Learning to be Refugees: The Bhutanese in Nepal and Australia

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I hereby certify that this is a piece of original work, produced solely by the author.

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In memory of Cynthia Jane Neikirk

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Abstract

The deployment of moral sentiments—humanitarian governance—both at an international and domestic level is a defining aspect of our times. Despite lofty aspirations, this ideology results in a global system of governance where domination and assistance are explicitly linked. Far from benign benevolence, humanitarian ideals are employed by international organisations to manage refugees while maintaining the legitimacy of the nation-based, global order. In an era punctuated by rhetoric and practice regarding the securing of national borders, the Bhutanese are an elite group of among refugees who represent a global community’s humanitarian heart. After two decades living in camps run by the UNHCR, the Bhutanese refugees are being resettled.

Following 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, in South Australia and in Nepal, it became evident this group had an insightful understanding of the expected behaviour of a refugee. Such expectations included mourning a lost nation; constituting a community; and requiring social reform. The Bhutanese actively cultivated an image of domesticated (controlled) subjects eligible for ongoing care and support. This performance required the Bhutanese to transform or mask their existing values and social norms. These performances provided a veneer of compliance that masked action. It is through these various junctures of expectation, performance, and contestation that their dynamic experiences are fruitfully examined.

The well-meaning discourse of humanitarianism absolves the conscience of the global community in the face of ever increasing evidence of injustices caused by nation building. Though the Bhutanese are a specific group, their experiences are reflective of the mores, values, and assumptions of our world. This ethnography illustrates how humanitarian ideals actively contour refugee identity to maintain the global order. Refugees must reinvent themselves to mirror the expectations of the governing institutions. It underscores that in accepting the role of humanitarian subject, refugees must abandon their role as contributors to the nation state and become satisfied with the position of guests. As supplicants in global reconstitutions, refugees articulate both the grand aspirations and the desperate shortcomings of a new, humanitarian system of global relationships.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Learning to be Refugees

‘Okay, now we will practise our English out loud. You, you go first.’ The coordinator nods towards a Bhutanese refugee taking part in the community-run course in Adelaide, South Australia on Saturday mornings.

With assurance she states, ‘My name is Gita. I am from Bhutan.’

The coordinator nods. ‘Good, good. Next.’

The next man says, ‘My name is Hari. I am from Bhutan.’

Again, the response is affirmative. The next lady begins timidly, ‘My name is Yasoda, I am from Nepal… no Bhutan, Nepal—’

The coordinator cuts in, ‘You are from Bhutan. Bhutan is your country.’ He glances sheepishly at me, writing notes, and explains, ‘You know, it’s a little confusing for them. Many people are illiterate.’

She repeats, ‘My name is Yasoda. I am from Bhutan’.

‘Good, good’ the leader replies. The exercise continues across the thirty participants.

My name is … I am from Bhutan. My name is … I am from Bhutan.

Superficially, the above exchange suggests a solid success—an ethnic leader facilitates an English class for his community while coaching the group to provide correct answers regarding its identity in Australia. The co-ordinator is astute: Yasoda’s wrong answer is problematic and her answer could elicit suspicion—if her nation is not Bhutan then theoretically she is not a refugee and does not have a claim to be in Australia. The co-ordinator smoothly shifts away suspicion through a sympathetic appeal—Yasoda is confused and illiterate. She lacks the skills to present herself accurately or appropriately to those outside her community. Yet it is imperative that she learns the expected response. This exercise takes on a performative dimension, which I witness as an outside researcher. The co-ordinator represents Yasoda to me as the figure of an ideal refugee: helpless, deserving of sympathy, and immersed in her community. The representation is strategic. Bhutanese elites largely create and effectively regulate the image of a Bhutanese refugee community in order to secure humanitarian support. However, the contemporary set of expected refugee behaviours is not always the image
all Bhutanese want to present. These expectations are simultaneously performances, contestations, and negotiations. This interplay between teacher and student is not an attempt to manipulate others, rather it is a response to contradictory and confining expectations: they are engaging in contextualized behaviours (Goffman 1959). This seemingly benign interaction is, in reality, illustrative of a multitude of tensions underlying not only this particular group’s experiences but also the broader humanitarian framework.

The Bhutanese still living in Nepal’s refugee camps are described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as model refugees (Ashton, 1996; HRW 2003). These model refugees are now part of the UNHCR’s much lauded and largest resettlement program to date (Press Statement by the International Organisation of Migration 1015). Once resettled, the Bhutanese are described by government representatives, council workers, and service providers as a successful refugee community. The Bhutanese cultivated image of ideal, model, or successful refugees speaks to their uncanny ability to reflect the values of their respective audience. It also appears to have been rewarded; globally they are the elite few that will resettle in the West. In a world that is increasingly inequitable, the Bhutanese are the realisation of ‘the fantasy of a global moral community’ (Fassin 2012, p. xii). Yet this celebration of model refugees masks as much as it reveals. Focusing on the current exemplary behaviour minimises events that led to their exile from Bhutan and obscures power disparities embedded in the camp systems. In Australia, resettling refugees from UNHCR run camps legitimises an increasingly restrictive migration policy. Further, inequality punctuates relationships not only between humanitarian representatives both in Nepal and Australia but also among the Bhutanese. Across these spheres of power certain norms, values, and groups are deemed acceptable while those outside this realm are marginalised.

The rise of humanitarianism after the Cold War has corresponded with a shifting perception of refugees. Rather than an obligation to support exiled political actors, the West increasingly equates refugees with victims in need of compassion. This is a crucial transformation. While refugees remain pawns in relations between nations, they increasingly are devoid of political context and potential. Refugees have become largely depoliticised, a moral category in need of intervention.
A Changing Approach to Refugees

Though refugees are not a distinctly modern phenomenon, the post-World War II era marked the institutionalisation of refugee status, with the creation of the UNHCR. The 1951 United Nations definition stipulates a refugee as someone who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

For the past six decades, this definition has remained virtually unchanged, yet the way refugees are imagined is drastically different. Until the end of the Cold War, the popular image of a refugee was politically engaged and European: capable and desirable. Refugees were imagined as heroically leaving oppressive countries to share in democratic ideals. Before the end of the Cold War, refugees acted as valuable political and ideological tools: ‘the figure of the refugee here is inescapably political and has a particular ideological value: the refugee was said to be ‘voting with his feet’ by fleeing to the west’ (Johnson 2011, p. 1020). They validated the capitalist-democratic value system. The global political environment, and the assumption that refugees brought tangible skills, marked earlier refugees as respected (perhaps even coveted) prizes in the Cold War. These political and popular conceptions, in turn, influenced the institution designed to protect refugees.

The UNHCR’s primary role was to provide legal protection for those returning to their homelands or escaping communist regimes—essentially safeguarding Europeans moving across Europe (Long 1993). The goal of protection sought to replace what had been lost prior to or during flight—the relationship between citizen and state. Namely: the right to work, freedom of movement, the protection of human rights, and physical security (Edwards 2005). Legal protection also functions to prevent non-foulement or forcible removal from the country of sanctuary. During the Cold War, it became equated with resettlement, repatriating refugees was considered taboo (Gatrell 2013). At a political level this results in ‘policy-makers and officials devoting much of their efforts to resettling refugees from communism’ (Gatrell 2013, p. 7). Until the 1980s, the vast majority of refugees resettled in the United States came from the Eastern Bloc (Barnett 2002). Thus, for a substantial period of time, legal protection for political refugees was central and achieved vis-à-vis resettlement. This illustrates that a particular
understanding of who refugees are and what they represent is crucial in terms of the support and reception they receive. These understandings are far from static, rather they respond to shifting global contexts and changing institutional orientations\textsuperscript{1}.

Initially the UNHCR focused primarily on refugees from Europe, but events occurring in Africa and Asia became influential between the 1960s and 1980s (Loescher, Betts, & Milner 2008). The decolonisation of Africa resulted in an expanded definition of what constitutes a refugee. The 1967 Protocol universalised refugee status beyond the boundaries of Europe. The move from assisting primarily European refugees to refugees in the broader world ‘was a significant turning point in the Office’s geographical scope and function’ (Loescher, Betts, & Milner 2008, p. 25). As the UNHCR extended its reach into Africa, the support refugees received similarly increased. No longer primarily concerned with legal protection, the UNHCR now provides material assistance to refugees. Additionally, the rapid onset of refugee generating events made Non-European refugees appear to be masses of victims requiring urgent intervention to save lives and relieve suffering. Death, disease, and misery rather than political persecution increasingly provided the onus for UNHCR intervention: these refugees required immediate humanitarian assistance.

This sense of urgency holds a pivotal role in providing a clear, morally driven path for action (Bornstein & Redfield 2011). The emphasis became saving lives in emergency situations. This sense of immediacy, though perhaps effective in generating donor support, obscures the political realities and historical processes that generate refugees. Refugees from outside of Europe become re-created or re-imagined: the image of refugees primarily as victims is solidified. As Stein (1981), has noted ‘refugees are helped because they are helpless’. Stein observed this in the early 1980s - when there were conceivably two parallel groups of refugees. One group is the idealised, anti-communist European refugees—individuals capable of decision making and planning. The other group, largely in Africa but also in parts of Asia, appeared to lack this sense of autonomy. Skran (1992, p.5) argues that ‘differences between European and non-European refugees have been greatly exaggerated’ to legitimise keeping refugees located in the Third World from accessing the global North. Chimni (1998), however quite rightly suggests that the differences are real. Just as there were differences between the wealthy, intellectual, anti-communist refugee and the poor, illiterate, possibly pro-communist refugee, differences between refugees from Europe and

\textsuperscript{1} The evolution of the UNHCR will be discussed in Chapter 3.
refugees from other parts of the world exist. The perception of difference is significant. Refugees from outside Europe are increasingly divorced from, rather than defined by, their political contexts. In the African context, the UNHCR is increasingly becoming a humanitarian organisation focused on alleviating the suffering of masses of poverty-stricken victims (Johnson 2014). Since the 1980s, the focus continues to shift towards alleviating victimisation and suffering. This highlights that differences and similarities are emphasised or minimised to justify distinctive responses to different groups of refugees.

The end of the Cold War led to new strategies of global governance and reconfigurations of social inequality (Thomas & Clarke 2013). Along with the great hope the triumph of democratic governance and the free market promised, the liberal notion of a unified humanity moving towards a better world held the day. Yet the global village’s market-based economy appeared to increase, rather than alleviate, poverty in developing nations (Lai 2000). Further, the development aid that formed a key aspect of Cold War policy seemed to have little positive impact on economic expansion (Cornwall & Brock 2005). An increasing awareness of global inequality paralleled the ‘introduction of a new dimension to the responsibility of the global community to take a direct hand in the resolution of ... unacceptable human suffering’ (Munro 1999, p. 466). However, it quickly became evident that not all suffering could be alleviated.

The contemporary imagining of refugees emerges at this juncture. Global shifts triggered firstly an international awareness of their presence as ‘suffering masses of humanity’ that existed previously but had been largely invisible (Harrell-Bond 1986; Malkki 1995). Their emergence onto the global stage corresponded with media campaigns by organisations such as the UNHCR (Cottle & Nolan 2007), paired with increasing celebrity promotion (Kapoor 2013; Müller 2013). These campaigns highlighted the helplessness of refugees—eliciting pity and compassion (Malkki 1996; Rajaram 2002; Hoijer 2004).

Secondly refugees became synonymous with being worthy of assistance precisely because of their ‘bare humanity’ and status as purely victims (Malkki 1996). The refugee condition became ‘the most privileged amongst many inferior statuses’ (Zetter 2007, p. 189). These changes gave rise to a global understanding of refugees that was increasingly removed from broader political processes. The 1988 World Refugee
Survey illustrates this transformation: ‘refugees and displaced people are victims. A few are controversial. But the bulk are regular people caught up in persecution and violence’ (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 1988, p. 41). This statement raises several key themes illustrative of broader shifts. First, refugees are primarily victims. This is not entirely new; Europeans after World War II could also be considered victims. However, victimisation is becoming central in defining a refugee.

The ‘few controversial ones’ is vague, though during the late 1980s the emergence of the third image of the ‘refugee warriors’ was deemed problematic both politically and institutionally (Zolberg, Suhrke, & Aguayo 1989). Refugee warriors lived in camps but also used the camps as bases to launch attacks against the regime in power within their homeland (Adelman 1998). Simultaneously dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive while engaging in an armed political struggle, they represented the emerging conflict between refugee status and political activism (Zohlberg, Suhrke, & Aguayo 1989).

The final statement, ‘the bulk are regular people caught up in persecution and violence’, focuses on passivity. Rather than political actors, refugees are ‘caught up’ in a situation. The situation happens to them, the ‘bulk’ of them are reacting to events they have little to do with. This perception has some truth in it: widespread political violence impacts even those not directly involved. What is striking, and significant for this thesis, is the fundamentally altered perception of the refugee. No longer perceived as fleeing due to particular political events or views, refugees are fleeing generalised persecution and violence. Increasingly, political involvement is equated with controversial fringe elements rather than the central, defining feature. This lack of political motivation is normalised into a ‘myth of difference’ (Chimni 1998). Chimni (1998) argues these differences result in a paradigm shift in responding to refugee populations and understanding the contexts that result in exile. This shift obscures the rights of refugees to seek asylum, legitimising increasingly restrictive policies.

By the 1990s, refugees were no longer celebrated for voting with their feet, marking a definitive break in the construction of refugees in the western imagination (Hyndman

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2 The World Refugee Survey is produced by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. This is a private, nonprofit organisation supported by multiple government and non-government organisations. Their reports are influential both academically and in terms of policy. The US is the largest donor to the UNHCR and accepts the greatest number of refugees for resettlement each year. While Loescher, Betts, and Miller (2008) illustrate the relative autonomy of the UNHCR, the institution is dependent on a steady funding stream to survive.
Increasingly, efforts were undertaken by the UNHCR to address the root causes of refugee movements. The earlier solution of legal protection through resettlement shifted towards the aspiration to ‘transform the structural conditions that make populations vulnerable’ (Barnett 2005, p. 733). The root causes were generally conceived as arising from internal policies rather than larger geopolitical and economic realities (Suhrke & Zolberg 1989). This had marked consequences. Primarily, as Chimni (1998, 2000) argues, if the refugee-generating state is solely responsible for refugee flows, other countries can effectively skirt their obligation to resettle. This understanding simplifies complex global interactions such as the impact of international sanctions, imbalanced trade agreements, colonialism, and the destruction of arable land for economic benefit (Thomas & Clarke 2013). In doing so, international dimensions of refugee flows are effectively absolved. Further, by conceptualising root causes as domestic issues, camps become sites to fix domestic problems via development activities. Material assistance and, increasingly, development projects replace earlier resettlement-centred approaches to refugees (Harrell-Bond 1986). The UNHCR gradually has become linked with the goal of developing refugee communities (Loescher, Betts, & Milner 2008). This has potentially problematic repercussions ‘the idea of linking relief and development has serious implications for working in protracted political crises’ (Duffield 2007, p. 189). Refugees, rather than being resettled, are now perceived as a problem requiring alternative solutions: containment and repatriation (Chimni 2009).

Refugees are no longer a gift to a country; admission is now framed as a gift to refugees. In contrast to the earlier days of the UNHCR, few refugees will be resettled in the Western world (Barnett 2002). Resettlement is not the first solution, or even a realistic solution for refugees. This is not to suggest there was a ‘good-old day’ of refugee status in the post-WWII era. Rather, historically, refugees played a significant role in global politics–political engagement was the crucial attribute of a refugee. This is changing. Instead of the former focus on the political decisions of refugees, the philanthropy of the international community begins to take centre stage. Refugee assistance is increasingly framed as a moral act (charity/benevolence) rather than the fulfilment of a legal obligation or as an evaluation of a country’s political virtue. As political solidarity gives way, anxieties are aroused, and ‘these wandering masses in movement, certainly perceived as masses of “victims”, but just as often as supernumerary and undesirable populations.’ (Agier 2010, p. 29). Accepting refugees
for resettlement now represents a moral impulse and charitable gesture. Consequently, the political dimensions of refugees are minimised, replaced by a focus on victimisation. These shifts have crucial consequences: ‘how we imagine particular categories of people determines how we engage with them, whom we accept as legitimate political actors and who is able to participate in our world’ (Johnson 2011, p. 1017). Humanitarianism emerges as a central concept in both how refugees are popularly imagined and approached by institutions. The UNHCR reflects these contemporary values, transforming from an organisation concerned primarily with the legal protection of refugees into a more broadly based humanitarian agency (Cutts 2000). This relationship now appears to be common sense: it is a given that refugees are a humanitarian project. Limbu (2009, p. 267) highlights this increasingly common-sense understanding with the statement, ‘refugee is first and foremost a bureaucratic and humanitarian term’. I do not dispute this link, yet how and why this link is normalised as well as its implications merits consideration. While refugees are now imagined in a presumably humane and sympathetic fashion, rights and obligations are becoming marginalised. This raises other questions: which groups of refugees have become acceptable and what mechanism is calibrating them? Who is most deserving? Who is allowed to participate and why?

Humanitarianism Revealed

The Northern/Western humanitarian movement, rooted in various traditions of charity and philanthropy and in the civilizing impulses of the Enlightenment, as well as their subsequent manifestations in the expanses of what we now call the Global South, constitutes the dominant, multi-billion dollar, visible face of humanitarianism (Donini 2010, p. 220).

Humanitarianism comprises four core principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Barnett & Weiss 2008). Taken together, these principles translate into the premise that all people in need are entitled to unbiased assistance, given without hope for self-benefit to the provider. Humanitarianism is, at its most basic, a commitment to helping others—a desire to alleviate suffering. Humanitarian ideals are fundamentally concerned with the sacredness of human life, universal brotherhood, and relieving suffering (Ticktin 2011). The equality of people underscores this ideology and suggests humanitarian acts are (at least theoretically) free from political opportunism. These aspirations speak to humanitarianism’s religious roots, a genealogy through the
Enlightenment, and its successful transplant into the secular realm (Stamatov 2015). These ideals permeate our contemporary world: the deployment of moral sentiments both at an international and domestic level is a defining aspect of our times (Bornstein and Redfield 2011). Namely, moral sentiments have seeped into governance, ‘in which particular attention is focused on suffering and misfortune’, combined with a desire to alleviate them (Fassin 2012, p. 1). Underpinning these sentiments is a profound sense of moral authority: a moral responsibility to the poor, the impoverished, the victims. This morally apt position, due to its seeming irreproachable benevolence, belies powerfully unbalanced relations. Lofty ideals obscure contradictions and paradoxes. Fassin (2012, p. 242) argues that these contradictions form the basis of the contemporary humanitarian movement:

an impulse of moral sentiments from the rich toward the poor countries, from a world at peace to a world at war … the manifestation within humanitarian organisations of the inequality between benefactors and victims.

The desire to emancipate and protect the welfare of others has led to new forms of domination and configurations of power (Barnett 2013). This logic has been dubbed humanitarian reason:

Humanitarian reason represents a powerful social imagery of our time … by instituting the equivalence of lives and equivalence of suffering, [it] allows us to continue believing—contrary to the daily evidence of the realities we encounter—in this concept of humanity which presupposes that all human beings are of equal value because they belong to one moral economy (Fassin 2012, p. 252).

