention to the nuances of their ultimate research subject is not a matter of ignorance among scholars and practitioners. It is often a convenience for the sake of generalization, and sometimes even a necessary fiction, because some hosts may interpret political activism as a threat to national security (Turner 2010). Nevertheless, this lack of attention has some serious drawbacks. What we miss with this shorthand is the everyday reality of how different people experience law during humanitarian crises.

Massoud (2011) and Polzer (2007) show how attending to the nuances of refugee interpretations can offer a richer and more complete account of the local consequences of international law. Massoud (2011) argued that human rights training by international actors in Sudan became highly meaningful to internally displaced people[5] who worked in civil society organizations, but ultimately exacerbated their vulnerability because the authoritarian government was hostile to rights claims. Polzer (2007) analyzed the experiences of Mozambican refugees in South Africa. She showed that in their 20-year trajectory from illegal immigrants to fully integrated residents, Mozambican refugees never developed a sense of

[5] Most international treatises distinguish between people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes and crossed national borders (refugees) and those remain displaced in their home country (internally displaced persons) (Lee 1996). The UNHCR has increasingly sought to clarify the international legal protection mechanisms for IDPs and bring this group under its mandate (Global Protection Cluster Working Group 2007).

themselves as refugees or international human rights holders, but rather as illegal aliens or co-ethnics (Polzer 2007: 33). What appeared on the surface to be an account of successful mobilization of international refugee law looked from the perspective of refugees like a story of local political struggles over immigrant incorporation.

While their empirical cases differed from mine—neither of Polzer nor Massoud sought to convey the legal dynamics of refugee camps—their shared methodological approach offers a model for how to study legal terrains of humanitarian crisis more effectively. My argument is that scholars who seek to understand humanitarian settings could benefit from the work of legal consciousness scholarship because fine-grained observations of the lived experiences of refugees teach us interesting things about how people actually reach the outcomes that others have observed: chronic insecurity and injustice. By exploring people's interpretations of law in humanitarian crises, we can recapture more of the ways that international law is conveyed, embodied, and interpreted under crisis, and reclaim the instances of agency—however fleeting or ineffectual—amidst disaster. This article contributes to that research agenda with fine-grained observations about how people experience law in a refugee camp; it illustrates how people can develop a special relationship to international law, even when they become alienated from host legal institutions.

Data and Methods

The analysis is based on 15 months of fieldwork and archival research in the UNHCR online archives. During fieldwork, I lived in Buduburam for 10 months (March–April 2006; October 2007–May 2008), commuted to the camp for three months (June–July 2008; June 2011), and lived in Accra for a little over two months (September 2007; August 2008; July 2011). In the camp, I engaged in basic household and social endeavors (preparing meals, washing clothes, socializing with neighbors and friends, etc.), volunteered for several months with a refugee-run newspaper, attended meetings, social gatherings, and church services, and had impromptu conversations on the street and elsewhere. The project explored everyday political practices and taken-for-granted understandings of authority and political subjectivity broadly speaking rather than focusing a priori on legal practices. Like other refugee studies scholars, I entered Buduburam expecting little in the way of legal entitlements or legal regulation, but that impression gradually changed over the months as I observed and asked people about their interactions with each other and with different authorities in the camp (refugee-run organizations, Ghanaian actors, and the

UNHCR). I did not ask people what they thought about law or whether they felt safe or fairly treated, but rather in my conversations and later in semi-structured interviews, I looked for instances of grievance or dispute, which I would ask people to elaborate upon. In interviews, I probed systematically for these dynamics using three commonly raised concerns as prompts (water, education, and electricity).

I also explored people's experiences with a critical event that occurred during my stay: the emergence and subsequent repression of social protests over the UNHCR's migration programs. The protests by refugee women, who called themselves the Concerned Women, began as a small demonstration of about 40 women in November 2007. By March 2008, the movement had surpassed a thousand people and launched a campwide boycott of the food distribution program and schools. In late March, the protests were violently suppressed. I met the protest organizers the evening before the first protest event and gradually developed a close relationship with them. I did not entirely share their platform (which I will describe in a later section), but I did offer them some support: I gave them contact information for UNHCR officials, talked with them about the broader institutional influences on local UNHCR policies, helped edit a letter of recommendations that they submitted to camp authorities, and encouraged them to seek legal counsel with a contact that I had at a national human rights organization. As the protests escalated, the camp authorities became increasingly suspicious of non-African nationals who spent time with the protesters, so I sometimes talked with protesters after events rather than attend myself.

During the protests, rights claims and legal institutions became central to camp politics. Rights claims and legal tactics alone did not reflect the richness and variation of people's strategies for dealing with their inadequate refuge, but it became clear that law had a far more substantial role in camp life than existing scholarship and my early observations led me to believe. Indeed, one of the first patterns to emerge from the subsequent analysis was the widespread use of rights claims by protesters. At that point, spurred by the legal consciousness paradigm to consider the broader ideological and cultural milieu within which people develop their understandings, I began to investigate how law surfaced elsewhere in camp life. It was this analysis that led to the broader and more nuanced conclusion that I offer in this article of the multifaceted relationship to the law that so many camp inhabitants developed. Much of the data on the law made reference to the UNHCR, so in the article, I explore their role in the development of people's legal subjectivity. But discussions of host institutions also surfaced frequently in discussions of the law. Those two dimensions captured the most crucial

subjective mechanisms of law in Buduburam and helped explain why people's rights claims took such an international form.

