

BOOK REVIEW

Bram J. Jansen. *Kakuma Refugee Camp. Humanitarian Urbanism in Kenya's Accidental City*. London: Zed Books, 2018. Distributed by the University of Chicago Press. 234 pp. Bibliography. Notes. Index. \$95.00 Paper. ISBN: 978-1-78699-189-8.

Located in remote Northwest Kenya, Kakuma is a sprawling refugee camp, or to use Bram J. Jansen's evocative proposal, an "accidental city." Created in the early 1990s in order to receive the Lost Boys of Sudan, Kakuma grew larger as other regional conflicts gained momentum. Today, this vast humanitarian hub is inhabited in a more or less temporary fashion not only by more than 100,000 individuals from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC, but also by Kenyans, international aid workers, researchers, and other visitors.

Kakuma is an urbanized space actively shaped by human agency that has altered and contested it over time. It is a "nodal point" embedded in the local and global landscape that connects those who live there with those who have passed through as well as those coming in the future. Jansen's new publication, *Kakuma Refugee Camp: Humanitarian Urbanism in Kenya's Accidental City*, opens a window onto the inner workings of this constructed space.

With the central idea of a humanitarian urbanism, Jansen impels us to think about how refugee camps are (re)produced and evolve. For this, the author urges us to consider a broader set of "symbolic, ontological and social processes" and "their meaning in relation to contemporary global social and political forces," as well as to go beyond the vision of refugee camps as unfinished cities to understand whether they configure a "window onto something new" (4).

In Chapter One, Jansen elaborates the notion of humanitarian urbanism "as the production and navigation of space through roles and practices that are both constitutive of and produced by humanitarian governance (27)." We learn that in spite of a myriad of (bio)political approaches of care and control, people in Kakuma do change, appropriate, negotiate, and alter that space and social ordering. The camp is not only the place where people seek refuge while waiting for durable solutions, but also a politico-military rear base, a place in which aid acts as a welfare system, and a strategic site in a wider world of mobilities. In this sense, Jansen impels us to perceive "camps as social entities in their own right" beyond "binary

logics” (inclusion and exclusion; exception and normality; rights protection and violation; dependency and self-maintenance; top-down or bottom-up governance), and understand not only how camps structure the lives of people but most importantly, what other possible forms of social life exist within them (29–31).

To this end, he discusses how the manifestations of refugee protection and humanitarian services are managed by the people in order to create a hybrid political power, accounting for how these “relate to, build on or negate and evade certain arrangements, measures, subjectivities or opportunities” (50) in the camp (Chapter Two). The author then delves into the experiences and histories of violence, informing about current and former ties with regional politico-military movements (specifically the case of South Sudan), and the way it influences and regulates the camp space (Chapter Three).

Essential for grasping such processes is the notion of *campital*, which is subsequently introduced. With *campital* Jansen aims to capture the specific skills, assets, networks, and strategies that are instrumental for navigating the humanitarian setting and key in the understanding of the camp’s social stratification and organization. *Campital* is important to “dig aid” and to “move along,” namely with regard to third-country resettlement opportunities (Chapter Five). Further on, through Jansen’s observations on the dilemmas South Sudanese individuals face upon, or in the face of, repatriation (Chapter Six), we comprehend how the time spent in a cosmopolitan camp, the services and infrastructures available in it, as well as the lack of such features and opportunities in home countries, have contributed to a certain *urbanisation des esprits*. Humanitarian or otherwise, urbanism might then be apprehended as a state of mind.

In this book we find no maps or plans. Rather, the reader is constantly being taken on a walk, as Jansen suggests in a middle Intermission section. The vivid descriptions stimulate the reader to create a mental map and imaginings of Kakuma and to feel the almost ordinary nature of life in such place. Based on extensive fieldwork, this engaging and well-written monograph offers a provocative perspective on camps while expanding the available analytical lexicon.

The fundamental contribution of this piece is the way in which it compels us to think about, and beyond, current patterns and catalysts of urbanization and the myriad of social phenomena these entangle. By thinking about refuge and humanitarian assistance as key urbanization forces with camps as the “normal” (or better, normalizing) instruments at its core, Jansen offers a glimpse into possible urban futures. Indeed, we perceive that the quest for refuge, the spaces instituted for that purpose, and the multiple modes of governance arising thereof give birth to not so exceptional pockets of life whose overall features and dynamics recall those of other cities throughout Africa and elsewhere. As a result, Jansen’s words reverberate beyond the pages of his book and of the paradigmatic case of Kakuma, pushing toward a broader reflection on the viability, meanings,

and uses of human settlements produced in response to social, political, economic, and environmental changes.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Gorman, Robert F. 1982. "Coping with the African Refugee Problem: Reflections on the Role of Private Voluntary Organization Assistance." *Issue* (Waltham, Mass.) 12 (1–2): 35–40. doi:10.1017/S1548450500002985.
- Kindersley, Nicki. 2015. "Southern Sudanese Narratives of Displacement, and the Ambiguity of 'Voice.'" *History in Africa* 42: 203–37. doi:10.1017/hia.2015.3.
- Schultheis, Michael J. 1989. "Refugees in Africa: The Geopolitics of Forced Displacement." *African Studies Review* 32 (1): 3–30. doi:10.2307/524491.

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