Thus, humanitarian reason conceals two significant realities. First, there is a striking disparity in the distribution of global wealth stemming from historical and contemporary social arrangements. This relates to the second obstruction, namely, that humanitarianism masks these larger processes by focusing on evaluating those in need of assistance. To address the initial point, the massive disparities between the wealth of some countries and the destitution of others are not wholly new (Milanovic 2011). However, these inequalities are vast, with the United States, Europe, and wealthy Pacific Asian countries (including Australia, New Zealand and Japan) controlling 88% of the world’s wealth (Davies, Sandström, Shorrocks & Wolff 2011, Table 8). What may be unique is the emerging everyday relationship between the economic ‘have-nots’ and the ‘the haves’. Humanitarian ideals are particularly effective because they frequently promote:

a sense of gratification for having contributed to saving the suffering of the world with no
challenge to their own lifestyle or global inequalities, or to the political system they are a part of … a global order that fails to engage with structural inequalities (Müller 2013, p. 478).

These small acts of supporting good causes create relationships that focus on alleviating suffering (Donino 2010). This is framed as an altruistic act with ‘a kernel of nobility in … giving money to ‘good causes’ to alleviate suffering’ (Douzinas 2007, p. 13). In effect, this allows structural inequalities to go unchecked and political realities to remain unexamined. Under the premise of equality, the reality of vastly different economic situations and access to opportunities persists. This brings me to the second problematic aspect of humanitarianism: humanitarian endeavours are undertaken with the desire to help. However not everyone can be saved. Humanitarianism seeks deserving victims.

Thomas and Clarke (2013, p. 317) propose that the post-colonial, post-cold-War, post 9/11 world has steadily entered ‘a new era of moral and humanitarian protectionism’, with a particular focus on victims. This category is not a natural or given but rather a complex and morphing intersection of ideals, cultural values, and political rhetoric. Victim status has become elevated as a means for people to gain recognition and social support. In parallel to this elevation is its exclusiveness, and here emerges the thinly veiled evaluation of deserving versus undeserving. ‘Because giving assistance is generally regarded as charity, humanitarians also assume the power to decide who is deserving. Such power is highly seductive and brings out the best or the worst in us’ (Harrell-Bond 2002, p. 67). Within this broad concept of sufferers in need of help, refugees emerge as a particular kind of victim. Examining a group who does not merit support may illuminate the specific set of variables that constitute a deserving victim in the context of refugees.

During the violent break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia hosted thousands of refugees in dismal conditions. Despite the State’s inability to provide materially for this population (reaching a million in the summer of 1999), the international image of Serbs-as-evil-aggressors translated into a lack of aid. This image was honed in the media but also reflects significant processes of valuation linked to refugee status. While refugee status is technically a right, it is being progressively treated as a privilege (Zetter 2007). This privileging creates a narrow canon of ideal refugee-victim. Serbs were perceived as politically active, the aggressors in the conflict, while other groups were perceived as helpless and hence worthy. Thus:
refugees in Serbia faced various negative consequences, such as consistently insufficient international aid, less chance of getting asylum to emigrating to Western countries in comparison to refugees from Yugoslavia, lack of interest from western people (Nikolic-Ristanovic 2003, p. 105).

In the hierarchy of victims, they did not quite fit the image of deserving or worthy. This links with the argument put forth in the previous section, that ‘the refugee’ has, over time, been progressively molded into an ideal-type victim devoid of political messiness. Humanitarianism masks contradictions and valuations: who is worthy of help and who is not? This process is problematic, for ‘the increased moral content of new humanitarianism combined with a move towards taking sides with the victim against the aggressor runs the risk of producing a hierarchy of victims’ (Fox 2001, p. 282).

Supporting some groups of refugees and not others is inherently political. This illuminates a fascinating paradox in which the category of refugee maintains a distinct political charge, but in order to be considered a ‘deserving refugee’, politics must largely be downplayed, hidden, or perceived as unproblematic. Humanitarianism, thus, constructs a particular victim. As such, despite claims of neutrality:

> a humanitarian act is at all times the carrier of cultural meanings even as it brings material assistance and relief to people in distress. The cultural meaning of humanitarian practices shapes and is in turn shaped by the political ideas of an age (Chimni 2009, p. 20–21).

The example of a group who were not considered deserving victims, namely Serbian refugees, can be contrasted with the construction of the ideal-type, deserving refugee.

Harrell-Bond (1999, p. 147) found that ‘the documents [she] obtained from [aid] agencies emphasized images of helpless, starving masses who depend on agents of compassion to keep them alive’. The UNHCR (2015a) website appeals to the reader: ‘imagine being the mother of a sick and hungry child and having to decide between risking your life staying in a conflict or leaving behind everything in search of safety’. Such documents are produced with the hope of securing funding, suggesting that helplessness and suffering are crucial hallmarks of a deserving victim. Further, ‘humanitarian compassion seems increasingly reserved for those who only suffer but do not act’ (Feldman 2009, p. 31). The theme of helplessness is particularly salient in relation to the perception of deserving refugees:

> refugees are viewed as being inherently disinterested in making choices between safe countries of destination. Indeed the making of such choices may be seen as evidence that
the ‘would-be’ asylum seeker is not genuine (Derluyn, Watters, Mels, & Broeckaert 2014, p. 3).

They are a kind of victim uninterested in helping themselves and wholly dependent on the compassion of others. Refugees are ‘helped because they are helpless’ (Stein 1981) but their very helplessness means their status is precarious: action casts doubt on their position as refugees. In turn, survivors of disaster, oppression and persecution adopt the only persona that allows them to access support—as victims. This status is tenuous:

people risk losing their identification as victims—and therefore their position as proper objects of compassion—if they do not appear “innocent” enough, or if they otherwise do not conform to the narrative demands of this category (Feldman 2009, p. 32).

This statement exemplifies the danger behind this shift; these understandings serve to legitimise supporting some groups while justifying the lack of support for others. It also manifests a system of ranking that leads the beholden party to recognise that humility, rather than political action, is expected (Barnett 2012). This divorces victims from historical forces and ongoing power disparities that are the sources of contemporary circumstances (Brown 2009). As refugees are de-politicised, ‘inequality, subordination, marginalization, and social conflict, all which require political analysis and political solutions’ become constructed as individual, natural, cultural or religious problems (Brown 2009, p. 15). Obscuring these interrelated processes divorces both humanitarian governance and those governed from engaging with sources of inequality. Recognition is limited to their status as ‘victims’ rather than the complex historic, social, and political events that led to exile.

[R]educing people to their victim status—in part by requiring them to appear as exemplary victims and not political actors in order to receive recognition of their suffering… restrict[s] their capacities to act in other ways (Feldman 2009, p. 25).

The compassionate approach to deserving refugees seems superficially to be humane, just, and inherently good. The victimisation category is problematic in the context of refugees, however, because it positions them as moral categories rather than political actors. In turn, refugees are placed in a precarious position: they become dependent on the compassion of others that can be withdrawn at any time (Feldman 2009). This also limits presumed capabilities and reinforces power imbalances. Still, it is also a category that has strategic value.

In Fassin’s (2012) Humanitarian Reason a few pages are devoted to a group of asylum seekers who found themselves shipwrecked on the French Riviera. Initially, these asylum seekers were met largely with public and political hostility. Despite this initial
reception, they managed to convey effective narratives appealing to French sentiments. Presenting themselves as a particular kind of victim, in this instance Kurdish refugees fleeing Iraq, moral sentiments prevailed and they gained acceptance in the country. In actuality, they were Syrian refugees fleeing the Bashar al-Assad regime but at this point in time, Syria did not appear as evil as the Hussein regime. This short example illustrates ‘the imaginary of refugees … and hence the idea that they have of the relational and emotional bases on which their requests for asylum will be assessed’ (Fassin 2012, p. 147). It is an intriguing scenario, precisely because it illustrates the interplay and competencies of two spheres of humanitarian actors: the governed and the governors. Humanitarian ideals and governance effectively mask power asymmetries but here, humanitarian sentiment is used strategically to further the asylum seekers’ goals. Again, this should not be considered a deceptive act but an example of the relationally situated, impression management that refugees and asylum seekers must engage in to access basic rights (Goffman 1959; Berreman 1962). This case is tucked within an almost encyclopaedic text that convincingly argues that humanitarian ideology defines relationships between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’.

Humanitarianism is a system that attempts to regulate people but is also a system that people act within. While the category of victim minimises capabilities, at times it can also maximise opportunities. Fassin’s thorough account of the organisations and governments that set the terms of humanitarian gestures provides a departure point to consider the perspectives of the recipients of those gestures. The interplay between humanitarian spheres requires further analysis; specific in-depth studies are necessary to explore motivations and experiences of those who are governed.

**Experiencing Humanitarianism**

**Camps**

Harrell-Bond’s 1986 study regarding aid to Ugandan refugees and Malkki’s (1995a) work with exiled Hutus could be considered the forerunners of a scholarly analysis of humanitarianism. Harrell-Bond’s research took place at a particularly tumultuous time during the initial formation of the refugee camps. The resulting book, *Imposing Aid*, examines the interplay between humanitarian aid providers and recipients. It challenges the simplistic, yet potentially oppressive, understanding of refugees as primarily
victims. This understanding, Harrell-Bond (1986, p. 363) argues, leads to unfettered power imbalances in refugee camps and ‘lies in the ideology of compassion, the unconscious paternalism, superiority, the monopoly of moral virtue which is built into it’. The impact of this underlying logic is a striking power imbalance between refugees and aid workers. Harrell-Bond (2002) argues that, when assistance is provided as charity rather than a way of enabling refugees to enjoy their rights, it is inhumane assistance. This approach forces refugees to ingratiating themselves to their helpers in order to maintain access to aid and support. Harrell-Bond’s work is a powerful critique of a particular moment in the experience of Ugandan refugees: the arrival and formation of the camps. Thus Harrell-Bond was not able to examine the trajectory the camp experience and the relationship with refugee status can take. This, due to the increasingly protracted refugee situations in the contemporary era, merits examination. Refugee camps, as Malkki (1995a) has argued, can emerge as a significant site of social meaning.

Malkki examines the creation of a distinct Hutu social identity in Tanzanian refugee camps. She claims that the camp space has fostered the development of a mytho-history that not only gives meaning to exile, but re-historicises the group’s exile. Put another way, refugees’ mythic-history is a political response to the camp experience. This relates to the broader argument put forth in this thesis: refugees are not necessarily passive in the processes of de-politicisation. Despite this impressive theoretical contribution, two aspects of Malkki’s work require further contemplation or modification. Fieldwork was performed at a unique juncture in the Tanzanian camps; in 1985 the UNHCR handed control of the camps to the local government (Malkki 1995a, p. 43). The local District Commissioner, shortly after the handover, described the Hutu refugees as economic migrants and challenged the historic events that led to exile. Malkki notes this is a crucial shift, describing the angst participants underwent as their refugee status became precarious. Regardless of this significant change, it is approached as a peripheral issue in Purity and Exile (1995a). A heightened consideration of this shift may have led to the narratives shared so methodically with Malkki to be analysed somewhat differently. Several themes seem to be deployed with a clear claim to ongoing international political recognition. Zetter (1991), for example, has argued convincingly that the bureaucratic labelling of refugees has direct implications regarding access to resources and recognition by international bodies.
Malkki’s illustration could be taken further if a greater analysis of the motivations behind why the group appears to be consciously creating a past that maintains their status of refugees was given. Further, Malkki’s widespread use of somewhat disembodied refugee narratives results in a clear sense of the participants as individuals remaining somewhat elusive. Though the difference between camp and city dwellers is examined, differences within the camps seem non-existent. If analysed more centrally, this may reveal the considerable political manoeuvring within the group to ensure one coherent story. In turn, this may also shed light on why it appears that only males participate in these processes of historical mythmaking.

If Harrell-Bond (1986, 1999) and Fassin (2012) emphasise that the status of victim has become a requisite aspect of accessing humanitarian support, Fiddian-Qamieyh (2010, 2011, 2014) approaches the idealisation of refugees from a slightly different perspective. Her 2014 book *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Refugees Politics of Survival* focuses on the performance of Saharawi female refugees living in Algerian camps as idealised refugee women. Though the book’s emphasis is on women, it does provide information regarding men’s experience and thus it is a slightly broader approach in comparison to Malkki’s work. The UNHCR and scholars such as Harrell-Bond (1986) describe the Sahrawi camps as model camps, partly because of the perception that women enjoy high social status. The camps are presented to an international audience as idealised sites of democratic transformation, gender equality, and secularism. The Saharawi are ‘good’ refugees. Fiddian-Qamieyh illustrates how this image is highly orchestrated– a political strategy that sustains donations to support the camp’s livelihood. The camp inhabitants make a concerted effort to present themselves in opposition to the normalised discourse of undeserving Muslim refugees. Undeserving status includes those who do not support Western values: they are undemocratic, uninterested in empowering women, and overly religious. Not content to stop at the merely descriptive, Fiddian-Qamieyh attempts to look behind the curtain to understand not only refugees’ political manoeuvres but also the consequences. It illuminates that humanitarian support is contingent and conditional, which in turn sustains or creates internal and external power imbalances. Promoting democratic governance either directly or through graduated assistance levels may appear to counter the shift towards expecting refugees to be apolitical. To a degree this is true. However, by celebrating the Saharawi as exceptional and ideal, the expectation that refugees, and
perhaps Muslim refugees in particular, are generally not democratic is further normalised.

Taken together, these differing works highlight how refugee camps are far from static or homogenous. Regardless, specific themes persist. In particular, refugees are primarily victims and the exceptional Sahrawi proves the rule, so to speak. Fiddian-Qamieyh illustrates clearly, and Malkki perhaps inadvertently, that façades actively form in response to particular camp contexts. These performances raise several questions regarding the broader field of power relations (Gupta & Ferguson 1992). Harrell-Bond proposes that humanitarian governance results in profound power imbalances that reduce refugees into almost non-actors while Malkki illustrates that camps can be sites of dynamic internal social engineering. Fiddian-Qamieyh further explores this theme of humanitarian support framing or sculpting experiences in camps. This thesis builds on these observations by examining another group of ‘ideal’ refugees—the Bhutanese—both as they experience refugee camps and during resettlement.

Resettlement

These authors consider refugees residing in camps, perhaps one of the most obvious sites of humanitarian governance. Once the refugees are resettled, distinct expectations of refugees emerge—albeit still strongly influenced by humanitarian ideals. Ong’s (2003) work with Cambodians traces participants’ memories of Cambodia, their experiences in the camps, and resettlement in the United States. Ong’s analysis of these refugees’ institutional interactions both observed and relayed – suggests refugee camps are the sites where Cambodians are inducted into their future role as subjects in the United States’ low-wage labour force. The camps educate refugees about their expected behaviour and roles. This argument is substantiated through resettled Cambodian refugees’ narratives that were reflections of their time in the camps. Ong proposes refugees who are resettled, become ranked on their ability to reflect dominant ideals such as self-reliance, entrepreneurialism, and individualism. Ong argues that pre-existing frameworks of power and prestige in the United States create social hierarchies. Refugees are ordered based on their ability to reflect dominant ideals.

Different ethnic groups are thus continually engaged in cultural struggles to claim higher status within the hierarchy, such contestations merely intensify the stratificatory processes based on physical and cultural difference (Ong 2003, p. 86—87).
While Ong’s work is insightful, examining interpretations of the refugee camp with participants still in camp settings and once resettled may yield additional insights. Furthermore, pre- and post-resettlement accounts are relatively rare in the existing refugee studies literature (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny 2011). While in the United States refugees are expected to become self-sufficient very quickly, Australia takes a more measured approach. Fanjoy, Ingraham, Khouny and Osman’s (2005) work with Australian resettlement representatives suggests that at the government level there is an understanding that refugees may need economic support for the rest of their lives. This implies that Australia presents different challenges to successful integration due to the assumption of indefinite helplessness. Similarly, Ong’s (2003) observations regarding the role of camp bureaucracy in creating a regulated, low-paid labour force may be quite different in the Australian resettlement context.

Australia is a generous country, ranking sixth in the 2014 World Giving Index (Taylor 2014). In Australia, though Australia is not unique in this regard, the opportunity to give to those in need is ubiquitous. Outside shopping centres, over the telephone, and via social media organisations such as the UNHCR, World Vision, Save the Children, Doctors without Borders, and Oxfam, to name a few, jockey for patrons. Australians are constantly reminded of the suffering in the world and the role they can play in its rectification. Parallel to this culture of giving, an increasingly strict approach to asylum seekers has emerged. While Zetter (2007, p. 172) has convincingly argued that in the developed nations there is resistance to both migrants and refugees, this research proposes that in Australia, this resistance is manifesting itself in a specific fashion. The division between refugee and asylum seeker has become reinforced by the recent policies developed by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection3. Somewhat counter-intuitively, a strict approach to asylum seekers is framed as a necessary measure to provide adequate humanitarian assistance to particular refugees. In the midst of Operation Sovereign Borders4 and proliferating offshore detention centres, a specifically victimised refugee becomes the deserving category. Claiming to want to help those who need it the most affirms a strict admission policy while reconciling a tightly regulated border with Australia’s egalitarian ideals. Watson (2011, 3 Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs 1993—1996; Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1996—2001; Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Indigenous Affairs 2001—2006; Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 2006—2007; Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007—2013; Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2013—present.
4 The Coalition government adopted a military-led response to curb asylum seekers arriving by boat. These unauthorised arrivals present a ‘border protection crisis as a national emergency’ (Abbott 2013).
p. 353) describes this paradox of refusing to accept asylum seekers while supporting the resettlement of refugees from camps, as ‘the humanitarian defence’. This shifts the figure of the refugee from political subject to recipient of charity—refugees become the deserving poor. The power imbalance in which one group is saving/helping another is nurtured, creating ‘humanitarian fantasies of rescue and salvation that often obscure colonial and post-colonial encounters and global inequality’ (Fadlalla 2009, p.81). Central to this is the way the deserving or ideal refugee is imagined.

Hutchinson and Dorsett (2012) posit the assumption that refugees experiencing and suffering from on-going trauma is embedded in Australia’s support system. Marlowe (2010) further contends that the core of deserving victim status relates to the presumed trauma refugees experience before resettlement. While being traumatised can translate into additional social support through disability payments and perhaps increased empathy, approaching refugees as traumatised is problematic. Marlowe (2010) found that Sudanese refugees in Australia were met with the assumption that they were traumatised. Trauma became an essentialised way of understanding the Sudanese as fundamentally different from Australians. These presumptions functioned as a hindrance to their attempts to integrate in broader Australia; the presumption of trauma marks them as ‘scarred for life and vulnerable…the refugee master status’ (Marlowe 2010, p 186). The Sudanese participants in Fanjoy, Ingraham, Khouny and Osman’s (2005) study, while grateful for governmental support, linked a lack of employment opportunities with the widespread perception that they were traumatised. Further, they associated their relative exclusion from employment opportunities as contributing to a sense of social rejection.