Types of Data

Fieldnotes and Unstructured Interviews

This type of data constituted the majority of data on the protest. These included observations and talks with refugees, Ghanaian nationals, and humanitarian workers about several critical issues and events as well as everyday life.

Focus Groups

After about six months of ethnographic observations, I conducted 10 focus groups of five to six people with a refugee moderator (one hour 20 minutes to one hour 50 minutes) to get more systematic information about how peers encourage or suppress each other while discussing camp politics. I used the focus group data to craft the interview questions for the semi-structured interviews, but did not analyze them separately for this article.

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews after nine months of fieldwork and focus group interviews to allow time to identify the critical issues and common idioms. Camp inhabitants spoke English, and Ghana is part of Anglophone Africa. These interviews constituted the majority of data on everyday camp politics that I used for this article. I interviewed 49 people in sessions that ranged from one to three hours (recorded). I had multiple interactions with the majority of interviewees, which helped to add depth to my subsequent analysis of the interviews. The questions aimed to explore both people's relationship to authorities and their approaches to three critical issues: a three-month electricity outage, education, and water. I sampled by gender and relationship to authority: (1) management-designated leaders; (2) recipients of extra UNHCR assistance; (3) UNHCR-Ghana ID cardholders without extra services; and (d) Liberians not registered with UNHCR-Ghana. It soon became apparent that the first two categories overlapped substantially, that is, that people who were recognized as leaders had better access to UNHCR assistance than other refugees. All the names I use in the article from these data are pseudonyms.

Peer Interviews and Observations

I worked for several months with two Liberian research assistants whom I trained: a woman with two years of college education, and a man who had almost completed a master's in political science

before the war interrupted his studies. They interviewed an additional 28 people (recorded) with the same interview protocol. I sought to discover the ways that Liberians answered fellow Liberians differently than me. These interviews were conducted after one month of semi-structured interviewing. I hired a third assistant (a woman with a college degree) to conduct informal conversations and observations on the relationships between Liberians and "white people" in Buduburam.

Documents and Photographs

I collected documents from around the camp including administrative forms that a person would fill out before meeting with a UNHCR official, public announcements, advertisements and public information signs, letters from refugees to officials, and any other documents that I could get. I also collected UNHCR, Ghanaian, and Liberian press statements and newspapers relating to the protest from GhanaWeb. I collected documents from the UNHCR online archives, which I used to situate the UNHCR's activities in Buduburam in a broader context of organizational development and international pressures. This includes UNHCR reports to the UN General Assembly (1960–2005), UNHCR statements before the Third Committee of the General Assembly (1952–2004), UNHCR interpretations of the Liberian refugee crises (Country Operation Plans, Statistical Yearbooks, reports by the UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Unit, etc.), handbooks, and other instructional manuals for refugee crises. I collected photographs having lent my camera to a Liberian journalist and other camp inhabitants and copied older pictures from refugees for camp history.

Validity and Access

I confronted two main challenges to data collection: access and validity. All Westerners face some informal limits in access to refugees by being outsiders, which in turn creates challenges for validity. People living as refugees tend to equate Westerners with the international aid workers on whom some rely, which exacerbates these outsider biases (Hyndman 2000), but I found that this varied significantly according to the person being interviewed. In some interviews and informal interactions, people thought I was tied to the UNHCR or able to provide significant resources. But other exchanges I had with people had the character of a favor done for me out of friendship or a sense of alliance, an educational exchange (an elder lecturing me as student), or a favor performed for a mutual acquaintance.

Nevertheless, I made a concerted effort to identify the limits that my outsider status posed for validity using both peer interviews

and observations and informal conversations with trusted informants. Living in the camp for an extended period of time helped me develop deeper ties with the people who I spoke with and gradually made it easier to identify when someone was telling a story for effect and, perhaps more importantly for what effect. In analyzing data with my three Liberian research assistants, I learned that most silences and inconsistencies related to two domestic issues. First, people were reluctant to speak of acts that I would consider domestic violence: physical "disciplining" of children and women. There were also silences about the ways that people talked about requesting gifts and sometimes aid more broadly. Many people felt the need to tell a good story when they asked for money or other forms of sponsorship, and people would talk more freely of this with their fellow Liberians than with outsiders. Challenges in talking about these domestic affairs and storytelling in humanitarian aid create practical difficulties for humanitarian action, but they do not produce insurmountable barriers for this analysis of law in refugee camps.