Trauma-based approaches to understanding and categorisation obscure more than they reveal, perpetually defining groups as victims (Fassin & Rechtman 2009). This is not to dispute that people can be traumatised for life or suggest that some refugees are not traumatised. Central to Fassin and Rechtman’s (2009) argument in The Empire of Trauma is that trauma has become a naturalised response to all manner of calamity. Trauma has become the moralising force that legitimises claim to victimisation (Fassin & Rechtman 2009). However, when entire groups are labelled as traumatised, this can hinder their opportunities to participate as full members of society. A key point in Fassin and Rechtman’s work is that trauma is largely invisible. This merits closer consideration.
Though trauma has emerged as a benchmark for evaluating claims to social support, it is still subject to suspicion partially because it is not readily observable. This raises an equally problematic aspect: there is not a clear end point to the traumatised victim status. Presuming refugees are traumatised may relegate them to an incessantly peripheral role in Australia. Marlowe (2010) responds to this emphasis on victimisation and trauma by asserting that there is a need to look at the ordinary experiences, as well as the extra-ordinary event of displacement, to understand refugees’ capacities as agents. While Marlowe’s assertion is appropriate, the ideologies that reinforce presumptions of trauma merit greater interrogation. In turn, this relates to broader discussion in Australia regarding how cultural difference is understood and negotiated. Hage (1998) argues that in Australia the mainstream culture imagines ethnic minorities as largely contained with little impact on mainstream culture. Further, ethnic groups are expected to express gratitude to the dominant group (Hage 2003). In a multicultural context, despite aspirations of mutual respect and equality, this allows the dominant group to maintain social power. During resettlement these two sets of systems, humanitarianism and multiculturalism, begin to mutually re-enforce each other. Both strive to help refugees but they sometimes have oppressive consequences, further relegating refugees to the margins of Australian politics.

Humanitarianism is a discourse of power that governs a sizable portion of the world’s population. It is an appealing discourse and feels morally right, but it obscures the reality that these decisions and processes of ranking are largely politically motivated. A critical reading of these multiple situations suggests that humanitarianism results in a global system of governance where domination and assistance are explicitly linked (Fassin 2012; Harrell-Bond 1986, 1999). Humanitarian reason in its various guises appears to be an all-powerful force. Yet this charitable framework has sufficient cracks to allow for action. Victimisation can also be a departure point, an expectation leveraged to further political goals. Refugees can move between the seemingly contradictory expectations of refugee-ness. They morph from victim in need of patronage as in Harrell-Bond’s 
*Imposing Aid* (1986), while attempting to set a political agenda, like Malkki’s (1995a) *Purity in Exile*, and strategically portray experiences to garner support or resources. Humanitarianism is a global discourse that privileges some parties, but the disadvantaged in this discourse can find ways to corrupt the discourse for their own benefit.


Follow the People

The goal of many ethnographic accounts is to understand the effect of larger structural processes in conjunction with the ways that the individual or a particular social group acts within or upon particular frameworks. Increasingly, moral sentiments are a crucial aspect of the current environment refugees’ move within. This thesis examines how refugees interact with humanitarian ideals both in camps and once resettled. This research is based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal (Kathmandu, Jhapa District, and Morang District) and Australia (Adelaide, South Australia). A multi-sited, ethnographic approach brought broader theoretical questions regarding the relationship between the local and the global, the nation-state and international to the fore.

Throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, several shortcomings became apparent. My grasp on the Nepali language remained of limited working proficiency. Thus, my research assistant provided the bulk of translating during interviews while I took notes. My research assistant was a native speaker and had impeccable spoken English—holding a Bachelor’s Degree in English. I felt confident in his capacity to translate in most instances and took additional steps to mitigate biases (See Appendix A for a thorough account of methodologies). My research assistant was selected by my initial participants in Australia and was a Brahmin man. While his social status at times made accessing particular groups (most notably Christina converts) difficult, it also allowed me to observe social interactions that I may not have otherwise been able to access.

Generally, participants under the age of thirty had a strong command of English, having been educated in English-medium classrooms. The widespread use of English, and people’s desire to practice with a native speaker, greatly facilitated my research. Nepali and English are the *lingua franca* of the camps though several groups spoke Hindi, Dzongha, Gurung, Sharchopka, or Tamang, to name a few, within the home. Given the diversity of first languages, it was not possible to learn the first language of all participants. Gupta (2014) argues anthropologists need to be transparent regarding the widespread use of interpreters. I took additional steps (multiple qualitative approaches, a combination of quantitative tools, engaging with participants during the early writing stages) to help overcome this shortcoming. By cross-checking data and ideas, I strove
to minimise errors that could arise from my deficiency of language (Borchgrevink 2003) however, excellent ethnographic research can be, and is, produced with the aid of interpreters.

Though studies have emerged from the Bhutanese refugee camps, significant changes have occurred since the resettlement process began. This is an area of research that Banki (2008a) has identified as under-developed (see Evans 2010a; Banki 2008b; Hinton 1996; and Hutt 2003 for accounts based on data before the resettlement process). While my fieldwork began in Australia, then moved to Nepal before spending more time in Australia, this thesis is not structured to follow my journey but rather the path of the refugees. This thesis begins by providing a brief introduction to Bhutan, as a means of situating the political processes that led to exile. Following this, Chapter 3 gives a logistical snapshot of the formation of the camps and the institutions that oversee them in Nepal. Against this context, the experience of ‘learning to be a refugee’ (as a participant astutely described it) is examined. This learning process is analysed across two chapters: the first, Chapter 4, deals primarily with the performance of the ‘ideal’ refugee, as participants attempt to reflect norms, values, and behaviours of international benefactors. The subsequent chapters analyse the strategies participants employ to mask behaviours deemed by humanitarian representatives as unacceptable. Through an examination of how institutional expectations are being performed, contested, and negotiated, the tension between structures of humanitarian governance and individuals in the camps setting can be analysed.

The next section of the thesis focuses on Bhutanese resettled in Australia. Though strong similarities exist between the ideology of the UNHCR and the Government of Australia (namely equality and democratic governance), there are pronounced differences. Chapter 6 introduces the political and public environment of Australia between 2012 and 2014. In Australia, the ability to manage those deserving of compassion can have a powerful legitimising effect. Chapter 7 examines the interplay between humanitarian ideals and domestic politics, arguing that governing refugees can become a means of gaining broader social credibility. The Bhutanese conform to and push against humanitarian ideals: Chapter 8 provides a snapshot of their attempts to

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negotiate pre-existing and introduced ideals. The penultimate chapter illuminates some of the consequences of the humanitarian discourse and the constricted framework towards participation it allows. As a means of concluding, the final chapter articulates this ethnography’s contribution towards understating broader humanitarian projects by exploring how the contemporary moral climate constructs refugees and the ways refugees respond. Though the Bhutanese are a particular group, as refugees in a globally connected world, their experiences are reflective of larger social processes.
Chapter 2

On the Fringe of Empires

In order to understand how individuals and groups respond to the global discourse of humanitarianism we have to see people in the context of their own history and culture. For refugees, the nation they left and reasons for leaving provides such a reference point. Bhutan is often referred to as the Hermit Kingdom, yet the culture that exists today is ‘not timeless and pristine objects [but] products of restless operations of both internal dynamics (mostly local power relations) and external forces (such as capitalism and colonialism) over time’ (Ortner 2006, p. 9). Thus, as isolated as the nation of Bhutan and the people within its boundaries may seem, it is possible to trace broader connections: a globally linked history. Wolf and Eriksen (2010, p. 3) show convincingly ‘human kind constitutes a totality of interconnected processes …this holds true not only of the present but also of the past’. The implications of these links, though noteworthy in their own right, take on additional significance in the context of the exiled Bhutanese.

Malkki (1995b) argues that refugees are frequently conceptualised as being without history, an understanding that naturalises their peripheral status. To overcome the lack of history, it is crucial to historicise the processes leading to the formation of refugee populations (Malkki 1996). Accordingly, this chapter introduces the geographic, political, and social context of Bhutan in relation to the larger global processes of colonialism and post-colonialism. While the processes leading to the exile of close to 100 000 Bhutanese occurred in a seemingly remote part of the world, they are linked to broader regional and global contexts. Analysing these interrelated processes allow us to see the refugees’ historical construction that, in turn, positions them as targets of humanitarianism.

Contextualizing Bhutan Geographically and Demographically

Bhutan, like any other nation, has an extensive history; a comprehensive retelling is beyond the scope of this thesis (see Aris 2005; Phuntsho 2013; & Rose 1977 for historical accounts of the nation). ‘Druk yul’, the land of the thunder dragon, is more
commonly referred to by a corruption of the Sanskrit word of ‘Bhotstan’ or ‘Bhuttia-Sthan’ — an Anglicised translation meaning the ‘country of the Bhots [Tibetans]’ (Rennie 1866; Phuntsho 2013). Bhutan covers approximately 46 500 square kilometres of exceptionally rugged, mountainous terrain, aside from a narrow belt of foothills along its southern border. The land is heavily forested; arable land is scarce and generally confined to valley bottoms. Despite the scarcity of land, more than half of the population are subsistence farmers growing maize, wheat, rice, and buckwheat (Tobgay 2005). Bhutan shares borders with China to the north, the Indian states of Sikkim to the west, West Bengal and Assam to the south, and Arunachal Pradesh6 to the east.

Map 1: Bhutan with International and Neighbouring Indian States

Modified from U.S. Department of State (1990)

Population estimates have fluctuated radically over the years, ranging from over a million in the 1970s to the 1990 estimate of 600 000 people, and the 2014 population of 758 841 (Hutt 2003; Rizal 2004; National Statistics Bureau 2014). Bhutan has a very low population density compared to its neighbouring Indian states and Nepal: Bhutan has 20 people per square kilometre while Nepal has 194 and India 421 (World Bank 2013). From a demographic standpoint, Bhutan houses three distinct ethnic groups in addition to several Indigenous peoples. While Bhutan’s three main ethnic groups will be

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6 Arunachal Pradesh is an Indian state that China also claims. Bhutan’s northern border is similarly disputed.
discussed, it is important to note that categorising people by ethnicity can be problematic (Malkki 1995a; Hutt 2003). The complexities of these categories will be explored in the subsequent section. The largest demographic group is referred to as Drukpa or Ngalong. These are the descendants of Buddhists who arrived from Tibet in 1616 and they tend to reside in the valleys of the north-west (Aris 1994). They enjoy a considerable amount of political power and are the social elites (Rose 1977). Their Sino-Tibetan (Bodish) based language, Dzongkha, ‘has traditionally served as the spoken vernacular of the royal courts, the military elite, educated nobility, government and administration’ (van Driem 1994, p. 93). Further, their cultural history and social norms emerge as the hallmarks of a national identity. This encompassing label of Drukpa includes smaller groups such as the Bumthaps and Kurtops. Linguistic differences exist among these groups, though they sit within the Sino-Tibetan language family.

The second ethnic group is the Sharchopas. This group lives in Eastern Bhutan, is also Buddhist and speaks a distinct language within the Tibeto-Burma language family (Aris 1994). Though the Sharchopas are considered the ‘original people’ of Bhutan (Wangchuck 2000), they also constitute the later offspring of slaves captured from various tribal groups in the Duar region of India. Slavery and forced labour were a common aspect of Bhutanese feudal social structure until the 1950s (Campbell 1869; Wangyal 2006). When slavery was abolished in the 1950s, roughly 10% of the population were slaves and the majority of the Sharchopas population were tenant farmers that paid taxes in kind or labour (Wangchuck 2000, p. 60). Contemporarily, the Sharchopas practise subsistence farming and animal husbandry (Pommerat 2003). Economically, they own the least land and have some of the highest rates of poverty in Bhutan (National Statistics Bureau 2014).

The Hindus of Nepalese ancestry, Lhotshampa7, literally ‘people of the southern border’, represent an additional minority ethnic group. A few accounts place Nepalese immigrants in Bhutan as masons and artisans as early as the 17th century and historical

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7 There is no single term all my participants accepted regarding how they would like to be identified. The term Lhotshampa was viewed by some as representing an attempt by Bhutan’s government to minimise their Nepalese ancestry while others felt the term Nepali-speaking Bhutanese placed too much emphasis on the Nepalese aspects of their identity. Due to a lack of consensus, I use the term Bhutanese and Lhotshampa interchangeably, particularly when discussing their experience in Bhutan and the refugee camps. For the discussion of their experiences in Australia I use the term Bhutanese, as this is generally how they refer to themselves when interacting with service providers and the broader Australian population.
documents suggest the peoples of Nepal and Bhutan enjoyed a cordial relationship (Hutt 1996; Sinha 2001). Still, the vast majority of the Lhotshampa are descendants of peasant farmers who migrated to Bhutan in 1865 after the Anglo-Bhutanese war, though subsequent waves of migration also contributed to the community’s growth (Gallenkamp 2011). Additionally, two of the indigenous tribes of the southern foothills, the Lepcha and Mechi, are generally categorised as Nepali due to their linguistic and cultural assimilation with the group. Though Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language, is widely spoken by the Lhotshampa they represent a plethora of castes and ethnicities. Generally, Lhotshampa practise subsistence farming and cash cropping along the comparatively fertile foothills that abut the border with India. Many of the major development projects and industrial endeavours, such as cement factories and hydroelectric projects, have been undertaken along these southern foothills due to geographic feasibility and the historical events introduced below.

**Bhutan and the British**

‘This country, which I shall distinguish by the name of Boutan.’
George Bogle, 30 September 1775 (Markham 1876, p. 191)

In order to begin to understand how refugee populations are generated, one must examine the peculiar co-ordination of space, time, and people (territory, history, and society) (Foster 1991). The previous section introduced geographic aspects in relation to contemporary demographic patterns. This section examines the respective influence of key historical events on Bhutan’s growth as a nation. It will introduce the period from Bhutan’s establishment until its first interactions with the East India Trading Company in 1772 and its later involvement with the British Empire.

The history of Bhutan, particularly before contact with the British, is very closely tied to its Buddhist religious history. The founder of Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, was forced by rival monks to flee Tibet in 1616 to the *Lho Mon* (land of southern darkness) (Gallenkamp 2011). He was led south by a guardian deity in the form of a raven that offered him the land as a religious estate (Aris 1998). The aspiring leader secured a geographic polity and warded off ongoing attacks from Tibet by bringing together several monasteries (Aris 1998; Gallenkamp 2011). In the process, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel established a political system not unlike that of the country he had
fled. The theocratic system that emerged had two political heads, one spiritual and one secular (Kohli 1993). The head of the religious government, Shabdung or Dharma Raja, was determined through re-incarnation. The Deb Raja was selected by the Dharma Raja to fulfil civil duties, such as protecting borders and administering the state (Aris 2005). Though invasions from Tibet had been common, the country maintained a close trading and religious relationship with its northern neighbour and theological birthplace. This relationship would prove crucial in later interactions with British colonial powers.

In order to understand the later events in Bhutan, a few key global processes merit examination. While Bhutan was slowly unifying, a world away the East India Company was similarly emerging, founded in 1600 when ‘Queen Elizabeth I granted the small group of merchants a monopoly of trade to lands east of the Cape of Good Hope and west of Cape Horn’ (Erickson 2014, p. 3). The company was initially based in Machilipatnam on the Bay of Bengal in India, roughly 1,900 kilometres south of Bhutan. By 1668 Calcutta, 700 kilometres south of Bhutan, was quickly becoming the base for the Company’s activities. The Company rapidly grew both economically and territorially, and increasingly became a political force in the region (Chaudhari 1978). Its emerging political influence, however, was not always well received. Mughul empires, sometimes backed by the French, attempted to exert control over territories the Company claimed, leading to armed conflict. By 1765 a series of battles with the rulers of Bengal had resulted in the territory of the East India Company expanding further north, virtually adjoining Bhutan. In 1772, Bhutan invaded Cooch Behar. Cooch Behar was an independent kingdom in what is now West Bengal and just outside Bhutan’s somewhat standard sphere of influence. The Raja appealed to the East India Company to repel the Bhutanese invaders. In return for assistance, the Raja pledged half of the area’s revenue to the company and recognition of the British crown. The Company saw this as an opportunity to further expand their economic reach and access an additional income stream. The British forces prevailed and a formalised relationship between the East India Company and Bhutan was signed in 1774 (Rennie 1866). Until this point, the British East India Company viewed Bhutan as a buffer zone, a potential site of resource exploitation or a future market for British goods. The company lost no time in sending Company diplomat, George Bogle, on a mission to Bhutan to evaluate these possibilities. In 1775, he labelled the country with the name that it still bears: Bhutan.
In 1813 *The East India Company Act (Charter Act of 1813)* was signed, granting the British Crown sovereignty over the East Indian Company’s territories. By 1856, the Company was officially dissolved and India was incorporated into the British Empire. During this 43 year period, the consumption of tea in Europe increased rapidly. Unfortunately for the East India Company, China monopolized supply (Chaudhuri 1978; Lawson 2014). The Company aspired to control the growing supply to the European market and began looking for areas suitable for tea cultivation, such as the foothills of Assam, Bengal, and Sikkim. In particular, Darjeeling, a hill station in North Bengal that historically belonged to Sikkim, appeared promising (Dasgupta 1999). In 1848, this site was selected for planting between 12,000–20,000 tea plants cultivated from Chinese sourced seeds, as well as seeds from a variety indigenous to Assam (Rennie 1866). By the 1850s Darjeeling, previously described as a ‘wasteland’, was emerging as a valuable producer of tea (Besky 2013). The transformation of this land was due largely to the British importation of non-local labour—in this case a group classed as Nepalese labourers (Besky 2013). Colonial thinking generally presumed Hindus would be naturally inclined to settle into agriculturally productive ventures while local tribes were disposed towards shifting cultivation or hunting-gathering (Behal 2006). Thus the local inhabitants of Darjeeling, the Lepchas, were not considered suited to the manual labour required to convert the land into tea gardens (Besky 2013). The Lepchas practised shifting cultivation, while the British imagined the Nepalese as being settled agriculturalists, ‘industrious, loyal, and easy to control’, and rewarded them with a higher wage than local workers (Besky 2013, p.80). Furthermore, the British were keen that the Nepalese should settle in newly acquired land in Darjeeling because they were considered to be the traditional enemy of the Buddhist Tibetans and the Buddhist Bhutias (Campbell 1869, cited in Dasgupta 1999, p. 55).

Geographically, Bhutan before the loss of the Duars extended to the Teesta River east of Darjeeling; the Bhutanese town of Kalimpong was roughly two days walk (48 kilometres) east from Darjeeling (Rennie 1866). To the south, Bhutan’s territory stretched into the states of Assam and Bengal.
The term territory, rather than state, is used deliberately, for ‘there was no precise line of demarcation but rather a band, zone, or interval … a ruler ruled as far as he could collect taxes and maintain order’ (Lewis 2002, p. 127). The Bhutanese raided, collected taxes or tribute, and used the land for winter grazing of animals. At this point, Bhutan covered a considerably larger area than it does today. The southern border extended an additional 4400 square miles over the 18 Duars spread across Bengal and Assam–states already under British control.

The word Duars roughly translates as ‘doors’ and these areas functioned as gateways to the Himalayan foothills. This relatively flat, malarial- prone land provided seasonal grazing, was a source of tribute, supported trading posts, and supplied slaves to Bhutan (Phunsto 2013). These were invaluable to the Bhutanese due to the otherwise mountainous landscape. The British, on the other hand, viewed this land as underutilised and problematic due to the lack of a precisely delineated border (Rennie 1866). The previously tolerable relationships between Bhutan and the British began to break down as border incursions by both groups increased. The stated motivation for acquiring these tracts of land was to protect the inhabitants of West Bengal, Darjeeling, and Sikkim from Bhutanese attack. However, this claim seems dubious and opportunistic, based on disputes averaging roughly one case a year (Gupta 1975). It seems more likely the East India Company turned their eyes to the Duars due to their potential for tea cultivation (Sarkar & Ray 2007). Regardless, these border disputes provided the onus for a full-scale attack that culminated in the 1865 Duar or Anglo-Bhutanese Wars. The Bhutanese, by all accounts, fought bravely but the British, with their superior weaponry, prevailed (Rennie 1866). Close to a fifth of Bhutan’s most
economically viable land was ceded to the British. Kalimpong, a trading post, was lost to the British but as a consolation the British assigned an 18-acre plot of the land to the already powerful Dorji family (Dorji 2008). Ugyen Dorji solidified himself as a skilled international representative of Bhutan, helping to stave off further British incursions. By doing so, the Dorji family emerged as a political force, holding a pivotal role in trade, future relations between India and Bhutan, and the settlement of south Bhutan.

From Theocracy to Monarchy/From Feudalism to Cash Cropping

The end of the Duar Wars left Bhutan embroiled in a civil war. Fighting between governors, however, was not a unique situation:

the country thus endured constant civil war, plots, and counterplots, and no less than 54 Druk Desis (rulers) held office between 1651 and 1907. More than half failed to serve a full three-year term, with many meeting violent death by sword, poison, or it is claimed, by magic (Wangchuck 2004, p. 838).

What may have been unique were the dire financial straits of the country combined with the presence of a neighbour that was clearly interested in expanding their territory. Economically, the feudal system had functioned for hundreds of years, partially because the Duars functioned to buttress it. It was severely undermined by the loss of this revenue stream though the British did provide a yearly stipend to the government (Sarkar & Ray 2007). These factors led to outward migration as civilians sought stability in the British-controlled neighbouring regions (Rennie 1866). In turn, a flow of refugees not only drained Bhutan but also made the country further vulnerable to British intrusion. In-fighting between governors, particularly regarding succession, led the British to describe the country as ‘an incomprehensible hierarchy’ lacking a clear leader (Ansari 2012, p. 51). Thus, though the dual religious-secular system functioned to keep the kingdom relatively united for several hundred years, it proved to be a system in need of refinement.

In 1903, the British governor in Darjeeling proposed that a mission to Tibet was imperative to counter the perceived threat of Russian imperial expansion (Aris 2005). Ugyen Dorji, based across the river in Kalimpong, was working closely with the British to the point of being described as having two masters: the British Empire and Bhutan (Aris 2005). He suggested to Ugyen Wangchuck (the future first King of Bhutan) that it
would be in Bhutan’s best interest to assist in this mission. As an added incentive, the British had threatened to withhold Bhutan’s yearly stipend if the latter did not cooperate. At this point, Ugyen Wangchuck was a powerful governor in central Bhutan who had developed a close relationship with Dorji, to whom he was distantly related (Aris 2005). The success of the mission considerably improved relations with the British Empire. Ugyen Wangchuck garnered an enormous amount of prestige and respect for his successful role as a mediator between Tibet and the British. After the mission, Wangchuck was invited to Calcutta and treated ceremonially as Bhutan’s ruler. The British Empire conveyed their formal appreciation for his diplomatic work by presenting him with the title ‘Knight Commander of the Indian Empire’ (Aris 2005, p. 90). In turn, this was the beginning of the movement away from a dual system of government. The British Empire had a vested interest in having a single head of government to interact with and a co-operative one would be invaluable. There was a strong desire to have Bhutan as a stable buffer zone against Chinese incursions. Though the crowning of Wangchuck in 1907 was not done at the behest of the British, their support was instrumental. This re-enforced a hierarchy in Bhutan, which positioned the Drukpa as the political elites. Similarly, Bhutan had a vested interest in establishing a stable political system. The threat of being subsumed under either British or Chinese rule was very much a reality.

While the government was being consolidated, the need to redevelop Bhutan’s economic system was simultaneously taking place. Previously, serfs belonging to all ethnic and indigenous groups worked the lands and gave tribute in the form of goods to the landowner, who passed a portion to the King. Due to taxes being paid in kind, ‘the central government had few sources of revenue’ (Hutt 2003, p. 80). To develop a tax system based on money, rather than goods, the southern lands needed exploitation. The Nepalese labour force in Darjeeling, at this point, was large, well-trained, and able to develop land in line with colonial expectations. Ugyen Wangchuck appointed the Dorji family, based in Kalimpong, to oversee the settlement and tax collection of Nepalese in the south. Historically, the Bhutanese residing in the north of the country sought to avoid the malarial plains, generally sending only minor government officials to extract tribute and taxes (Collister 1987). Further, residual distrust between the Bhutanese and Bengalese persisted after the 1865 Duar wars, making the plains inhabitants less than desirable to the government. The Nepalese emerged as a natural choice to develop the area (Dutt 1981).
Agriculture in the south proved to be a very valuable source of government income, as it was the area where cardamom, oranges, and other cash crops could be grown. Due to the country's largely moneyless feudal system, the monetary contributions of immigrants were of particular importance. The new system of cash cropping began to fundamentally shift the feudal tributary system in Bhutan and introduced the concept of taxation. As Hutt (2003, p. 80) observes, ‘it is, therefore, very clear that the main motives for encouraging Nepali settlement in the south were economic ones’. For a considerable period of time, the Nepalese settlers existed as an economic asset to Bhutan. While these economic contributions were welcomed and encouraged by powerful elites, local herdsmen experienced further marginalisation. A survey conducted by White in 1905 suggests that the lifestyle of the nomadic Bhutanese from the northern districts was undergoing considerable change due to interactions with Nepalese settlers (White 1909). The sedentary lifestyle that intensive agriculture demanded fundamentally altered the way land was being used in the south. No longer could Bhutanese herdsmen move their livestock from the northern foothills to winter on the more temperate plains. This further stratified the groups within Bhutan to ruling elites, nomadic pastoralists, and immigrants participating in capitalist endeavours. In doing so, the relationship between resource use and political power in Bhutan was fundamentally altered.

These stratifications have strong parallels with other colonial situations. In Malaysia, the British utilised Chinese and Indian labourers while accommodating political elites (Ong 1987). A similar process occurred on the subcontinent. The British in Darjeeling actively encouraged Nepalese migration, as they had a vested interest in seeing a protectorate population settle the borderland between the empire and spaces of perceived Sino-Tibetan influence (Ghosh 2010). Colonial rulers ‘sought to create a subservient Nepali land-owning class in order to counteract the traditional predominance of the Tibetan and the Bhutia landed aristocracy’ (Dasgupta 1999, p.55). This facilitated colonial management. The local population and the immigrant population were used in different ways, accentuating perceived differences, while the ruling elites were given some degree of licence. This practice is very much akin to the formation of caste-type groups by Belgium in Burundi: a stratified society became a means of extracting a maximum amount of taxation while maintaining comparable control (Malkki 1995a). Similar to the Tutsi and Hutus in Burundi, differences in Bhutan would become reinforced and exploited. The British re-enforced the political
hierarchy that placed the Drukpas as rulers and the Nepalese as a migrant, labour caste
different from the local population. It also began to solidify the Nepalese as a unitary
group, despite the many tribal, caste, and religious differences within this broad label.
These ‘colonial efforts to fix racial boundaries and spatially enclose groups’ (Bissell
2007, p. 185) were to have future consequences and an impressive ability to re-incarnate
themselves, as the following chapters will illustrate.

After the British: Regional Instability

After the coronation of the first king in 1907, Bhutan enjoyed a relatively stable time of
subtle re-adjustment. This period came to an end when China annexed Tibet and a
newly independent India was in the throes of partition (Gallenkamp 2011). An
affiliation with Britain, which transferred to India during de-colonisation, proved to be
of both practical and strategic importance in the maintenance of the country’s
sovereignty; such an affiliation functioned as a rebuff against China. This did not stop
ambitious Chinese expansionists from attempting to claim historic rights over the
territory of Bhutan (Choden & Penjore 2004). During the Cultural Revolution in China,
maps produced in China included Bhutan as part of China’s historic territory (Coehlo
1970). The fervour of rallying calls within China to reassert their place as the suzerainty
over its dominions of Nepal, Sikkim, Assam, and Bhutan may have been overstated;
however, the events that occurred in Tibet certainly must have been unsettling (Dutt
1981). Bhutan watched its northern neighbour, a Buddhist nation with which it shared
historical and religious ties become subsumed under an empire. This was the same
empire that still disputes Bhutan’s territorial claims in the north, going as far in the
1960s as stationing troops in the disputed area (Mathou 1994).

To the north, the massive sovereignty battles that played out in Tibet were prompted by
an external power: China. To the west, a similar battle played out in the Buddhist
kingdom of Sikkim, though this time the catalyst came from within. Similar to the
lineage of Bhutan, Sikkim’s ancestors came from Tibet in the 16th century, identified as
Buddhist, and founded a monarchy. Sikkim enjoyed a close relationship with Bhutan,
bound not only by a shared religious past but intermarriage of royal families. The
current King of Bhutan has a Sikkim princess as a grandmother. Over the span of a
hundred years, the Nepalese population in Sikkim not only became the most dynamic
aspect of the economy, it became the majority community (Rose 1963). The royal
family came to represent the minority of the population and reacted by taxing the Nepalese at higher rates and limiting representation in government, increasing friction between the two groups (Levi 1959). In 1975, a strong push by the Nepalese majority led to the referendum that abolished the monarchy and merged the country with India (Gupta 1975). Bhutan’s neighbour, and extended family, emerged from the process of democratisation fundamentally different. Another key political event was the violent Gorkhaland independence movements that occurred in Darjeeling between 1986 and 1988 (Thinley 1994, Evans 2010b). This movement, led by ethnic Nepalis, was an attempt to expand the boundaries of present day Nepal to include contemporary Indian states. It ‘must have played a major part in convincing the Bhutanese government that political activity among the Lhotshampas should be prevented at any cost’ (Hutt 2003, 195–196).

The Bhutanese government officials witnessed three countries with which they shared an affinity drastically change in a direction that stripped virtually all power from the ‘traditional’ political elites. Two countries had lost their sovereignty to super-states while Nepal, though able to maintain its sovereignty, bore a major power shift that saw the ruling elite lose their power. Partially in response to these events, the Bhutanese Government decided to undertake a process of nation-building based on the principle of ‘one nation, one people’ (Hutt 2003). This ethnically exclusive nationalist policy strove to create a homogeneous Buddhist kingdom that dressed, spoke, and worshipped alike. It also demanded, as a central tenet of traditional etiquette, unwavering loyalty to those who ruled. These policies favoured the Drukpa majority while initially downgrading, then alienating the rights of minorities (Gilroy 1990; Hutt 2003, 2005; Evans 2010b).

**Building Bhutan**

Though taxes from the southern foothills flowed north, the movement of people from the south to north Bhutan was strictly regulated. An internal boundary relegated people of Nepalese ancestry to the southern regions (Hutt 2003). This boundary remained in place until the 1970s though there were efforts to assimilate the south Bhutanese as
early as the 1950s (Thinley 1994). The National Assembly\(^8\) of Bhutan, during its first meeting in 1953, illustrated its desire to bring the minority into the fold:

> with the aim of converting the Nepalese of southern Bhutan into Buddhism, His Majesty the King was pleased to command the establishment of a Monk Body consisting of 5 monks with one head Lama in the Nepali villages of southern Bhutan (Royal Government of Bhutan 1953).

In 1958, when feudalism ended and slavery was abolished, the south Bhutanese became citizens with the rest of the country (Muni 2014). Taxes, land receipts, and government issued identification determined a group relatively integrated into the government bureaucracy. Yet, this loose integration did not translate into having roles within the Bhutanese government (Hutt 2003). During the late 1970’s and 1980’s, to help foster integration the government promised generous monetary incentives to promote intermarriage between Drukpa and Bhutanese of Nepalese origin. These were not taken up, perhaps due to the strict caste lines that dictated marriage in Hindu society. Prior to the late 1980s, the government was mindful to distribute official documents and textbooks in both the Dzongka language as well as English and Nepali. It also celebrated some key Hindu festivals. Despite these gestures, there was very little interaction between the two groups. Few south Bhutanese studied in the north and fewer north Bhutanese studied in the south. The national dress of Bhutan was considered foreign and unsuitable to the south Bhutanese.

For a considerable period of time this system was stable. However by the 1980s, the large, predominantly Hindu population occupying the southern border was increasingly perceived as a threat to the emerging Buddhist kingdom. This was partially because the south Bhutanese represented a blurring of cultures rather than the firm, geo-political boundary Bhutan was attempting to establish. Bhutan learned during the Duar Wars the dangers of having an undefined border. Further, the Lhotshampa effectively controlled the majority of Bhutan’s agricultural land, an invaluable resource in a mountainous region (Hutt 1996). Bhutan responded to these perceived threats by encouraging a very particular image of ‘who’ was Bhutanese. Several related events, along with more integration efforts, would prove to be catalysts for exodus: the *Marriage Act of Bhutan*

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\(^8\) The National Assembly of Bhutan was established in 1953. It was a combination of government representatives, Buddhist monks, and district representatives. It dissolved in 2007 in the lead up to the institution of a parliamentary democracy.
For Hindus, marriage ideally is arranged based on caste hierarchies. The new bride must be of the same caste and ideally reside in a different village. After marriage, she will live with the husband’s family; reflecting a strongly patrilocal social structure. In Bhutan, the different village was not necessarily inside national boundaries. Wives could either come from Nepal or be Indian nationals of Nepalese ancestry. As a result of the Marriage Act of 1980, a citizen married to a non-citizen lost their eligibility for promotions and access to loans or goods such as livestock, and the educational opportunities of their offspring were curtailed. These provisions were viewed as having a disproportional impact on the south Bhutanese. This was likely their intention.

Bhutan’s National Assembly adopted the Citizen Act in 1985 and a census based on this act that sought to identify Bhutanese nationals was implemented in 1988 (Hutt 2005). Previously, anyone whose father was a Bhutanese citizen was able to become a Bhutanese national (see The Nationality Law of Bhutan 1958). After the Citizen Act, only those born to parents who both held Bhutanese citizenship would be citizens by birth. The changes were perceived as targeting the south Bhutanese (Human Rights Watch 2003 and Amnesty International 1992a also questioned the application of these laws). The Citizen Act was particularly problematic in that it was retroactive in scope: only those who could produce tax receipts dating specifically to 1958 could be considered citizens (Lee 1998, Saul 2000). Other documentation, including land titles, marriage certificates, government-issued passports, or tax receipts from other years were considered insufficient. The 1958 Nationality Law did not have specific provisions regarding language abilities or knowledge of specific cultural mores. The Citizen Act, however, stipulated that people must be able to speak, read, and write Dzongkha, as well as have a good knowledge of the culture, customs, traditions, and history of Bhutan. These were difficult requirements for the south Bhutanese to meet due to an education system that was based on the Nepali language and relatively few social interactions with the north Bhutanese. The Act further enforced Drukpa cultural norms through the policy of national etiquette called Driglam Namzha (Hutt 2003). The etiquette is extensive, including nominating which clothes are appropriate, what language is allowed in public, and how superiors are to be addressed.
Wearing particular clothes, having to observe Drukpa social norms, and speaking a
different language were considered unbearable: the south Bhutanese protested,
demanding democratic reforms (these demands will be introduced here but explored in
greater depth in Chapter Nine). Several associations founded by south Bhutanese,
including human rights groups and student organisations, staged:

mass public demonstrations in southern Bhutan in September and October 1990 that
were unprecedented in the kingdom's history. The demonstrators submitted a list of
demands that was clearly influenced by the wave of democracy movements and human
rights activism that had swept across eastern Europe, and had very recently reinstated a

‘seditious pamphlets’ (as described by the Royal Government of Bhutan in 1992 and
1993) appeared and eventually 45 people were arrested for what one arrestee described
as ‘raising our voice for democracy’ (Gazmere Male, Age 40s, Interview Adelaide
2012). Arbitrary arrests increased until thousands of south Bhutanese were imprisoned
(Amnesty International 1992a). The arrest of dissenters (and reported deaths while in
custody) reverberated through both the north and the south. The involvement of
established, high-ranking public servants and university professors was interpreted by
the government as demonstrating that south Bhutanese could not be trusted—even those
in high positions were not loyal citizens. The south Bhutanese interpreted the morphing
policies as an attempt to force out those who spoke against the government. The south
Bhutanese suspected the government was attempting to make them submit to the
Drukpa culture or leave the country (Hutt 1994, p. 11). Tension between the two parties
continued to mount, becoming more and more violent. Eventually, an arrestee’s wife
contacted Amnesty International to intervene on her husband’s behalf, hoping to secure
his release from prison. Amnesty International performed an investigation, finding their
imprisonment to be largely arbitrary:

the individual violent crimes … were all committed in April - June 1990, six or more
months after they were detained. It also examined the booklet *Bhutan: We Want Justice*
and concluded that it did not contain threats of armed uprising against the state or the

The efforts of Amnesty International led to the release of 313 political prisoners who
had been shackled in solitary confinement for criticising integration policies (Amnesty
International 1992b). When the political prisoners were eventually freed through the
efforts of Amnesty International (1500 were pardoned by the King in 1992 after
Amnesty International’s visit), many found their property confiscated and their citizenship revoked. The government maintains that illegal immigrants who lived in southern Bhutan left willingly during this period. The refugees maintain that systematic harassment, including rapes, physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and the kidnapping of family members forced them to flee. Saul (2000, p. 347) argues that “the mass exodus of south Bhutanese was immediately caused by discriminatory nationality laws, overly zealous cultural protection laws and laws repressing democratic dissent. The U.S. State Department (2000) similarly maintains that the Royal Army and Royal Police of Bhutan committed human rights abuses such as arbitrary arrest and rape. The refugees view the government’s policy of integration as a concerted effort to ethnically cleanse part of Bhutan. Ongoing violent clashes persisted until approximately 90,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese had been forced to flee—unsuccessfully seeking refuge first in India, then in eastern Nepal. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees established camps in eastern Nepal between 1992 and 1993.

The Sharchopas of Eastern Bhutan formed a second wave of several hundred refugees between 1996 and 1998. While some made the journey to the UNHCR-run camps, others settled in the neighbouring state of India. These exiles were similarly persecuted in Bhutan for demanding democratic changes. In June of 1994, this group founded the Druk National Congress, an organisation promoting human rights and democratic reforms in Bhutan. In 1997 the group marched and protested in Eastern Bhutan. They were harshly punished by the Bhutanese government through arbitrary arrests, torture, and the revoking of No Objection Certificates of their extended families. Families of arrestees fled under duress. Similar to the Lhotshampa, some of these prisoners are still being held in Bhutan and others are presumed dead. A small stream of recently released prisoners still trickle into the camps, generally after the King’s birthday celebrations or Bhutan’s National Day where pardons are granted to select prisoners.

**Conclusion**

In order to understand how individuals and groups respond to the global discourse of humanitarianism, we have to understand the context of their own history and culture.