The Buduburam Case

After the outbreak of war in Liberia in 1989, Ghana became host to several thousand people who fled the civil war. Ghanaian authorities created the Buduburam Refugee Camp to house the first flood of refugees in 1990, and the UNHCR provided financial and administrative support from an early stage. By 2006, the camp was being jointly administered by the UNHCR and Interior Ministry. Located in the Gomoa district not far from the capital city, authorities allowed unrestricted freedom of movement throughout the country. Buduburam can serve as a best case scenario for legal empowerment in a refugee context because Ghana offered so few legal restrictions on refugees.

The official estimates for the camp population fluctuated from a low of around 7,000 people in 1990 to a high of around 40,000 people in 2003. The influx of people and resources transformed the camp environs and surrounding villages into an urban space. In the ensuing years, Buduburam became host to a diverse array of nationalities including several hundred people from Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ivory Coast, and a rapidly growing population of Ghanaian nationals moved from elsewhere in the country to live in or near the camp (Agblorti 2011). Liberians remained the overwhelming majority, operating as a relatively cohesive community with extensive economic (Porter et al. 2008), religious (Dovlo and Sondah 2001), social (Hardgrove 2009), and political (Owusu 2000) organization.

Incursions from combatants in the Liberian civil war never reached Ghana in part because the countries do not share a border. Close ties between Liberia and the United States and the placement of the UNHCR regional hub in Ghana for several years led to more generous resettlement programs than elsewhere in West Africa. The end of the Liberian war in 2003 renewed the possibility of repatriation. Ghanaian authorities participated actively in the administration of refugee policy including government outposts for social welfare, fire, and police funded in part by the UNHCR. The UNHCR implemented the programs for food, health, education, and women and children through Ghanaian organizations rather than international organizations. For these and other reasons, Buduburam gained a reputation as one of the more progressive and effective refugee camps in Africa (Apeadu 1991; Dzeamesi 2008; Kpatinde 2006; Zongolowicz 2003). There have been increasingly strong calls for (and from) African host states to channel refugee protection through state institutions rather than creating isolated refugee camps governed by the UNHCR (Abuya 2007: 55). Buduburam with its extensive involvement from the Ghanaian state provides a glimpse of one possible future for other national refugee protection regimes in Africa if this initiative continues to grow.

The Concerned Women Protests

Liberians in Ghana may have evaded the violence of war, but they faced pervasive insecurity and deprivation from the chronic economic discrimination, uncertain immigrant status, crime, and general resource scarcities. So it was not wholly surprising when between November 2007 and April 2008, disagreements over the camp policies—particularly the migration programs—erupted in a series of social protests. The protests, led by a group called Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns (hereafter, Concerned Women), grew quickly over a five-month period to culminate in a sit-down protest in the Buduburam field with over 1,000 women and children, and a series of boycotts that closed the schools, food distribution centers, and nightclubs across the camp. The Concerned Women wanted the UNHCR to enhance its migration policies, the "durable solutions" programs that supported repatriation back to Liberia, local integration in Ghana, and resettlement to a postindustrial country. By June 2007, the UNHCR had ended its unpopular repatriation program due to lack of interest—few people wanted to return to their war-torn country given the continued insecurity, housing shortage, and lack of economic opportunities. But facing pressure from other refugee crises and reluctance from donor governments like the United States, the

UNHCR had also closed its highly popular resettlement programs. The agency had switched its focus to local integration against the opposition of both the Ghanaian state and most Liberian refugees (Salducci 2008). Protesters wanted the UNHCR to reopen the resettlement program and give everyone a hearing on the grounds of political asylum. To serve those ultimately rejected from resettlement, the protesters wanted the UNHCR to reopen the repatriation program and provide substantial cash grants so that returnees could rebuild their lives in Liberia.

In March 2008, after several weeks of demonstrations, the host police arrested over 600 women and children engaged in a sit-down protest near the entrance of camp and brought them to a detention camp; a few days later, the police launched a camp-wide raid, arresting over 100 men not visibly engaged in protest and deporting 16 men to Liberia. Authorities argued that men were somehow behind the protests. This was not the case. It was a gendered tactic of repression. People feared the arrest of men more than women, because according to the gendered political logics of this context, authorities would likely punish men more harshly than women. The protests ended shortly after the repression with the intervention of the Liberian Foreign Minister and the negotiation of a new and even more unfavorable agreement between Ghana, Liberia, and the UNHCR that mandated that Liberian refugees leave Ghana. It was never fully enforced, but did usher in a period of mass repatriation, and the protests were quelled.

How did law surface in this context? In the next three sections, I explore that question. I begin in the next section by analyzing how international law and other legal instruments helped make people living as refugees into international legal subjects.

Making International Legal Subjects

The first step to becoming wards of international law is to develop a sense of oneself as connected to international law. The UNHCR served as the primary teacher of international refugee law in Buduburam often framing refugees in ways that encouraged people to think of themselves as legal subjects. As the recognized expert on international refugee protection, the UNHCR devotes substantial resources to the interpretation and implementation of this legal framework.[6] In refugee camps like Buduburam, the agency transfers some of this legal knowledge onto laypeople. The public announcements, which were posted on the bulletin boards

[6] http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646cce.html

and also read through the camp loudspeaker, offer a particularly good window on the UNHCR's efforts to introduce legal frames at a local level.