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9 A No Objection Certificate is a document the Royal Government of Bhutan introduced after the 1990 protests. This document must be valid to access education, employment, and health care options in the country (Whitecross 2010).
Though the processes leading to exile occurred in a seemingly remote part of the world, they are linked to regional and global contexts. Disputes over territory, migration, how to assimilate minority groups, and demographic anxieties precipitate exile in many contexts (van Driem 1994). This chapter has provided an historical background to Bhutan and pointed to some of the values and principles that evolved throughout the refugee’s exile. The events that occurred in Bhutan during the late 1980s to the mid-1990s are described as ‘ethnic tensions’ (UNHCR 1992; Amnesty International 1992a; Human Rights Watch 2003). This chapter illustrates that such an exclusive status requires interrogation. Ethnic differences exist, but became amplified by colonial discourses and local power elites. It became mutually beneficial for ethnic stereotypes to be exploited. The inequality that developed and festered in Bhutan was the product of competition over resources and, perhaps of equal significance, political power. Stereotypes buttress particular understandings of who claims political space in Bhutan. In Bhutan, radical ethnic stereotyping resulted in certain groups being pushed further to the periphery of state power. A very specific, local environment constructed them as marginalised, peripheral, and immoral: people on the fringe. Many of these understandings coloured global responses, positioning them as deserving subjects of humanitarianism.

History and politics, as Malkki convincingly argues, can give meaning to exile (1995a). Further, displacement can ‘be an opportunity to assert claims to political recognition’ (Gatrell 2013, p. 283). However, as the following chapters illustrate, approaches to refugees tend to obscure this political dimension, leading to a sanitised, apolitical community.
Chapter 3

From Humanitarian Emergency to Developing Humanity

In 1989, there was only a smattering of Bhutanese exiles in Nepal. This number continued to grow and in 1991, the Government of Nepal requested assistance from the UNHCR to support the refugees. The UNHCR evaluated the situation and, while recognising there were political refugees in Nepal who required legal protection, decided not to become involved—describing the refugees as ‘well-tolerated’ (UNHCR 1992). In 1992, the circumstances changed. Waves of cholera, measles, typhoid, and other diseases swept through the overcrowded, makeshift refugee camps: children died at a rate of 30 per day (Reilly 1994). The situation in Nepal became a humanitarian emergency requiring urgent intervention. The UNHCR returned, this time providing much needed relief and building provisional refugee camps. The diseases were brought under control and the emergency waned — but the refugees remained. Seven temporary camps, built by international organisations in a space of exclusion from the surrounding nation-state, became a legitimate site of social intervention by well-meaning international agencies. These interventions fashion the exiles into a unique vision of a Bhutanese refugee community defined by the ideals of democracy and human rights.

The benevolent tutelage of the UNHCR in Nepal occurs within broader, complex relationships between countries that, to varying degrees, use refugees to legitimise their status as modern nations that control their borders. For the Bhutanese refugees, those states include not only the wealthy, influential countries that fund the camps through the UNHCR but the host country of Nepal and neighbouring India. In addition to the various international and state actors, powerful refugees also strive to regulate and utilise the exiled Bhutanese. This chapter argues that through the elevation of particular humanitarian norms and values, the refugee’s existing social institutions become politicised problems that require re-engineering. This results in considerable tension as the refugees attempt to balance pre-existing cultural values, social institutions, and political roles with introduced ideals.
State Power Plays

Where refugees end up after their flight is the consequence of complex political and historical factors. Countries consider their own sovereignty as well as the financial expense they may incur or the support they may receive. Refugees can be used to further both regional and international political agendas. Increasingly, housing refugees is an opportunity to present nations in a favourable international light. Accepting refugees can provide emerging governments with a chance to gain moral credibility by latching onto the contemporary emphasis on humanitarian values in western politics. Refugees are frequently described as excess, undesirable populations (Agier 2010), but as this section illustrates, the Bhutanese refugees were utilised as pawns in complex power plays between states.

For the refugees fleeing Bhutan, India was the first country of sanctuary. The border between Bhutan and India is governed by the 1949 Treaty of Friendship and was formally delineated between 1974 and 1983. Bhutanese citizens are not required to have a passport or visa to enter India. Further, India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention; thus non-citizens entering the country are governed by India’s 1946 Foreigners Act and 1955 Citizenship Act. These acts stipulate that entering India without the proper visas makes such trespassers liable to deportation. The Bhutanese camping on the India border in the late 1980s and early 1990s technically were protected under the 1949 Treaty of Friendship. However, they were still vulnerable to deportation and forced eviction. Compounding on this vulnerability was lingering effects of the Gorkhaland movement that saw ‘about 200 people’ die in north India as members of the Neplai diaspora violently attempted to expand Nepal’s boundaries (Hutt 1997, 130).

During this period India was countering multiple separatist movements across the country, including in Assam and West Bengal - both of which border Bhutan. The United Liberation Front of Assam formed in 1976 and has since then undertaken an armed struggle to gain independence from India. India claims the organisation is a front for the Pakistani intelligence agency and considers it a terrorist organisation (Prakesh 2008). An additional group, The Bodoland Movement, claims to represent the Bodo ethnic group historically indigenous to the foothills of north-east India, Bhutan, and Nepal (Mullick 2001). They also seek autonomy from India through armed struggle. Both of these groups established camps along the Bhutan-Indian border in the 1980s.
and 1990s, moving between the countries to avoid detection. These camps functioned as bases to stage attacks against Indian police, government officials, and infrastructure. The groups also targeted various ethnic groups originally brought to the area by the British to work tea plantations (Prakesh 2008). Both groups are antagonistic to those described as immigrants in the region, and attempt to legitimise a claim to the political and geographical space through ethnic longevity. There has been speculation by the refugees that these groups, due to their strong anti-immigration stance, worked with the Bhutanese government to force the south Bhutanese of Nepali-ancestry out of the country (Interviews Nepal and Australia 2012-2013). Again, the relatively recent violent acts by the Gorkha National Liberation Front in the region may have also made a reception in India unlikely.

In addition to the groups based in Assam, West Bengal housed several Maoist groups that advocated armed struggle to overturn the Indian government. In the early 1990s, the Indian military staged operations against the United Liberation Front, the Bodoland Movement, and the Maoists by dismantling all camps along the border. There appeared to be no distinction between camps housing Bhutanese refugees and those set up by anti-Indian militant groups. By forcibly removing these groups and the refugees, India asserted its sovereignty over a precarious border region. Indian security further exerted their power over establishing who was a legitimate citizen of Bhutan or India by forcing the exiled Bhutanese to Nepal. As the following section will demonstrate, this may have been a strategy to highlight India’s power in the region.

India seemed to view the Bhutanese refugees as yet another group threatening state power in an already fraught border. However, due to their Nepali ethnic heritage the refugees did appear to have a potential role to play in political relations with Nepal. Though the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal stipulates the free movement of people and goods across the border, by the late 1980s this arrangement was coming under considerable strain. As an increasing number of Hindi-speaking Indians settled within Nepal’s borders and sought Nepalese citizenship, citizenship became more politically charged. Nepal introduced a transit visa system for Indian workers, attempting to supplant the existing model that allowed for free movement. India responded by supporting the expulsion of ethnic Nepalese from Indian states. These ethnic Nepalese, aside from being viewed as equal to Indian nationals under the 1950 Treaty, often were born in India (again, having been brought to the region by the British as labourers). India’s governmental support for their
expulsion illustrated the manipulation of ethnic or national categories for political gain (Nath 2005).

From March 1989 until June 1990, India imposed strict economic sanctions, unilaterally closing its borders with Nepal. Tensions between the governments escalated. Refugees shuttled to Nepal by Indians during this time had few options: Indian border police hindered their re-entry. Similarly, the Nepali government had few options, as India crippled Nepal economically (Hagerty 1991). The Nepali government was effectively forced to accept political arrangements largely dictated by India (Hagerty 1991). The refugees became a means for India to challenge Nepal’s sovereignty by exerting dominance over who and what were allowed across borders. Maintaining that the people India delivered into Nepal did not have a claim to be in the country may have been a small effort by the Nepali government to wrestle back political power over borders. By the end of 1990, several hundred refugees were in Nepal. The Bhutanese refugees became pawns in a struggle not only over land in contested border zones but in larger political arrangements between countries.

The people who initially fled Bhutan in the early months of 1989 were high profile south Bhutanese men from both the most ritually pure and ritually polluting castes. This group of five took refuge in Nepal, hoping to garner international support for their cause, only to be extradited back to Bhutan in 1989 by the King of Nepal. By 1990, Nepal was swept up in a popular uprising that demanded the autocratic rule of the Royal Panchayat regime end and be replaced by a multiparty, democratic system (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997, p. 443). In February 1991, the newly appointed Nepali Prime Minister officially allowed the Bhutanese refugees into the country asserting that he hoped Bhutan would consider democratic reforms. This thinly veiled critique may have been a foray into realpolitik. Hoping to recover from the recently ended blockade from India, Nepal was struggling economically. A coup d'état suggested economic instability, potentially curtailing much needed international aid and investment. By highlighting the democratic product of the overthrow, cautious international donors and trade partners were appeased. Economically, Bhutan and Nepal traded very little. Critiquing Bhutan to emphasise their own politically modern approach to governance functioned to cast the Nepali government in a favourable economic light.

Despite offering sanctuary, Nepal could not absorb, provide legal protection, or offer humanitarian assistance to what quickly escalated into a massive influx of refugees.
Nepal lacked a legal framework for refugees to situate themselves in. Their legal status was regulated by Nepal’s Citizenship Act of 1964. This Act permitted citizens of particular foreign countries, who had relinquished their citizenship, to gain Nepali citizenship. Bhutan was not one of these foreign countries. Thus, the Bhutanese refugees were considered aliens. Nepal was not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor to the 1967 Protocol; as such refugees could not access political rights and were not allowed to engage in economic activities or own certain kinds of property. As the number of refugees climbed and conditions deteriorated, the Government of Nepal requested UNHCR assistance in September of 1991 (Hutt 2003). Agreeing to host these refugees provided a positive to the new government. It linked the country with a global image increasingly associated with humanitarian and democratic ideals. This gave the fledgling government a degree of legitimacy and a positive means of differentiation from the earlier administration. Regardless of these potentially positive outcomes, the agreement to host the refugees had caveats. The group needed to be contained in camps and repatriation to Bhutan was of the utmost importance. In this way, the refugees served an additional purpose. Nepal was re-asserting their status as a nation-state with the ability to regulate its borders after an unsuccessful power-play with India. Reflecting this, repatriating refugees to Bhutan became the singular solution sought by the Nepali Government. This stance is articulated by Salter (2008, p. 370) building on Agamben (2005):

> the sovereign ability to define and limit the population is a longstanding institution of the state, intimately tied into the notion of sovereign territoriality and the imaginary of borders implied in this conception of bounded space.

Relegating the majority of refugees to camps in the far eastern region of Nepal promised to keep the problem peripheral to the highly centralised political sphere of Kathmandu.

Managing States of Exclusion

During a humanitarian emergency, refugees need help. The timely distribution of food and medical supplies, the procuring of shelter and establishment of proper sanitation facilities are principal priorities of the UNHCR. Initially conceived as temporary camps to meet pragmatic needs, these spaces morph seamlessly into sites of long-term care, maintenance, and management. These camps occupy an ambiguous position: part of the “national-order of things” (Malkki 1995b) but morally luminal. These protracted
situations elicit sympathy, occasional moral outrage, but more frequently donor fatigue. Beyond the emergency stage of the savings of lives, it becomes more difficult to determine what action is required (Redfield 2010). In an attempt to rectify these various ambiguities these sites become legitimate spaces for development aimed at maintaining order while simultaneously promoting moral progress.

While as early as the 1960s the link between refugees and development began to be examined, the UNHCR’s work in Africa during the 1980s effectively merged the provision of legal protection with longer-term development (Betts 2013a; 2013b).

In the early years of the UNHCR, when the majority of the world’s refugees were to be found in the industrialized countries, refugees and development were perceived as two distinct issues, with relatively little bearing upon each other (Crisp 2001, p. 168).

As the UNHCR conflated refugees and development, its scope expanded. The UNHCR grew at an astounding rate: between 1960 and 1980 the operating budget of 5 million US dollars grew to 394 million US dollars.

Chart 1. UNHCR Budget by Year

![UNHCR Budget by Year](chart.png)

Data drawn from Cutts (2000); UNHCR (2000); UNHCR (2010)

By the late 1980s, the UNHCR High Commissioner proposed the organisation needed to be confronting the root causes of refugees’ exile in order to overcome perceived cycles of aid dependency. The root causes identified became linked to a lack of development. In 1987 the UNHCR and UNDP (United Nations Development Program established in 1966) began a co-operative relationship to undertake development activities with refugees (UNDP 1987). These two organisations became somewhat co-mingled to promote the harmonization of humanitarian and development action (UNDP 1987). This marriage was codified in 1997 to ‘promote an early and smooth phase out
of humanitarian assistance in favour of sustainable local development’ (UNHCR 1997, para. 8). This is an interesting shift; by the late 1990s development programs were being criticised as failing to make the dramatic transformations once imagined (Escobar 1995; Friedman 1992). While a complete history of development theory and practice is beyond the scope of this thesis (see instead Rist 1995), the United State’s Truman Four Point Plan unveiled during his inaugural address in 1949 provides an introduction to the basic goals and assumptions of development. The plan promoted capitalist interests; seeking resources and new markets that would bring about the loftier goal of ‘the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas’ (Truman 1949, line 44). The underdeveloped people were described as victims, miserable, handicapped by circumstances, and suffering. Assisting them was framed as a moral obligation: ‘the old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans’ (Truman 1949, line 53). Despite the lofty rhetoric, by the 1960s it was becoming evident that economic involvement did not necessarily translate into a better life. Broadly, development agendas were criticised as a means of extending western economic power and imperialist aspirations. It appeared to be a guise to further the extraction of resources or labour, ultimately deepening global inequalities (Rist 1995). Development discourse also functioned to obfuscate the political dimension of resource allocation. In turn, this naturalised inequality through bureaucratic process and the emphasis on technical solutions to complex social structures (Ferguson 1990). On a more abstract level, the dichotomy of developed/underdeveloped created an enormous population that required intervention and adjustment (Shrestha 1995). Thus, the power imbalances between ‘the West and the rest’ (Hall 2006) was effectively maintained through a set of moral values and norms.

While development had contained a moral dimension for some time, the form development took in the refugee context was presented as being distinctly humanitarian: morally just rather than economically corrupt. The focus was on developing democratic governance and human rights (Bakewell 2003). The programs in the refugee camps in Nepal included efforts towards the empowerment of women, recognition of the rights of children, universal education, and promotion of democratic values. These were ambitious and seemingly laudable goals – seemingly beyond reproach. Despite the moral tone and the suggestion that independence from politics or economics equated with piety, the camps became laboratories for social transformation. These transformations frequently required radical social changes and represented an
astounding incursion into the everyday lives of refugees. Even the most intimate of relationships, say between a husband and a wife (or wives) or parents and their children, became legitimate sites of intervention.

Developing populations to hold the values of Universal Human Rights and democratic governance is still ‘a process whereby the lives of some people, their plans, their hopes, their imaginations, are shaped by others who frequently share neither their lifestyles, nor their hopes, nor their values.’ (Tucker 1999, p. 1). While Tucker is referring to development in general, this insight becomes particularly crucial in the arena of humanitarian development. In this context the moral imperative creates ‘a kind of protective screen whereby any specific procedure is justified’ (Orford 2010, p. 336). Brohman (1995, p. 136) argues that the ‘ethnocentric and ideological biases of the mainstream development framework’ become obscured under scientific or, as Ferguson (1990) argues, technical discourses. With this distinct form of humanitarian development programs occurring in refugee camps, these biases are obscured by the urgent, moral connotations. Problematically, as the following chapters illustrate, this can become a means to depoliticise the social processes that led to exile and long-term containment. These root causes are not necessarily linked to the political reforms of the refugee generating country or a challenge to state policies that strictly regulate their borders. Rather, the problem becomes reflected onto the refugees themselves: they need to be developed.

The development of refugees becomes a means of intervening in the refugees’ daily lives. By casting refugees as a population that needs external intervention to become a different society, their containment becomes normalised. In relation to the metamorphosis of the UNHCR, Barnett (2001, p. 247) observes ‘the worrisome possibility that a more pragmatic UNHCR is potentially (though unwittingly) implicated in a system of containment’. Duffield (2010) similarly cautions that the shift from protecting the insecure to developing them is not benign or inevitable. Rather, it is a means of legitimising their management and containment (Duffield 2010). Brohman (1995, p. 134) argues that development programs function to ‘turn attention away from the basic inequalities in the international economic and geopolitical structures by placing the onus for Third World underdevelopment firmly on the South\textsuperscript{10} itself’.

\textsuperscript{10} The ‘global South’ denotes conditions such as poverty and social backwardness roughly associated with the geographic regions of Asia, Africa, and Central America (Escobar 1995). Escobar highlights that the deployment of this discourse has profound political, social and economic consequences (1995).
Refugees, rather than larger structures and processes, become the problem due to their perceived underdevelopment. Crucially, this legitimises refugees’ strict admission into wealthy countries—further normalising their exclusion. Presenting the development of refugees as morally just has unfortunate consequences. It helps to absolve moral qualms that a strict migration policy to wealthy countries raises. The refugees’ interests are theoretically being advanced through a robust education in international norms and values, absolving any further action by international donors. Approaching refugees as underdeveloped normalises the exclusion from the nation they fled or the nation they reside in. In doing so, refugees are further depoliticised.

As a result of obscuring the processes that generate and then create sites of perpetual containment the camps become normalised sites of development. As Ferguson (1990) argues regarding development projects in Lesotho, the country was first created in a particular image by international aid organisations to justify various forms of intervention. These interventions, undertaken to modernise or improve the country, fostered the image of a space without political complications or competing groups. It justified a myriad of endeavours by international actors seeking to modernise and develop an undeveloped, socially backwards space. A similar process is occurring in Nepal’s refugee camps. Development discourses legitimise the expanding role of the UNHCR. The camps become blank canvases for the inscription of morally just principles. Development becomes a means of deflecting the causes of exile back onto the refugee population. In turn, this helps to justify criticisms of their cultural norms and values. Focusing on the development of shared ideals and a group that meets international standards does not address the underlying cause of the refugees’ displacement. Transforming camps into sites for development obfuscates the structures that have created a situation where indefinite containment is the status quo.
The first UNHCR-administered camp was established in April of 1992 and six more were built over the next year. The flow of refugees steadily increased until an approximate peak of 1000 refugees per day was registered in the middle months of 1992 (Reilly 1994). As 1992 concluded, 56,000 were under the care of the UNHCR. This number increased to 75,400 in 1993 before the trickle of refugees slowed in 1996 and the camp population settled at 88,000. By 2006, the year preceding resettlement, the total population was approximately 107,000 due largely to procreation (World Food Program 2006). In addition to the camp dwellers, there were estimated to be tens of thousands of Bhutanese living in camp-like situations in India (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2002).

The Beldangi camps were the largest and housed close to 50,000 people by 1993. Beldangi consisted of three satellite camps—Beldangi I, II, and III (or Extension)—with a population greater than most cities in Nepal and roughly double the size of Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan (Reilly 1994). It was located approximately fifteen minutes north of the town of Damak [population 41,421 in 1991] (Dhakal & Strawn 1994; Brown 2001). These camps were created directly by the UNHCR and their design reflected a need to house a high number of people while effectively delivering basic services; thus they were crowded. The camps sit on a floodplain that has been partially fortified by UNHCR supplied sandbags. Fingers of scraggly jungle divide the camps, attracting the
occasional elephant. Despite being established two decades previously, in 2012 and 2013 the camps still had a temporary feel.

The other four camps include Sansichare, Khudunabari, Timai and Goldhap in the Jhapa and Morang districts (Banki 2008a). In 2012, due to the high rates of resettlement, all had been consolidated and closed except the Sansichare camp. Sansichare is markedly different from the Beldangi camps. Its construction, according to participants, was supported directly by the European Union rather than the UNHCR (Interviews Nepal 2012-2013). While Beldangi was remarkable for its congestion, Sansichare had a decidedly village feel. Despite the temporary nature of the bamboo housing, the space between the huts was greater. It was set on a hill, rather than a flood prone plain, and this lent it an air of permanence. This was accentuated by a small library and a few brick buildings. Rather than being some distance from town and buffered by jungle, the camp was adjacent to the bustling, small town of Patri. As the following chapters illustrate, these spatial configurations impacted on the experience of living within the camps.

Camp Demographics

Surveys conducted during fieldwork in the Beldangi camps revealed at least 26 ethnic groups\textsuperscript{11} within a population of 15 000. Though Nepali was the lingua franca in the camps, most ethnic groups also had their own language. The majority of camp inhabitants were Hindu though there had been a large number of religious conversions over the past twenty years. Most of these had been conversion of what was described as the middle caste: either historically indigenous to Nepal or of Tibetan ancestry. The three religions that were growing in the camps were Kirati (an animist religion indigenous to the region), Buddhism, and Christianity. Conversions to the first two religions tended to mirror broader social movements in Nepal that emphasised indigenous identities and religions rather than the Hindu hierarchy. Conversions to Christianity were occurring across ethnic and caste groups, with high numbers of the lowest castes and few conversions of high-caste Hindus. The significance of these conversions will be discussed in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{11} These ethnic groups have multiple internal divisions, see Chapter 5, Table 1. For example, Brahmins consider themselves to be a distinct ethnicity that is further divided based on purity and assumed proximity to God. Vishnu Brahmins occupy the highest rung as the protectors of Hinduism. Vishnu’s various incarnations are still Brahmins but slightly lower in the social hierarchy. Brahmins as an ethnicity appear to be a relatively recent development and reflective of changes in broader Nepal. These distinctions will be discussed in the following chapters.
In addition to the majority of inhabitants who can be subsumed under the broad label of ethnic Nepali there were two smaller populations. These groups were originally from Eastern Bhutan and were forced into exile between 1996 and 1997. There were several hundred Sharchopas living in the camps and a few dozen Drukpas who similarly fled to escape imprisonment and torture stemming from their demands for democratic reforms. These groups tended to be Buddhist and had settled together on the north end of the Beldangi II camp, though again some leaders lived outside the camps. While some participants complained that the UNHCR dictated their hut location, these slightly later arrivals appeared to have enjoyed greater autonomy in hut placement.

Camp Logistics

Each camp was sub-divided into sectors and units for administrative purposes. A unit had approximately one hundred huts and a sector comprises four units. Huts were constructed from bamboo and were six metres by three and a half metres. Extended families cohabited and the average household consisted of approximately seven people. Camp amenities were provided by the UNHCR largely through their implementing agencies: the World Food Program (WFP), Lutheran World Fund, Save the Children, Caritas Nepal, OxFam, and a multitude of other national or international NGOs. The World Food Program provided rations that included rice, lentils, cooking oil, a limited amount of salt, a fortified legume based pre-mixed beverage, and (until January 2013) fresh vegetables. Lutheran World Fund maintained the sanitation facilities. Toilets were pit style and shared between two households. Water was provided via communal wells that flowed twice a day. There were usually multiple wells to serve each unit. The materials for huts were supplied by the UNHCR via the Lutheran World Fund. Due to severe budgetary constraints in 2006—2007, the plastic sheeting that had been employed as a weatherisation device for the huts was no longer distributed and for that reason the conditions in the camps had deteriorated (Lænholm 2007). This was largely rectified with resettlement: huts were torn down, materials recycled, and the land cultivated. The cleared space was converted into kitchen gardens to produce fresh vegetables and herbs, helping to overcome cuts in rations. In addition to water and sanitation, healthcare was provided within the camps. Health care was funded by the UNHCR and provided by AMDA Nepal, a Nepal based, non-governmental medical
organisation. Programs promoting the training of refugees in the medical field were also offered.

The Kathmandu-based NGO Caritas provided refugees with an English-based education. Caritas, a Catholic charity with a stated objective ‘to building a just world by empowering local organisations and enabling the world’s most vulnerable communities to be the architects of their own future’ (Caritas Australia 2010, p. 7), did not undertake proselytising in the camps. Initially, Caritas played a small supporting role within the education sector of the camp, providing stipends for teachers. This changed when an outside organisation working with Caritas, the Agency for Personnel Service Overseas (APSO), contributed educational experts towards the development of a refugee-specific curriculum and facilitated the training of refugee teachers (Brown 2001; Ringhofer 2002). After this period in 1992, the education of students was largely coordinated and maintained by refugees. Training and a certification process carried out by the Caritas organisation in nearby Damak supplemented in-classroom apprenticeships. Caritas Nepal provided free education up to Grade 10 and the UNHCR had recently begun funding Grades 11 and 12. A small number of scholarships were available to refugees who wished to pursue tertiary education either in Nepal or abroad. Caritas also provided guidebooks for teachers in relation to teaching students with special needs, in line with UNICEF’s (2011) goals for child welfare that included minimising discrimination based on physical or mental disabilities.

The adult English classes that Caritas offered enjoyed exceptionally high numbers of female participants. In 2010, 6835 people, of whom 5994 were female, attended these optional classes (Caritas Nepal 2010). With resettlement now a certainty, women were being encouraged to learn English—a skill already held by the majority of men in the camps. While technically the refugees were not allowed to work, a small stipend is provided to teachers. Teachers in the camps were male and female, high- and low-caste, old and young. This was a radical shift from pre-exile models of schooling in Bhutan, as Chapter Four illustrates.

In addition to a teaching stipend, another option to legally access money in the camps was through small-scale income generating projects, such as weaving or mushroom growing. These programs specifically targeted women. The programs tended to be funded by multiple NGOs but Oxfam had the highest profile. Another small business in the camps was the conversion of huts into retail shops, generating a small revenue
stream for families. These huts received a business license from the UNHCR after undergoing an application process and paying a nominal fee. Gold and silversmiths underwent a similar registration procedure. During 2012—2013, the increased space for vegetable gardening was not yielding a surplus that could be sold. Another source of income related to the resettlement process. Since 2007, a steady flow of remittances had financially buttressed the camp inhabitants. These are but a small sample of the economic livelihood strategies adopted within the camps; more will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Resources available to the refugees were, in many respects, rudimentary. Electricity was non-existent and fires from oil lamps or wood cooking frequently broke out, spreading with frightening speed through the cramped quarters. The bamboo huts were bitterly cold in winter. However, the belief persisted that camp residents were receiving better treatment than the local population in terms of food allocation, access to medical care, and educational opportunities—a perception validated by the significantly lower rates of malnutrition, under-five mortality, and incidents of infectious disease in relation to Nepal’s statistics (Brown 2001). The refugee camps (and in particular the large Beldangi camps) strained the local environment in terms of land use and access to forest resources. This contributed to growing tensions between the refugee group and the local population (Birendra & Nagat 2006; Banki 2008a). Though the refugees were technically not able to work outside the camps and the movement of refugees was in theory highly regulated, thousands of refugees moved between the camps and the town of Damak each day. Though some members of the local community benefited from an invisible workforce, the refugees were also viewed as unfair competition for local jobs.

In response to these tensions, the UNHCR implemented projects to benefit the host population, including improving local infrastructure, increasing training of local medical care providers, and allowing local children into the refugee schools (UNHCR 2009). Roads leading to the camps were paved and buildings constructed that will be turned over to the community after resettlement is completed. The UNHCR strove to hire local Nepalese as a means of investing in the host community and did not hire Bhutanese refugees. Local Nepalese were the dominant face of the UNHCR in the camps. The refugee population was thus both a burden and a benefit for the local population. The balance between these two perceptions was dynamic and impacted on group interactions. When the refugees are viewed as bringing beneficial projects or money through remittances, they are treated well. When they are viewed as competition...
in the labour market, degrading the local forest, or receiving more than the local population in terms of valuable resources, treatment deteriorates. This shifting status illustrates the complexity of these relationships. The image of a Bhutanese refugee is linked to the manner in which the local group views them; however, this process of creating boundaries around identities is far from static (Barth 1969).

Though the refugees were not governed by the Nepali-state, the laws that functioned within the camps were developed in consultation between the government and the UNHCR. These laws reflected Nepali norms and values. Thus, an act such as playing cards (a form of gambling) was illegal both within and outside the camps. Though some laws created the impression of a shared system of governance, most laws reinforced the differences between refugees and citizens. The ‘camp policies and directives from the Government of Nepal restrict freedom of movement of refugees and prohibit their engagement in gainful activities, such as agriculture, trading and other business’ (World Food Program 2006, p. 8). Technically, refugees were not able to work outside the camps and the movement of refugees was theoretically highly regulated. Local integration was not a legal option for the Bhutanese refugees. Government decisions suggested a desire to differentiate between the two groups and keep Bhutanese refugees out of the local population: the message was that a Bhutanese refugee was different from a Nepalese citizen and needed to be contained. This was an exercise of power; an enforced segregation regarding who was included in the nation-state and who was excluded. The more ambivalent reality related to the peripheral location of the camps.

Relegating camps to the fringe of the country served to buffer the highly centralised government from refugees’ potential political demands. It also made their oversight difficult—if not impossible. A skeleton crew of local police were tasked with enforcement. Despite the rhetoric of containment, the movement of people only had a semblance of moderation through the official or main entrance. It was unencumbered elsewhere. While the Beldangi camps were partially surrounded by barbed wire, the fencing seemed to start and stop without logic and it had been co-opted for drying clothes, air-curing meat, or tethering animals. On the edge of the nation of Nepal, the borders between camps and villages, Nepal and India, refugee and citizen were blurred. Regardless, the expectation of difference was persistent and became reinforced by the organisations working within the camps and refugee leaders. Refugee leaders had a
vested interest in the establishment of camps maintained by the international community for international involvement could lend credibility to their causes.

**Micro-Politics**

In addition to the expectations of international and state-level institutions in Nepal, the role of Bhutanese leaders was central. These leaders had clearly developed political agendas and worked tirelessly to promote them. In doing so, they sought to construct a particular image of the experience of exile and what it meant to be a Bhutanese refugee. Some aspects of this image reflected international values, particularly when these buttressed existing social structures. Many of the leaders (if not most) lived outside the camps in either Kathmandu, Damak, Birtamode, or Karakavitta; the majority had already resettled. More than the UNHCR or even the Government of Nepal, these were the gatekeepers to the camps despite their lack of immediate proximity. The reason leaders lived outside the camps varied. Some leaders had found gainful employment; others wanted to utilise the relatively superior infrastructure of larger cities to advance their political goals. Others had the financial assets and corresponding networking skills to secure lodging. A few had been expelled (by fellow residents) from the camps for corruption. These stories were told in whispers and the leader (perhaps counter-intuitively) still held a place of prestige within the group. Even when confronted with corruption in their leaders, to the point they felt inclined to dispel them from the camps, few were willing to disavow them. This reflected the partial realisation of a crucial aspiration: the projection of a unified community when presenting themselves to outsiders. This was only a partial realisation: some of the group held these leaders in disdain. The leaders who were criticized tended to be from the lower castes. While the caste of the person being criticised was always mentioned, participants reiterated that their critique was not motivated by caste. Rather, the criticism was framed as a failing to recognise international values (for example, a lack of care for the community or acting in self-interest). This was illustrative of attempts to reconcile local social values identified by the managing institutions as morally wrong with the morally righteous ideals of the international organizations working in the camps. This is discussed in depth in Chapters Four and Five.


Conclusion

The relationship between citizens and states is political: the state determines whom they include and whom they exclude. If those excluded from states become a pressing, urgent humanitarian emergency, they may be evaluated as refugees. Once labelled, they enter into a system of international governance headed by the UNHCR. As the UNHCR manages these populations, refugee camps become sites designed to address the causes of exile through social and ideological development. In doing so, refugees are fashioned into humanitarian subjects rather than political actors. By normalising this distinctly humanitarian development of refugees, complex conversations regarding global inequity are avoided. The refugees themselves, rather than the states that generate or perpetuate their exclusion, become legitimate populations for radical social intervention.

The refugee camps in Nepal are illustrative of the space between a humanitarian emergency and ‘the ordinary, longer-term problems that surround them’ (Redfield 2013, p. 191). For the Bhutanese camps in Nepal, the problems that surround them include not only a global system that appears to perpetuate containment but also generates domestic power struggles. These domestic struggles occur between locals and refugees, particularly when local staff are employed by international organisations. Further, they occur within the group as multiple value systems intersect and compete for social authority. The following chapters analyse the Bhutanese refugees’ attempts to balance their unique value system with the norms and values of managing institutions.
Arriving in the main Beldangi camps, I was immediately struck by the congestion. Bamboo huts appeared to sprawl with mathematical precision in every direction. While striking, this was not surprising: images of crowded refugee camps have been transmitted around the globe for decades. The second impression was unexpected. Unlike the Syrian camps in Turkey, there were no high gates topped with barbed wire encircling the space. Occupants did not have to undergo retinal screening as in Malawi camps (Ghelli 2014) or a fingerprint check to enter or leave as in the Tanzanian camps (Ismail 2006). Identity cards did not appear to be checked with any kind of regularity, in contrast to camps such as Daabaab in Kenya (Horst 2006). Passes were not necessary to leave the camps, as in the Mishamo camps in Africa (Malkki 1995a).

These technologies all attempt to regulate the movement of refugees, effectively managing populations. In Nepal, refugees have been managed quite differently. The physical division – walls, fences, regulated gates – between locals and refugees is less rigid than in other camp situations. The UNHCR presence, aside from a logo on the occasional blanket, is minimal: UNHCR staff are based in nearby Damak and visit the camps infrequently. In place of guards or fences, refugees are inculcated with humanitarian values that position them as a deserving population. Thus, rather than physical containment and on-site surveillance, the emphasis in Nepal is governance from a distance achieved through radical moral reconfiguration. Transforming the refugees into righteous, humanitarian subjects promises those excluded from the nation an opportunity to become part of a virtuous, international community (Rose 2000).

Camps are far from passive relief zones. Rather, they are dynamic sites of social transformation. Malkki (1995a) observed this in Tanzania, arguing that camps foster essentialised social categories. Building on the premise that social categories are both made and unmade in the camp settings, this chapter examines the role of humanitarian governance as it attempts to mould refugees into particularly deserving subjects. As Ong (2003, p. 53) argues regarding Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand, after the
emergency phase passes ‘relief organisations quickly begin the task of physically and socially converting the refugees into citizens of the global world’. These humanitarian subjects are tailored to reflect the legitimacy of the nation-state and the values sanctioned by the international organisations working within the camps. Camps become exceptional spaces, excluded from the nation but included in a supra-national network underpinned by humanitarian values. Internationally supported camps become sites of morally just intervention, aspiring to remake the world by designing righteous humanitarian subjects.

**Becoming Bhutanese**

During the first two weeks of December 2012, there was one event on the minds of the refugees in the Beldangi camps: Bhutan’s National Day. The National Day falls on December 17th and commemorates the coronation of the first King of Bhutan, Ugyen Jigme Wangchuck. Bhutan generally is a popular topic of conversation in the camps but the impending date made it the focus of even more conversations. Speculation was rife: Would the King pardon prisoners? What would the King discuss in his speech? Would the refugees get a mention? The appropriate way to celebrate what I was repeatedly told was a very important occasion was discussed at length. Deciding the exact activities seemed to be the only problematic aspect. There were assertions that there should be dart throwing or a soccer game. Other people surmised that there would be dancing and music – requisites of any celebration. Everyone assured me many festivities would be taking place. Those who owned a *gho* or *kira* – Bhutan’s national dress – would don them, and perhaps the children would put on a special demonstration of Dzongha, Bhutan’s national language. The day, like other festival days, would start early and stretch throughout the day. It was not to be missed.

The lead-up to Bhutan’s National Day reflected the first lesson the refugees learned in the camps: the importance of being Bhutanese. In essence, the refugees were only entitled to support if they were outside their nation-state and, crucially, they must desire to return home. Such values were taught via an ‘education for repatriation’ both formally in the camps’ schools and informally through institutional programs in the camps (Evans 2010a). These projects were undertaken with the hope of being allowed to return to Bhutan – a reflection of the goals of some refugees, the host government, and the UNHCR. Educational endeavors included promoting the acquisition of Bhutan’s
national language and history. Additionally, the few south Bhutanese who had lived in
the north of Bhutan taught Drukpa etiquette to the broader group, which included how
to greet a superior, the appropriate way to eat out of a bowl, and how to cross one’s legs
when sitting. In short, the refugees needed to embody the physical demeanor of a
particular kind of Bhutanese.

While living in the camps several of the refugees purchased Bhutan’s national dress
while others hung photos of the King of Bhutan in their huts. While Bhutan stipulated
that speaking Dzongkha and being able to exhibit the correct social etiquette were key
factors in being a Bhutanese citizen, Bhutan gave no indication that the camp based
efforts would impact on the chance of repatriation. The Government of Bhutan
maintains an unwavering stance that they hold no responsibility towards the refugees.
Most participants, rather than question the push for repatriation or protest the imposition
of a largely alien culture, described this process as a time of learning. They learned from
the international organisations working in the camps that these transformations were
legitimate requests by nation-states. Nevertheless a few participants mentioned how
disconcerting it was to promote the customs of a country they had been forced to flee.
While the managing institutions and the host government promoted the idea that the
refugees naturally belonged in Bhutan, this understanding overlooked the myriad of
complicating factors hindering possible return. Further, for refugees who experienced
imprisonment, torture, or assault sanctioned by the government, repatriation was not an
ideal solution. These efforts, undertaken with the intention of helping refugees,
attempted to transform the refugees into well-behaved citizens. In doing so, they
illustrated that ‘the function of modern international organisations is to manage refugee
populations in a manner that does not radically undermine the framework on which the
nation-state rests’ (Owens 2009, p. 571).

The dominant message to emerge from these educational endeavours was the
significance of national affiliations. Focusing on the national aspect of the group, rather
than the numerous ethnic and linguistic divisions, allowed the managing institutions to
approach the group as a nation in miniature. No longer a stream of refugees, the group
became a containable entity. The UNHCR does not explicitly define community in its
numerous handbooks but in Nepal, the organisation implicitly conflated community
with place. This generalisation very effectively created a Bhutanese community, bound
in a similar fashion as nation-states. Quite quickly, the group was approached
bureaucratically as a Bhutanese refugee community. As a community, their governance
could be expedited. Activities were delegated to community leaders who were tasked with the moral self-regulation of the group.

The dual statuses of Bhutanese and refugee became intrinsically linked. In turn, these associations legitimised the international support they received in the camps. Their exile entitled them to particular amenities to which the host population was theoretically not entitled. The refugees were acutely aware that it was only through their exclusion by the nation (not only Bhutan but also Nepal) that they could access any of the security that the international community provided in the camps. This inclusion was conditional on the refugees’ willingness to maintain the largely artificially defined boundary of ‘Bhutanese refugee community’ created in the camps, a label that reflected a broader humanitarian ethic. The line between local and refugee became necessarily emphasised.