A representative example is a public notice from UNHCR-Ghana (2008a) in which the agency uses the concept "legal status" to explain the place of refugees in Ghana:

> Legal Status
>
> *What is the present status of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in The Republic of Ghana?*
>
> Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees who registered with UNHCR upon their arrival in the country and were verified in 2003 and in 2007 are recognised refugees on a "prima facie basis" by virtue of Art 1(2) of the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.[7]

People living as refugees faced serious questions about security and belonging—Will I be able to make a home for myself here? Will the Ghanaians trade with me? If I send my child to school here, will the teachers abuse her? With they beat me? Will they deport me? The announcement narrows and reframes these concerns using legal concepts: "legal status," "prima facie," "OAU Convention." Legal status, like most legal artifacts, is a coarse tool that tells camp inhabitants little about how they will fare in their immediate social interactions with Ghanaian neighbors. Prima facie refugee status is a fleeting tie to Ghanaian society, not a firm anchor.[8] But the UNHCR has no fuller answers for these practical concerns being like the refugees constrained by the uncertainty and instability of the humanitarian context. Law stabilizes—at least discursively—and camp inhabitants often did express a sense of security from the UNHCR's presence. This sense of security was not generally conceptualized in legal terms, but one man said (speaking of the UNHCR), "they are trying to give me my rights as a human—to think what is good for me" (SSI 44).

Researchers tend to focus on how international actors transmit international law like the example above (Kagan 2006; Massoud 2011; Wilde 1998). But it is also interesting to note that the UNHCR brought national law to camp through its announcements. In contrast to the positive entitlements that the agency conveyed when the agency cited international law, the UNHCR

[7] It is interesting that the UNHCR frames people's legal right to stay in Ghana in terms of the African Union legal convention rather than 1951 Refugee Convention; it speaks to the increasingly nuanced approach to regional inequalities at the UNHCR.

[8] Prima facie refugee status determination is when the State recognizes a group as refugees rather than evaluating individual cases.

often used national law to frame transgressions in legal terms. For example, a public notice from the UNHCR-Ghana (2008b) on prostitution states (emphasis in the original):

NOTICE
FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS
IN BUDUBURAM REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

Wanton Behavior

UNHCR would like to remind refugees and asylum seekers that **prostitution is a criminal offence** in the Republic of Ghana as stipulated in the Criminal Code 1960 (Act 29) as amended by Act 554 (section 15).

Sometimes, as in this prostitution example, the UNHCR cited national law to affirm its commitment to host concerns. Host authorities and the broader public often objected to the purported "moral failings" of the Liberians and the potential for their presence to become a corrupting influence on Ghanaian youth (see also Frontani, Silvestri, & Brown 2009). Prostitution was tied in public rhetoric with the perceived tendency of Liberian young people to wear Western clothing and talk without sufficient respect to their elders.

The UNHCR also used national law to frame transgressions of *agency* policies as violations of the law. This surfaced particularly clearly in the agency's efforts to regulate refugee migration. To regulate migration properly, the agency felt that it needed to register each person by name, assign identification numbers, and map their family ties (see Ghana Refugee Board and UNHCR (2003); see also UNHCR 2004: I–15, IV–13, IV–21, IV–47). The UNHCR used the subsequent data to allocate resources like seats on an airplane to return to Liberia or travel to the United States. Both Liberian refugees and Ghanaian nationals who lived near Buduburam deviated from these administrative regulations for a variety of reasons. Some saw registration as a formality that they could skip to deal with more pressing concerns; others saw registration as a process tied to resource distribution that they could use strategically to gain the best possible access. Consequently, false registration was a chronic concern of the agency, and the UNHCR posted several announcements condemning these practices. In October 2003, the UNHCR posted an announcement that framed these activities as a legal matter (emphasis in the original text):

> Falsely representing your identity in connection with refugee related matters, including refugee status determination and resettlement, may be prosecuted as a **criminal violation** of the law in Ghana. (UNHCR-Ghana 2003a)

In January 2006 shortly before a verification exercise, the UNHCR posted Q&A with a similar point:

> 14. I am not a registered refugee what will happen to me if I try to register anyway?
>
> If you register, you will be committing fraud and legal measures will be taken against you. You will be apprehended by Ghanaian police authorities and a case registered against you. (UNHCR-Ghana 2006)

Deviating from the administrative script becomes framed as a legal transgression: "identity fraud." As people became increasingly convinced of the need to conform to the UNHCR's legal criterion, legal resources like lawyers and certificates became valued in the camp. Patience, for example, describes her efforts to place her relationship with her lover in the recognized legal category of marriage so that she could join him in resettlement.