**Bhutanese are Righteous**

Attempts to create, solidify, and maintain divisions between the refugee and local population reinforced nation-based social constructs. Participants recognised that this was difficult to maintain in the camps due to the shared *lingua franca* of Nepali, common ethnic backgrounds, and religions. The two groups spoke Nepali with very little, if any, difference in accents. The ethnic groups found in the camps were also found in greater Nepal. During religious rituals marking birth, marriage, and death differences were virtually indistinguishable. The festivals that dotted the Hindu religious calendar were celebrated both by locals and refugees in nearly identical fashions. Beyond that, in the mundane every day, the groups were remarkably similar. Refugees and locals washed clothes in a similar manner, hanging all items sopping wet on a clothesline so they dried without wrinkles. Newspapers were recycled to line tables or counter tops. Locals and refugees, when eating dry foods such as puffed rice, tossed the food in such a manner that their hand did not make contact with their mouth. The kitchen gardens were similarly cultivated: punctuated with marigolds, enormous radishes, and scraggly okra. The bounty of green, chicory-like *saag* was preserved by refugees and locals in identical fashion through a process of repeatedly dousing with hot water and pounding with a heavy, pestle like stick before being left to ferment. In terms of everyday, despite the emphasis on Bhutanese versus Nepalese the line that divided them appeared vague. Yet this line was essential to maintain, for it was on this line that
political claims rested and camp livelihood depended. Thus, the maintenance of this seemingly irrevocable difference was significant.

The division between the groups became a matter of ideology and morals – without it the assistance refugees received was called into question. The Bhutanese were educated: the Nepalese were backwards. The Bhutanese were righteous: the Nepalese were corrupt. Several participants used derogatory terms to describe the locals: ‘they are no good’, ‘they are rotten’, or ‘they don’t have pure hearts’. These comments came from all ages, both genders, and virtually every caste – particularly when I first began work in the camps. They were especially critical when describing locals who worked for international organisations. In contrast, expatriate staff were described as ‘so good’ and ‘having pure hearts’. The refugees were quick to associate themselves with morally righteous international actors who were only occasional visitors in the camps. They were acutely aware that, though largely unseen, the international community (rather than their local Nepali representatives) controlled the camps.

Most participants described the moral difference between locals and refugees as stemming from the degree of education the refugees attained. Part of this education took place in the camp classrooms. The schools in the camps were drastically different from those in Bhutan. Historically, only the males born into the priestly castes would attend school. This was reflected, with few exceptions, in surveys I conducted in the camps. Of women who grew up entirely in Bhutan, 7.5% attended school in Bhutan. Those who attended school stopped their education once menstruation began—generally before Year Seven. The average grade completed by women in Bhutan was Year Four. In conversation, several women recalled that in Bhutan, ‘women were not allowed to join school for this was the community belief’. This specific sentiment was directed towards a lower caste woman. Brahmin women articulated further that when they were children and young women in Bhutan an educated woman was considered ‘a curse’. For men raised in Bhutan, approximately 25% attended school. The median grade completed for this group was Year Five. Brahmin males achieved the highest level of schooling, studying up to Year Ten in Sanskrit schools. They also were disproportionately better educated, with 60% completing some level of schooling in Bhutan. Education in Bhutan was an exclusive activity and those few who could access a high degree of education were esteemed.

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12 Survey methodology is discussed in Appendix A.
The Caritas-run education system in the camps provided free, English-based classes and child attendance was mandatory up to Year Ten for both genders. With textbooks and supplies provided to the refugees, the completion rate was close to 100% at the primary and secondary level. In broader Nepal, primary schools also had high rates of enrolment but supplies were difficult to procure. In terms of overall literacy, 75% of the Bhutanese in the camps were literate compared to 57% of the population of Nepal (Muggah 2005, Table 1). The camp based schools explicitly promoted gender equality, the rights of children, and international human rights. In this school setting, the caste system was described as a human rights violation and was systematically undermined: higher caste children were obliged to eat food served by lower caste students or teachers. A refusal to eat this food, considered ritually polluting, could lead to corporal punishment, taunts by fellow students, and ostracism. Attendance for children was mandatory and parents could be punished with cuts to rations if their children did not attend. A powerful moral hierarchy in which only particularly ‘good’ subjects became legitimate recipients of humanitarian assistance began to emerge.

Refugees became different from locals not just because of the number of years of schooling completed, but also as the result of a radically different value system that was reinforced in the camps. The refugees prided themselves on being educated, and this education was based on specific social values. The experience of exile and coming under the care of international organisations led several to claim that they now understood the world—and their associated place—in a profoundly different manner. As one male refugee man explained, ‘from our camp, we have done Class 12. Before, I heard about refugees in other countries and didn't know who they were. Now I am one and I understand.’ Similarly, a female refugee in her early thirties stated, ‘education began occurring at a higher level (leading to) a social awareness. It did a great role in equalizing, the equality of the people.’ This statement accentuated a key aspect of the camps: the need to reflect the values that were promoted in the camps by international organisations.

The Bhutanese actively promoted themselves as socially aware and embodying the value of equality. This understanding of equality was set in contrast to the local population, particularly when discussing the caste system. The caste system in the camps was explained to outsiders as an unfortunate consequence of living in close proximity to the Nepalese. The system allegedly existed in the camps due to the corrupting influence of the locals but it was fading due to, as a female in her thirties
suggested, ‘the higher education and this means greater equality, also there are many programs running in the camps’. While there were several types of programs running in the camps they could broadly be divided into two categories: those that attempted to transform behaviour and those that illustrated the transformations that had occurred. The former were largely dictated to the refugees by international humanitarian organisations in order to teach morally righteous values. The latter provided the opportunity for refugees to teach each other these values through the provision of financial support. By demonstrating that they had internalised these values, the refugees created an image of being domesticated (controlled) subjects eligible for ongoing care and support. This echoed the:

new emphasis on the personal responsibilities of individuals, their families and their communities for their own future well-being and upon their own obligation to take active steps to secure this (Rose 1996, p. 327-328).

Transforming Behaviours and Internalising Values

A second group of projects was particularly illuminating regarding the ways refugees were transformed into humanitarian subjects. Billboards punctuated the camps with images of men washing dishes or fetching water, an attempt by the international organisations to change gender roles. Camp cleaning rosters were posted and strictly adhered to. These rosters included all ages, male and female, and every caste; everyone was expected to keep a clean camp for the sake of their community. This was a radical break from the historic system that demanded only particular castes were responsible for cleaning outside the home. Further, in Bhutanese culture fertility was celebrated: a woman’s red sari was a bold reminder of her reproductive capacities. Children were highly valued for social, economic, and religious reasons (Stone 1978). Historically in Bhutan, children participated in rice harvests thereby contributing to the economic viability of the family. Families were large: older women claimed upwards of seven children and a few boasted fourteen. Even in the camps having only one child, even if he was a male, was still considered inauspicious. As several women informed me, ‘one is not good, what if something happened? Who would take care of you? One boy is not enough, it is better to have a girl as well – they can help you around the house’.

Children represented a social security net for women and for many were the key path to social status. Nevertheless, when I was in the camps in 2012, there was a campaign to introduce wider use of contraceptives. A smaller family size was promoted as being
more cost-effective, aligning with the shift within UNHCR from an emphasis on relief to one on development. The people to whom I spoke agreed with the premise of these campaigns. Men and women both explained that with such uncertainty about the future maybe a smaller family would be better. Others questioned me directly about what the acceptable family size was in either the United States or Australia. Some worried that a large family would become penalised. Not a single participant directly stated that they would not participate in the contraception education programs running in the camps. Rather, they saw their participation as a crucial means of showing their support for the UNHCR policy and broader ideals of family composition.

Most efforts were largely externally designed, developed, and dictated with the goal of promoting equality in the camps. However, there was also a strong push for the camps to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. The hope was that refugees would undertake these types of efforts of their own accord. The goal was to create a community that could self-regulate. Ethical values, rather than direct surveillance, became a means to maintain social order. This aspiration was illustrated by a series of workshops run by an international NGO working in the camps with the permission of the UNHCR. These workshops occurred the month before I began working in the camps but were frequently discussed by participants. A 27-year-old refugee provided a succinct summary of one of the workshops:

He had us all sit and imagine we were in a room. The room did not have doors or windows. Now we sat in this room but we were unhappy and we wanted out. We looked and looked for a door but there wasn’t one. It was frustrating. He told us we could be stuck like this forever: looking and looking for a door or a window. Then, he said we had to imagine we were looking up. Instead of a ceiling it was just open. We could leave the whole time… What do you think about that? We are not too sure (Brahmin Male, Interview Nepal 2013).

The exercise is aimed at ‘creating active individuals who will take responsibilities for their own fates’ (Rose 2000, p. 337). Rather than questioning why they were trapped in a hut or strategising how they could seek assistance, their problems became an inability to help themselves or develop innovative solutions. While promoting the goal of self-sufficiency, this lesson also functioned to regulate the group. This regulation was achieved by introducing a degree of conditionality: the refugees must conduct themselves appropriately. They must actively work towards improving their quality of life rather than, to use the analogy of the NGO, feel frustrated by an apparent lack of doors. By ‘looking up’ to the humanitarian values espoused in the camps, their situation would be improved. As Ong (2003) similarly observed in the Thai camps that
host Cambodian refugees, the emphasis was on creating self-reliant, disciplined, and controlled subjects. In both contexts, this lesson was highly individualistic while also reinforcing the ideals that individuals should undertake projects to better their community.

The multiple participants who discussed this workshop with me proceeded to ask for my additional perspective as a representative of a broader international network. The refugees were trying to determine my values as a member of their audience. This demonstrated that ‘surrounded by a web of vocabularies, injunctions, promises, dire warnings and threats of interventions, organised increasingly around a proliferation of norms and normative’ the humanitarian subject must constantly self-evaluate (Rose 2006, p. 150). Repeatedly, the refugees had to reinvent themselves and mirror continually morphing expectations of humanitarian agencies in the camps. The need to reflect ideals and expectations thus underpinned the drastic power imbalance between those who worked and those who lived within the camp. The questions participants asked regarding this exercise were attempts to stake a small claim over the various activities they were expected to accept or embrace in their entirety. These projects were rarely partnerships, even if undertaken with the best of intentions.

However there were activities theoretically developed and controlled by refugees. These projects hinted at the possibility that if the appropriate values were internalised, then the group would be rewarded. In the camps there was a glut of projects undertaken by refugees all striving towards social transformation. One participant, raised in the camps, summarised the driving ideal: ‘development starts with us’ (Rai Female, Age 20s, Interview Nepal 2012). These projects were run, as multiple ambitious coordinators explained, ‘to support our community’. Participants stressed that serving their community was a good or righteous activity. This mirrored the aspirations of the governing institutions. Reflecting these values translated into various privileges (Rose 2000). Though the refugees were expected to volunteer their time, in order for these projects to take place, they required funding by either the UNHCR or another NGO working in the camps. Funding generally went to constructing a hut to host activities, defraying printing costs, or procuring specific materials. The lack of funding for wages, far from being criticised, was often praised for giving the refugees the opportunity to volunteer. As a female refugee explained, ‘Why do I volunteer? It feels that work as a volunteer is a good job. It is done without profit so it is good’ (Bhujel Female, Age 20s, Interview Nepal 2013).
The UNHCR stressed that paying refugees a wage for performing community services would lead not only to corruption but social deterioration (UNHCR 2008). The Bhutanese, far from criticising this decision, lauded it as a way of protecting them from the corrupting influence of paid community service. Yet it did mean that some had to work in more precarious situations if their family required an injection of cash. However, in the camps they presented themselves as proxies for the international organisations, tirelessly working to reach the prescribed level of moral values. This was in contrast to Nepalese citizens who occupied paid positions in the UNHCR, IOM, and most other organisations in the camps who wanted to give a local face to their activities. This division again reinforced the divide between local and refugee. The refugees were serving their community while the locals were perceived as profiting from their exile. Maintaining that refugees help each other due to moral righteousness (versus economic gain) ensured ongoing access to resources not available to the host population. In turn, this fostered a sense of conditional inclusion in a broader, international framework.

Projects focused on helping vulnerable people were viewed as consistently receiving funding and support. ‘Vulnerable’ is a term employed by the UNHCR to denote groups who require additional social and/or economic support. The UNHCR defines vulnerable people as women (particularly single), children, the elderly, mentally or physically disabled, ethnic minorities, survivors of violence, and those suffering from HIV/AIDS (UNHCR 2005). To borrow the language of an idealistic young refugee, ‘we need to help the poor people – you know the victims’ (Brahmin Male, Late 20s, Interview Nepal 2013). Helping the ‘poor people’ was an act that had roots in Hindu cosmology. The giving of charitable alms to the poor is promoted in the Vedas (Bornstein 2015). However, most participants felt the charity work in the camp was different. Religiously charitable giving could contribute to one’s karmic merit – the rewards were not necessarily recognised in this life. But in the camps participating in a charitable framework promised resources and recognition. Training programs yielded certificates that had potential value once resettled. Service to one’s community enhanced the image of the refugees in the eyes of international actors and donors.

This is not to say there was not altruistic giving occurring in the camps; I observed women cleaning the temples without expectation of recognition and goods or services provided to those that needed them. Rather, the structured programs in the camps began to mirror the governing institutions. The newly created Bhutanese refugee community became tasked with identifying those in need. Those who possessed the correct
qualifications and values intervened with the support of international staff. These tended to be people who could readily use the international discourse and nomenclature. This was strategic: ‘those who learn to translate their needs into the language of others may find valuable resources and support’ (Eversole 2010, p. 37). Hence, ‘vulnerable’, ‘community service’, and ‘development’ punctuated discussions regarding programs in the camps. All of these buzzwords highlighted the necessity of intervention: a moral evaluation of the refugees had found them wanting.

**Transformational projects**

Projects were funded, it appeared, on their potential to transform refugees. This underscored the understanding that the group required intervention and needed to change. The projects that developed in the camps to help vulnerable groups included children’s centres; domestic violence support centres; designated classrooms for the disabled integrated with education strategies tailored to their unique needs; and literacy classes for the elderly. These interventions, though perhaps well-meaning, were often based upon particular assumptions and understandings that did not necessarily reflect the experiences of refugees. The much-praised domestic violence program in the camps illustrated this quite clearly. Female refugees, trained by international organisations, staffed the domestic violence centre in the camps, called Gender Focal Point. Once trained, staff ran educational programs in the camps to promote gender equality, the dangers of alcohol, and the impact of domestic violence on children. They published booklets, held mediation sessions, and provided counselling for families. The central message focused on the equality between men and women as a basic human right. The coordinator, a 26 year old woman, was at pains to highlight the effectiveness of the centre’s activities (Bhujel Female, Interview Nepal 2012, 2013). There were less referral and fewer reports of domestic violence between men and women. This outcome was described as a very good thing, ‘violence has been controlled through campaigning and programs, violence is decreasing’. We spoke at length regarding her training, the violence in families, the support systems in place, and why she thought there was violence in the camp. She kept reiterating the successes of the program, reminding me again that the rates of violence between husband and wife had dropped over the past year.
In terms of effectiveness (a crucial factor in maintaining funding) the program seemed to be working. It also felt right. The centre was run by refugees and headed by women. In many ways, the centre seemed the perfect manifestation of camp governance: through guidance and management by international donors the refugees internalised the necessary ideals and learned to be ‘good’. I was feeling that the interview might be wrapping up when she stated, ‘you know, it is not just husbands and wives, the worst kinds of violence are between women.’ Intra-female violence was a significant and continuing problem in the camps but did not receive the same attention as spousal violence. This limited understanding ultimately hindered attempts by victims of other forms of domestic violence to access resources and support in the camps. The Bhutanese are strongly patrilocal; a new wife lives with her husband’s family and contributes considerably to the household. Younger women slowly gain social status as they bear sons and grow older. For women, their status reaches its pinnacle once the eldest son marries and brings his wife into the family home. This status can remain high even if the son’s mother is widowed. These senior women, if living with their son (a standard arrangement in the camps), can wield considerable power.

The new wife entered into this household power dynamic. Immediately, she was expected to contribute in several ways. Under the guidance of her mother-in-law, she performed the bulk of domestic duties. Before dawn, she fetched water to ensure it was warm or tea had been made when the family rose. The responsibility for cooking meals and snacks, processing milk into yoghurt and ghee, along with cleaning and washing fell to her. The garden had to be tended, and every few months the hut’s floor needed to be refinished with cow dung. For most women in the camps, the only reprieve from the workday came in the late afternoon—a time for neighbourhood gossip, crocheting, and knitting. This arrangement was maintained until the bride was pregnant with her first child. Then, the mother-in-law ran the household while the new mother first convalesced and then, after childbirth, tended to the child. This arrangement could last up to a year. After this period of ‘maternity leave’, the process of accumulating domestic credit began again. This was the idealised situation but it did not always work. There could be personality conflicts, different tastes in food, or distinctive standards of cleanliness, leading to tension in the household. There could also be conflicts regarding when maternal rest should begin or end or the foods the infant’s mother, dependent on her mother-in-law to prepare, wanted to eat. This tension could erupt violently, generally with senior women physically assaulting junior women.
Such a form of domestic violence did not fit into an imagining of domestic violence that the project funders transmitted to the refugee staff. From the project standpoint, elderly females who had outlived their husbands were considered vulnerable. For a junior woman who was married and theoretically not vulnerable to experience physical abuse by a ‘vulnerable’ elderly woman complicated the access of support. The elderly woman (the mother-in-law) was entitled to additional resources from the UNHCR and its implementing partners. At a household level, there was reluctance to identify the mother-in-law as anything other than vulnerable for fear of losing additional resources. This situation illustrated the limits of a generalised or collectivised understanding of women refugees, both elderly and vulnerable. Such templates for approaching life in the camps began to strain under diverse social arrangements.

The coordinator did not collect data regarding the incidents of female-female violence but considered it to be an equal, if not greater, issue in the camps. Assaults between women sharing a home were not a focus of the international training sessions and did not become translated into the camps through campaigns or programs. The coordinator of the domestic violence centre felt compelled by international overseers to focus primarily on male-female attacks. Her successful mediation of these situations evidenced the group’s ability to self-regulate. Focusing on this particular kind of domestic violence, which was decreasing considerably within the camps, promoted a positive image of the Bhutanese. These measurable successes then reinforced the framework the program operated within: the program worked because the refugees were effectively helping themselves.

The refugees were, in effect, created in a particular image requiring corresponding interventions. This project received funding because it ticked the right boxes: female refugees running a gender centre to stamp out male-perpetrated domestic violence. A template of who was vulnerable was projected onto the group, yet the reality was perhaps inevitably more complex. In turn, this placed the coordinator in a conundrum: to maintain funding and the centre, she needed to focus on the domestic violence that was targeted by the program. The difficulty in explaining to her funders that domestic violence was occurring between women was compounded because it could be constructed as yet another problem requiring external evaluation, intervention and rectification. This illustrated that particular administrative imaginings of social arrangements must be mirrored to access resources and maintain a positive image.
requisite mirroring of particular norms and values to maintain social support reflects that refugees are well aware they cannot directly claim the rights of equality, self-reliance, and community support the managing institutions promote.