> A certain man was helping me go . . . to join the USA. So, when I got here, I declared these things. [UNHCR] asked me, I say, "I don't have a husband, because he don't marriage me. He was just friends to me," so I explain my story to UNHCR . . . [The man] said, "I intend to marriage you legally." . . .? Every day he complain, "I will send you for, I will send for you." . . . He always telling me he [is] loyal. (SSI 13)

The account provides a glimpse of the complex emotional negotiations that keep relationships strained by forced migration from fraying entirely. Law appears in this account as a strange interloper; we are left with a slightly unfamiliar rendition of a character quite familiar to us: marriage. As the story progresses, it comes to center around a "marriage document"—it is unclear to me whether this is a fabricated document or not. She ends on an inconclusive note saying: "He said, I should send the marriage document to him, and then he can send to talk to the lawyer, to see after my documents, so I'm worried" (SSI 13).

The legal frame was not the only potential frame for these kinds of administrative practices and transgressions. In another announcement about registration issues posted in 2003, the UNHCR-Ghana (2003b) framed the matter as an "error" and exhorted people to correct their mistakes or "it will raise questions of credibility and honesty that could effect your ability to benefit from . . . UNHCR services." The announcement concluded by stating, "If you fail to correct these errors now, it will cause you problems in the future for which you will have only yourself to blame." But over time, the UNHCR became increasingly punitive in their response to refugee noncompliance, and these measures

became increasingly reliant on legal institutions like the host police. This pattern is not limited to Buduburam, but reflects a common shift over time during protracted crises—a pattern of rising mistrust that weakens the relationships between the UNHCR and refugees (Daniel & Knudsen 1995) and refugee status determination practices more broadly (Alexander 1999; Cameron 2010; Kagan 2006).

Alienation, Insecurity, and Domestic Legal Practices

Being a ward of international law is inextricably tied to alienation from host law. Camp inhabitants experienced host law, primarily through their interactions with the police and security forces, courts and prisons, and the chieftaincy. In her extensive analysis of these and other dispute resolution mechanisms in Buduburam during this time period, Sagy (2010) argued that Ghanaian authorities ultimately refused to take responsibility for the administration of law in the camp. Not just civil dispute resolution, but often even criminal prosecutions were privatized, administered by refugee organizations (e.g., Liberian Refugee Welfare Council, Vigilantes, and Elders Council) or nongovernmental organizations (e.g., WISE) rather than state officials. She concludes that the state (and the UNHCR) pushed the security burden onto the backs of already vulnerable camp inhabitants who did not have the resources to protect fellow refugees from criminals. To use one example (sadly, not hypothetical): If a man molests a child, but the affected parties treat it as a matter for the refugee organizations to resolve, the man is not going to end up in prison, because only the host state controls prisons (in the case I knew, he left the camp and went to Nigeria). My interviews and observations support the ultimate assessment of insecurity, but I will show that host law was nonetheless widely present in the camp and intersected with many people's lives.

Like in other settings, law from the host state often appeared in mundane ways. For example, one person shared a legal form from the court in the neighboring town of Kasoa; a woman had a dispute with her landlord and sought recourse in the court of the nearby town. Another person described petitioning a local chief to gain access to land (see also Sowatey 2005: 120) Another woman shared a copy of a divorce certificate stamped by the High Court of Justice in Accra in 2000. A document that the National Disaster Management Organization sent to refugee leaders in 2004 mandated that the leadership body register monthly the number of live births, deaths, deaths under five years, deaths under "U year," and newborns issued a birth certificate. Mohamed described an interaction

with the local police officer that allowed him to resolve a dispute over a tee shirt: A man accuses him of petty theft, together they go to the police officer, the officer asks for some proof of theft, no proof is offered, so the police officer decides in favor of the defendant (SSI 3). Most people I encountered had some documents or stories that related to law. What leads to the conclusion of widespread insecurity and injustice is not the absence of legal interactions, but the accounts of discrimination, costliness, and insufficient support that pervade the interview transcripts and fieldnotes. Patricia felt unable to go to the police after her daughter's father kidnapped the child. She said, "Some friends were saying, my neighbors were saying that we are all Liberians and the Ghanaians, normally they don't like us" (SSI 49). Robert explained that they cannot hold the camp manager accountable for perceived abuses because of fear of retribution:

> No, the present manager . . . we could [not] hold him accountable for whatever is being done . . . from where we stand, we are completely at risk. . . . You can't say anything because . . . they have a list of people who could be arrested and prosecuted so we don't want to see ourselves as being personal target to his leadership. Like what happened to some of our colleagues who had to flee from this camp. So we are afraid like for me I got my little son. Who takes care of him when I'm going to prison? (SSI 24)

All legal institutions have repressive dimensions. What differentiates legal institutions that the camp inhabitants encountered is the shortage of positive counterweights within these institutions—police who come when you need them most and judges who resolve disputes fairly. Police corruption was not just a problem for refugees. Policing in Ghana had become "characterized by abuse, violence, intimidation, and widespread corruption. These abuses have alienated the police . . . from many Ghanaians" (Tankebe 2009: 1271). So in Ghana, the most likely outcome is to become alienated from the law regardless of whether one is a host citizen or a refugee. But I found that people living as refugees became alienated from the law through different reasoning than Ghanaian nationals. Below, I present three understandings that undercut people's ability to find security and justice through legal institutions: law as a proprietary resource of citizenship, refugees as unprepared for legal rights, and law as a lesser form of justice. The latter could apply to all parties, but the first two subjective understandings derive from the distinctive experiences of refuge.

Law as a Proprietary Resource of Citizenship

Law often surfaced in interviews as a proprietary resource of citizenship rather than a universal principle. When I asked about

police treatment of refugees, Benjamin gave a common response: "If I have a problem with Ghana Police, well, that is a difficult question to answer. I don't go to nobody because they are the overseers of the camp. They are the lawmaker so you can't give them nobody else (laughs)" (SSI 9). The host police make the law, and that makes it *their* law. Not just the police, but even the host nationals were often seen as having stronger claims to the law than refugees. As Emmanuel put it, "As a refugee, you don't have any rights, it's how I look at it, my own perspective because if a policeman does something to you, you can't carry [your case] anyway. Even the citizens, if they do something to you, and then you get a case [in court], you will never be right" (SSI 11). This understanding surfaced widely throughout the accounts irrespective of standing or educational background. Robert, a refugee leader who was asked by the Ghanaian electricity company to prevent Ghanaian inhabitants of the camp from illegally tapping the electricity lines, used this understanding to explain why he did not comply with that order:

> And he told us as refugee to go and arrest the person and bring them and we said no, refugee cannot arrest a citizen because you be doing it unlawfully. And you know what will happened? The citizen will get angry with you and that will cause, serious, confusion between you and so that how we left it. (SSI 24)

Before the war, Robert intended to become a lawyer. With his skills and class background, he would likely have succeeded in that ambition had there been no civil war or had he found a more egalitarian sanctuary. The locals stealing electricity in the Gomoa district may have less political experience or cultural capital than Robert, but these factors did not matter in his mind—for him, the law belongs to the Ghanaian citizens.

Host officials would object to this proprietary assessment of the law. One man describes a visit from the camp manager to a prominent intellectual club[9] in the camp in which the manager entreated the camp inhabitants to think of him as an ally:

> [The Camp Manager] advised us that we should be kind, we should be polite, we should know how to address issues, he is our friend. Anything wrong, somewhere, we should get his consent there so that he can know exactly what is happening. Nobody should take the law in their hands. He is there for everybody, and we should feel free any time to approach him for any reason. He would be available. (SSI 7)

[9] Most urban centers in Liberia have "Hatai clubs," tea houses where people (mostly men) come to socialize and debate issues. In the Bududuram Hatai club, for example, I once joined a debate over the causes of HIV-AIDS.

But however sincere this exhortation most people in the camp felt that legal institutions privileged Ghanaian nationals over refugees.

Refugees Not Prepared for Legal Rights

A far less common but equally striking understanding that drew people away from the law presented refugees as unfit for political and civil rights. This understanding surfaced most frequently in discussions about the Welfare Council, the representatives for camp inhabitants. In early camp history, the Welfare Council members had been democratically elected. Elections ended in 1996. After 1996, the camp management appointed the council members. I often asked people what they thought about the decision to end the elections for refugee representatives. Generally, only refugee leaders had a strong opinion about this. Most people did not care, and many did not know anything about the matter. Thomas, a refugee leader, said that it was fine with him. I asked him why, and the answer that he gave exemplified the stance against political rights for refugees. He replied:

> Because refugees, these are traumatised people. You cannot incite them to politics, because there aren't . . . some of them don't even know how to exercise their rights. . . . They're angry. So if you bring up a election where people have their own campaigns, I mean, definitely, sometime it end into a violence, so I prefer being choosed to run the affairs of the refugees. (SSI 7)

There are several fears embedded in this understanding. Past experience of civil conflict either demonstrated that Liberian people were not ready to hold elections peacefully or so traumatized people that they became unable to respond peacefully to elections. He felt that the risk of future violence was too high to justify the perceived luxury of political rights. I did hear others express variants of these fears, but they were by no means universal. Martin offered a different interpretation of elections and what it meant for collective violence to emerge. He remembers that the camp elections became part of the host state's legal interventions in the camp: "There was elections, and then [the Ghana national elections commission] used to come and tell, 'listen Liberians,' and we're listening. 'We are here in Ghana to teach you elections, so that you will know human rights and that, because you know, that's why you are killing yourself in your country" (SSI 46). I asked him what he thought when they said that, and he replied with a fatalism that makes the stance against political rights seem not so much unjust as futile: "Well it's not true. It's just eventuality. It can be any country can fall into conflict, but they were saying that Ghana is a peaceful nation, and they are teaching us about human rights, because we don't know about our rights, that's why we are fighting. So they

were having elections, but I remember the last election—they stopped it" (SSI 46). The violence of war is never far below the surface of refugee camp politics; sometimes questions about law seem to be beside the point.

Reaching for Different Normative Ideals

People could also reject host legal institutions by reaching to other understandings of justice (though host nationals sometimes used this practice as well). Betty's explanation for why she decided not to take the father of her children to court for child support offers a particularly clear example of the different cultural idioms available for Liberian refugees. First, she appeals to ideals rooted in an African identity: "The reason I don't want to take him to court, we the African" don't use courts like that. Then, she brings in familial obligations: "[If] I take him to court, I don't know if the children will hold me responsible for it tomorrow. Because some children they love their father, like the boy, he loves his father." Next, she incorporates Christian ideals: "Each time I tell [my son] I want to take set he tell me 'mommy forget about it. Just pray, and God will . . . help you.' " She concludes with a return to familial ideals and Christian faith: "He don't want me to take his father to court, he don't want to take his father to the law. So I can't force it, I will listen to him. . . . [T]hey will tell me 'mommy just try your best, and God will bless you. And we will help you in the future. We will pay you back, just forget about him.' I can't force him (laughs)" (SSI 34). Her account offers a vivid example of the practical juxtaposition of rights talk and other visions of justice.

Material barriers to host legal institutions played a large role in alienating refugees from host law, but most material impediments to law—the corruption, expense, lack of police staffing and resources—affected Ghanaian citizens as well as refugees (Ayee 2000). Indeed, it would be interesting to compare the Liberian self-help initiatives that Sagy describes with the Ghanaian self-help mechanisms that Tankebe (2009) explores. But we can identify differences between how refugees and host citizens became alienated from host law when we examine how people made sense of their relationship to law. The separation of host law from security and justice follows distinctive subjective routes for people living as refugees via the proprietary assumptions about law and legal self-alienation because of a war-torn past.

Agency within the Legal Field—Claiming International Law

However imperfect the legal field was in Buduburam, some people took the talk about legal status, Refugee Convention, and

human rights and turned it into rights claims during the Concerned Women protests of 2007–2008. In so doing, they served as wards of international law in a different way, promoting international human rights by their public commitment to these ideals. "To be a refugee is not a crime. Stop the humiliation," declared one protest placard. "Refugees are human and humans have rights," declared another. Protesters tried without success to transform the legal discourses around refugee status, international protection, and human rights into concrete benefits in migration programs during the demonstrations.

What struck me most about refugee rights talk was not their existence, but their form: The protesters anchored their claims to rights in a special relationship to the international community rather than host obligations. The placards that protesters carried offered a particularly clear window into this global (not local) approach: "UNHCR-Geneva are we not entitled to good health, shelter, education, and good life as refugee?" and "Geneva we want resettlement injustices to be investigated." The protesters did not appeal to "Ghana" or "camp authorities"—they explicitly referenced the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, which had become in their minds, their closest connection to the international community. Over the years, the UNHCR had sought to convince the host state that refugees belonged to a separate category than other migrants—that people who found refuge in their country were entitled to the distinctive set of rights laid out in the 1951 Refugee Convention. In Buduburam, camp inhabitants embraced this understanding of themselves as refugees and reinterpreted it as an entitlement to international protection.

The protesters who wrote the signs often interpreted the UNHCR's lessons in a way that stretched their meaning beyond the actual legal guarantees of international refugee law. The broad-ranging rhetoric of a right to "good health, shelter, education, and good life" comes not from the narrow guarantees of the 1951 Refugee Convention, but the expansive vision of international human rights. International refugee conventions did not actually cover most of the rights that refugee protesters claimed, though other international human rights instruments did encompass many of them. Perhaps for this reason, a second striking dimension of refugee rights talk was that people often appealed to human rights rather than just refugee protection. Consider again the earlier quotations: the UNHCR is giving "me my rights as a human"; Ghana is monitoring camp elections so "you will know human rights"; "Refugees are human and humans have rights." Human rights became for many people in Buduburam a richer, more intuitively resonant legal artifact grounded in bodily needs. Yet, human rights were also—from an enforcement standpoint—a vaguer and more distant international legal regime than refugee protection.

The protesters melded overlapping international legal regimes (human rights, refugee, development) into a single subjective legal framework of "UN law" or "UN constitution," which they expected the UNHCR and international community (not the hosts) to enforce. For example, when Patricia, as a rank-and-file protester, defended the legitimacy of the protests against the criticism of the Interior Ministry, she cited a "UN constitution": "Under UN constitution, what we did, we were right to do that. Because we did not go into the streets. We did not block their principal streets. We did not even go to Accra! You getting what I'm saying?" (SSI 49). She feels that the host state's condemnation of the protests was unjust not according to the dictates of national law, but according to international law. Likewise, Betty reconceptualizes humanitarian aid as a "right" rather than charity when she explains how the protests began: "We started going for the meetings, because it was our right for UN to settle us in our own country since we're not going travel [for resettlement abroad]" (SSI 34). The connection between people's interpretations of their rights as refugees and actual international refugee law is not always straightforward—there was no right to resettlement or to financial support for repatriation—but even false expectations have consequences.

A few people did frame injustices in legal terms with appeals to national law, but this was much less common and only found among the educated elite. For example, Mohamed argued that the prolonged detention of protesters violated the Ghanaian constitution. (This was also an argument made by the Ghanaian human rights organization that defended the detainees.)

> Okay, they kept them there from time indefinite and there, their legal right was violated because under Government Constitution, even our Constitution under legal rights, a person should be held within in the period of 48 hours but they were held above 48 hours so they was there for time in and there was other human right lawyer who was, who seek the case and came into intervene. It was, it was air over BBC, it was air over CNN how refugee was manhandled or maltreated. (SSI 3)

Ordinarily, people have the most knowledge about local forms of law; knowledge about international law is often limited to those with more educational background and higher socioeconomic status. But in the refugee camp, the link between status and lay legal knowledge inverted the more common pattern. International law became part of popular knowledge, while only the educated class gained significant knowledge about host legal institutions.

Protesters used rights talk to claim injustice, inspire unity, and manage fear. In so doing, they reached to international laws and the universal language of rights. "We wanted fight for our right there, that if it is anything, we as a group, we should stand

together" (SSI 49), declared Patricia. Meanwhile, Betty melded rights talk and religious discourse with a black-humored assessment of the stakes: "If we go back, we will die from hunger. If we go in front, we will still die. So we prefer to go in front (laughs) . . . and then God will be on your side. So this is why we went on the field to advocate for our right" (SSI 34). The protests failed. (I have tried to explain this failure elsewhere (Holzer 2012)). Few examples of genuine legal empowerment exist in refugee camps (for an exceptional case, see Pessar 2001; Worby 1999). But despite its ultimate repression, the Concerned Women protests revealed a distinctive form of rights talk that became a critical part of camp politics—rights talk that melded different international legal regimes and appealed to the international community rather than the host state.

Conclusion—Refugees as Wards of International Law

Refugee law scholars observed widespread human rights violations in refugee camps and concluded that camp inhabitants did not benefit from the legal protections enshrined in international, regional, and domestic laws. That conclusion conveys an important truth: existing legal instruments offer little security or justice for people living in refugee camps. But these legal instruments do offer something interesting that we can observe if we explore—as legal consciousness and mobilization scholars advocate—how people make sense of law and make claims to justice.

In this article, I have sought to show, first, that with the encouragement of the UNHCR, many people living in the Buduburam Refugee Camp developed an understanding of themselves as a distinctive group of rights holders with a special relationship to the international community—as refugees rather than simply Liberians or migrants. Second, I have argued that most people remained alienated from host legal institutions even when they understood themselves to be international rights holders. Third, I have shown that despite this widespread alienation from host law, some people still claimed rights in large-scale social protests. In claiming rights, these protesters drew not only upon normative ideals laid in the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, but also from other international legal instruments. They crafted an understanding of their entitlements that ranged from the right to food, shelter, education, work, and health to resettlement and other positive migration choices. They looked not to their hosts, but to international actors to honor their rights claims.

More broadly, I have argued that in this paradoxical outcome of simultaneous legal mobilization and legal alienation, people living as refugees became wards of international law in the full and contradictory sense of that word. Like "a child, a minor, or other

person legally incapable of conducting his affairs,"[10] they understood themselves as vulnerable people under the guardianship of the international community. But like a "watchman, guard, keeper," they publicly claimed rights to international law, promoting international law through public displays of belief.[11]

Sometimes it is unclear what, if any, consequences international laws have for people living amid humanitarian crisis. Rights talk is meant to protect the less powerful. Yet, efforts to claim rights often fall to the same power dynamics that produced the original violations. Scholars have rightly condemned the widespread human rights violations that people living in refugee camps suffer, and the shortcomings in the international refugee protection regime that make these violations chronic and systemic. But it is important to recognize that these laws are not disappearing without a trace in refugee camps. These laws still become part of the fabric of social life.

Neither international nor national legal instruments ultimately offered security or justice for the people living as refugees in Buduburam, but the subjective processes whereby people embraced international law and became estranged from domestic legal institutions still reflect an important consequence of law. Mixed outcomes to international human rights campaigns such as this far outnumber the clear successes and failures. A full accounting of the international human rights system must make sense of these outcomes as well. In this article, I sought to illuminate one such mixed outcome—the emergence of wards of international law. I want to conclude by reiterating that such mixed outcomes should not be conflated with successful human rights campaigning. It is not clear that placing one's trust in the powerful governments and institutions that comprise the international community truly serves people's needs. In some ways, the concept calls to mind the category of "wards the state," a legal status with a long and unsavory history in North–South relation (Collmann 1988; Conklin & Graham 1995; Kame'Eleihiwa 1993; Mead 1967). But regardless of its practical accomplishments, in the complex legal, moral, and political terrain of humanitarian crisis, people found solace in the human rights ideal that "each person is the subject of global concern" (Beitz 2009: 1) and inspiration in the promise of international protection.

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