While the projects that received funding drove the values that were transmitted in the camps, those that were not funded were also significant. One male participant in his forties, after being unsuccessful at receiving funding for his fledging social service organisation, commented to me, ‘they [international organisations] always are focusing on the negative, they also need to pay attention to what we do right. They say they want refugees to help-self but then do not give funding’ (Magar Male, Age 40s, Nepal 2013).

While this reflected personal frustration regarding the conditional status of funding in the camps, it was also indicative of broader camp processes. According to my participants, newspapers were not funded by the UNHCR. Refugees, with intermittent support from international organisations not working directly in the camps, largely funded the newspaper running in the camps between 2012 and 2013. Similarly, a refugee organisation, the DELTA group, which wanted to create an archive of the documents people carried with them from Bhutan was not able to secure funding. Regardless of the reasons given for the lack of funding, the representatives of these groups took away the lesson that overly political actions, despite the UNHCR’s emphasis on developing democratic management structures, were not rewarded. In turn this underscored the broader, institutional shift away from the political aspects of exile. Rather, the focus in the camps became the creation of humanitarian subjects.

For the Bhutanese, subjective and evaluative project funding illustrated key expected refugee attributes. For example, the importance of being linked to Bhutan while looking towards the future. Rather than attempting to archive past grievances, they should be bettering themselves in line with humanitarian values. It was through this process of becoming humanitarian subjects that ‘new spaces of visibility’ appeared (Feldman 2008, p. 500). This was similarly observed by Gabiam (2012) working in Palestinian camps. For these Palestinians, abject suffering was equated with international support (Gabiam 2012). Development projects, in the Palestinian context, were viewed with suspicion: improvements to living conditions could undermine their cultivated political image. The striking difference between the Bhutanese and the Palestinian refugees was that the Palestinians saw development projects as a direct threat to their status as deserving refugees. For Palestinians, the loss of ‘deserving’ status was viewed as undermining efforts to return to Palestine. The Bhutanese, on the other hand, viewed
development projects as an opportunity to promote themselves as legitimate humanitarian subjects, thus eligible for resettlement in a donor country. This provided a platform for future action and, perhaps, opportunities not available to most refugees. However, this potential for visibility was largely premised on mirroring international values.

Projects were funded based on the degree they emulated and reinforced behaviours viewed as morally good. The refugees quickly learned that some behaviours were rewarded while others were unrewarded and considered problematic. To access the resources in the camps and to maintain their inclusion in a humanitarian space, they had to emphasise the significance of national boundaries while reflecting broader humanitarian values. Frequently the development projects functioned to inform the refugees that their social structures were largely unacceptable unless they conformed to particular norms and values presented as universal. These values had to appear to be internalised: the refugees had to strive to reform themselves. The Bhutanese refugees actively presented themselves as morally righteous. For it was righteous Bhutanese who could access a resource that was increasingly scarce: resettlement. They had become developed enough to deserve resettlement in wealthy, western countries. This development and restructuring often required a radical break from the past.

A Moral Marriage

This restructuring was particularly blatant in regards to marriage customs, where well-meaning interventions yielded unintended consequences. For the Bhutanese refugees, national boundaries have not always been a central point in dictating their personal relationships—particularly marriage. This failure to marry along national lines was a factor that led to their exile: in 1990, the Royal Government of Bhutan stripped the citizenship of any person born to parents who were not both Bhutanese. The Government also gave written notice that non-Bhutanese spouses must evacuate the country within 30 days. While the Government maintains these measures were applied to all Bhutanese, the south Bhutanese were the group who frequently married across national lines. These marriage practices were viewed as de-legitimising the nation-state of Bhutan.
In the camps, marriage practices were similarly deemed problematic, becoming a site of humanitarian intervention and evaluation. The UNHCR and International Organisation of Migration (IOM), through their liaisons with countries of resettlement, held specific concepts of marriage that refugees must reflect in order to participate in resettlement. Marriages, to be legitimate in terms of resettlement, must conform to three guidelines, they must be between two adults over the age of 18 (as defined by UNICEF’s 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child), respect national/humanitarian boundaries (Bhutanese-Bhutanese), and be between one man and one woman.

For the Bhutanese, caste plays a central factor in the selection of a marriage partner: marriage is expected to observe and perpetuate caste lines. For example, a Vishnu Brahmin is expected to marry a Vishnu Brahmin. A marriage partner is selected by the senior male in the family unit in consultation with a priest or priests. These priests evaluated the respective astrology charts to check compatibility and select an auspicious marriage date. Historically, marriage occurred at a very young age, around age seven for the bride and nine for the groom, though the bride did not enter her husband’s home until she began menstruating. These arrangements were undertaken to ensure the virginity of the bride, in line with patrilineal ideals of descent. Now, due to the changing role of children and conception of childhood, these child marriages technically no longer occur. Virtually every participant strongly disavowed child marriage as backwards or old-fashioned. Even those who were child brides themselves described it as ‘uneducated’ behaviour. Many explicitly quoted the Convention on the Rights of the Child when discussing their views. In order to respect the international norms and values that they were taught in the camps, they stated that arranged ‘promises’ rather than ‘marriages’ occurred. In the camp, a similar process of selection and astrological consultation occurred. Again, the priest performed a ritual but it was not the marriage ceremony. The degree to which this was binding was difficult to discern. Some of the marriages that took place when I was in the camp saw the couple betrothed from childhood. Most claimed the ritual was loosely binding, with space for negotiation once the children came of age or circumstances changed. Though this may appear to be an unquestioned step in the right moral direction, it was still an incursion into the family of a refugee. These were radical transformations—political transformations—occurring in a space that claimed to be apolitical.

Marriages between a refugee and a local were subject to intense scrutiny during the resettlement process. This led most refugees to criticise these arrangements (previously
a rather mundane if not ideal configuration) as corrupt or self-serving. The venomous
criticism of these arrangements was, however, largely abstract and carried a
performative dimension. When participants spoke about specific families resulting from
a mixed refugee-local marriage, it was with sympathy. There was genuine concern that
families would be left behind or forced to divorce. Divorce, though it happened in the
camps, was not widespread and was considered a recent phenomenon. Participants were
unable to recall divorce occurring in Bhutan. The only couples I met who divorced did
so because of the restrictions on resettlement. Many participants were keenly aware that
refugees, particularly with resettlement, had a degree of security that the locals were
theoretically not entitled to. It was only through maintaining this image of difference
that they could continue to access the basic resources granted to humanitarian subjects.
A precarious balancing act was being undertaken as the refugees grappled with pre-
existing and introduced value systems.

The impact of the adoption of values that favoured national-based marriage practices
and monogamous marriages is best illustrated through two different polygamous
families, the first a young Nepali woman married to a Bhutanese refugee in the camps
and the second a long-established polygamous family who married in Bhutan. While in
the camps, a man approached me, concerned that his neighbour did not have a hut
allocation—generally a clear indication they did not have refugee status. I went to the
hut and met a nineteen year-old girl with an infant in her arms, her daughter. She began
to explain her situation. She grew up in a remote village in the neighbouring district
before entering into an arranged marriage with the man who used to live in the hut and
was the father of her child. He was decades older and an esteemed man in the refugee
community. Generally, families worked strategically around the ‘one wife’ requirement,
registering second wives as aunts, sisters, or daughters to ensure all are resettled
together. For this young wife, her local status would have drawn out the resettlement
process considerably. Her husband told her they would get a divorce to expedite the rest
of the family’s resettlement process but that it would not be a real divorce. He promised
to send money to support her in the camp, where her daughter was registered but she
was technically trespassing. Months later, the money had still not arrived. Attempts by
well-meaning neighbours to contact the husband through his extended family proved
fruitless. The young wife had Nepali citizenship but returning to her natal home with a
child but no husband would be exceptionally stigmatising. At a very basic level, she
lacked the means to purchase a bus ticket home, though the neighbours had been
considering pooling funds to purchase the 150 rupee ($2 Australian) ticket on her behalf. Here, the tension between competing value systems was acute. As a junior wife, she would have traditionally enjoyed the same (or similar) status as senior wives. A 26-year-old woman explained the balance between multiple wives to me, ‘in the community, both are regarded as equals because they feel they should be equal. It is not her fault (new wife) that she married the man’ (Bhujel Female, Age 26, Interview Nepal 2013).

The wayward husband is mirroring an internationally supported system of values in which monogamy is considered the morally correct form of marriage. Previously, such renouncing of the marriage had strong social repercussions. The husband would have been heavily stigmatised and forced to either maintain his wife financially or find a suitable new partner for her. Conforming to the standards of international organisations undermined existing social institutions. Though undermining these institutions was viewed as a way to help women, it ultimately further marginalised those it claimed to be helping.

Even those polygamous families registered as Bhutanese refugees also faced difficulties. One such family included a gregarious husband and two doting wives. The first wife was badly injured in a fall a few years after they married in Bhutan. At this point, the husband and wife had one child. It was very difficult for the wife to care for the household in her semi-handicapped state and she seemed unlikely to bear more children. Even basic tasks, such as fetching water from their well and cooking, were no longer possible. The husband attempted to help but agricultural activities absorbed much of his day. They decided a second wife was necessary in order to keep the household functioning. A suitable distant female relative was selected. The three adults, now with several children, lived together in Bhutan, fled the country together, and shared a hut in the refugee camps. When I met them the patriarch was in his seventies and his wives in their mid-sixties. Their communal children had resettled to the United States and there were new grandchildren. The parents hoped to join them. In order to do so, the husband had to divorce his second wife to whom he had been married for close to fifty years. The seventy year-old man explained his experiences:

We wish we could go together. I requested at IOM not to leave any family here and to take the family together. I have been treated well there but I want to go with my other family members, I am sad with this separation for resettlement. Nowadays, after three years, some of the separated families are still here and have not been reunited. We’re very worried, that is a long time. I am not sure of the actual number but many people are
separated like this, people are really worried they will die here and not meet their family in the new country. It is very important to keep families together, they should not be separated but if separated they must be taken very quickly and resettled in the same house together (Brahmin Male, 60s, Interview Nepal 2013).

What emerged from these transformations was an imposed structure of marriage that mirrored the institutions of the governing bodies. Child marriage was no longer practiced and marriages respected national divisions. Further, there were few polygamous families under the age of 30, which reflected the broader ideal of monogamous marriage. Polygamous families were still considered equal to monogamous couples but the practice appeared to have essentially stopped. Younger couples explained that it was too expensive and caused problems with resettlement. While the UNHCR did not directly interfere with the family structure of refugees, the programs promoting human rights in the camps criticised the practice of polygamy. A framework of human rights asserts that ‘polygamy violates the dignity of women. It is an inadmissible discrimination against women’ (Human Rights Committee 2000, para. 24).

The evaluation of marriage practices as appropriate or inappropriate was a moral and political exercise. The promotion of particular models of family was an intimate intrusion into refugees’ lives. These intrusions reflected moral decisions, masquerading as administrative policy. Many speculated that adopting these arrangements would make life in new countries easier—crucially aware that if their social norms were deemed morally corrupt it would legitimise their exclusion. Most participants worried about their reception in new countries, how they would be judged or what values (if any) would be selected as morally legitimate. These concerns were the extension of an experience that had been occurring for the last two decades in the camps as they learned what it meant to be a refugee from Bhutan, in Nepal. Administrative decisions transformed the institution of marriage in the camps. These transformations were done under the premise of protection (either protecting children, protecting women, or ensuring scarce resources for deserving refugees). In doing so, camps reproduced a hierarchy of inclusion and exclusion. Refugees found themselves in a tenuous position between the two statuses.
Conclusion

The camps fostered a unique image of the Bhutanese refugees as deserving humanitarian subjects. In doing so, a distinct political space was created within an a-political, humanitarian area. The Bhutanese, as a refugee community, had not only been created in the camps but also consistently moulded into a specific image. The understandings of the international community’s expectations of refugees contributed to the maintenance of the image of a ‘Bhutanese refugee community’. Presenting the correct, coherent image translated into support. This conformity also obscured drastic power imbalances. The models of behaviour and values promoted in the camps often meant that international ideals go unquestioned as morally right.

Camps became a legitimate site of domination—legitimate due to lofty humanitarian ambitions such as helping refugees, supporting the vulnerable, and seeking universal equality. This required that the target of these ambitions transform their values, social norms, and the most intimate of relationships. It is worth returning to the celebration of Bhutan’s national day that began this chapter. The morning of the big day arrived, I was in the camp early to enjoy the celebrations. Walking to the designated field with my research assistant, I heard the sounds of families waking and starting their days. Arriving at the field, there was but a handful of children kicking a soccer ball in an ad hoc manner. Perhaps I was too early, or maybe the fog kept people away; it was a dreadfully cold morning. My research assistant was not sure where everyone was. He had not attended a celebration of Bhutan’s National Day for quite some time. We went back to his hut, drank tea, chatted, and returned to the field a few hours later. As the day stretched on, it became obvious the National Day was not going to be celebrated. The lead up to the event was largely a performance, an attempt to reflect the specific image of community that had been created in the camps. Maintaining this mask of community allowed them to present a concerted and strong political voice.

Maintaining an image of conformity required that internal divisions became deliberately obscured. The image of deserving Bhutanese refugees was a political arrangement that required considerable internal management, as the following chapter illustrates. However, though the ideals of the managing institutions permeated the social spaces of the camps, these ideals did not necessarily dominate the daily interactions of the refugees. Rather, the refugees took part in a partial, and strategic, subordination to further their own political goals.
Chapter 5

Behind the Performance

The previous chapter argued that humanitarian expectations of refugees mould the Bhutanese. The creation of a morally righteous Bhutanese community facilitated the management of the camps and the camps’ inhabitants. However, the Bhutanese arrived in Nepal with existing social structures and moral institutions. As a result, adoption of introduced norms and values was partial—though the appearance of completely internalising values was viewed as essential to the refugees’ ongoing support in the camps. The performance of this righteous identity is best interpreted as an on-stage construction, with very different behaviours characterising back-stage activities.

On my first day visiting the camps, a high-caste Brahmin provided me with a list of close to fifty people that he considered were suitable for me to work with. Over the subsequent weeks my research assistant led me through this list of predominantly high-caste Hindus who served as community representatives. The people I met with spoke earnestly regarding Bhutan; the morally repugnant locals; and the importance of serving their community. The stories re-enforced each other, emphasising the shared values between the refugees and the managing institutions. This list proved both helpful and problematic. It illustrated very quickly the highly orchestrated, on-stage public relations activities that the influential among the refugees felt was essential for continued support in the camps. The people who appeared on the list were not actors. While these were genuine experiences, they were displayed as representative of the group in its entirety, a performance of Bhutanese refugee-ness. The people I worked with were complex and at times contradictory—thus it was necessary, ‘to represent not only people’s most noble characteristics and behaviours, but also the uglier sides…to avoid the tendency in ethnographic writing… to champion our informants’ positions’ (Faier 2009, 28). Rather than simplifying my participants into the status of ‘ideal’ refugees, I approached them as complex people dealing with a difficult situation.

The list became a hindrance as I attempted to move beyond the performance, to grasp what social structures were both supported and obscured in these strategic
representations. Accessing people who were not on the list was difficult: my desire to speak with lower castes or religious converts was questioned and at times curtailed. Similarly, moving conversations beyond the themes considered acceptable by the more influential refugees proved challenging (see Appendix A). This chapter argues that, for the Bhutanese, attempting to define themselves as deserving humanitarian subjects necessitated elaborate measures of performance management (Goffman 1959, Berreman 1962). This performance simultaneously enunciated divisions that were considered acceptable by international managing structures—particularly cleavages based on national affiliations—while masking internal hierarchies and divisions. The image they present is akin to Adams’ (1996, 40) analogy of the two-way mirror: a cultural exchange of values in which the ideal a ‘Bhutanese refugee’ is both produced by the organisations running the camps and by those that live in the camps.

In the camps, the divisions between undeserving local and deserving refugee emerged as a morally acceptable division partly because it underscored the legitimacy of national boundaries. In contrast, the caste system was flagged as morally reprehensible. Its practice became understood as a threat not only to national constructs of Bhutanese-ness but also to the assumed solidarity of suffering as the moral construct of the refugee. This had the effect of normalising some hierarchies while problematising others. To analyse these interrelated processes, this chapter first interrogates the presentation of boundaries between refugees and locals. Next, it examines how the group’s internal divisions were managed. This approach demonstrates that humanitarian ideals encouraged particular, moral behaviours of refugees. Refugees learned that concealing alternative constructions of themselves was a necessary aspect of life in the camps.

**The Thin Line between Local and Refugee**

Participants consistently juxtaposed the image of a morally righteous Bhutanese refugee against the morally corrupt Nepali citizens. There was an often repeated equation of the lack of moral righteousness on the part of the locals with the payment of wages by the UNHCR and international NGOs. The payment of locals was criticised by refugees as fostering a ‘thirsty’ people: cash created dissatisfaction and an expectation for more. The previous chapter illustrated the way this understanding mirrors the decisions of the managing institutions. Technically, the Bhutanese refugees were not allowed to move—much less work—outside the camps. Reinforcing this ideology was the humanitarian
ideal of ‘community service’; these policies and programs effectively created an image of the ideal Bhutanese refugee that did not strive for economic gain. Hence, the key aspect of the Bhutanese performance in the camps was a desire to serve their community. The locals were paid for work performed, while refugees volunteered. This fostered the appearance of two groups, the local and the refugees, existing parallel to each other.

For the refugees, maintaining this image promised access to resources and support not available to the local population. Thus, working outside the camps was considered a threat to a righteous Bhutanese identity. The young, educated, and politically minded frequently described ‘outside’ work as demeaning or exploitative. They maintained that interacting and working with locals was a threat to the Bhutanese moral legitimacy: ‘spoiling’ was the key term in circulation. This understanding, though not entirely without justification, enhanced the divisions between local and refugee. It was a simplified understanding of what were complex and subtle social interactions. In turn, this mirrors the way international agencies attempted to order the camps along national boundaries. The reality was much more blurred. The refugees’ participation in paid labour challenged the performance of difference and complicated understandings of what it is to be a Bhutanese refugee. The pothole-riddled road between Damak and the camps wound its way through picturesque paddies. On the rare day that the smog lifted, you could glimpse Kanchanjunga, the third highest mountain in the world, or Makalu, another peak topping 8000 metres. The more common sight was fellow commuters: piled high on the roof of buses, packed snugly into minibuses, methodically powering sturdy single-speed bicycles, or walking.

The first bus to make the trip left around 6 a.m., covering the journey from the camps into the town of Damak in 10-15 minutes. It was a government bus, resembling a decrepit but brightly painted American school bus—the engine rumbling and belching smoke. Government buses ferried passengers back and forth roughly every half an hour. Minibuses supplemented the timetable, with departures every 8-15 minutes during the morning and late afternoon. The fares were the same but the minibuses were much more crowded with smaller passengers expected to clamber on laps or perch on wheel wells. Surveys I conducted at the main bus stop in Damak, on any given day, revealed close to 3000 refugees moving between the Beldangi camps and the town. A few worked in local shops or restaurants in Damak. Others worked as teachers in local schools. The
majority found employment in construction or as agricultural hands. The morning would see an influx into town while the evening experienced a reverse flow.

While service without expectation of financial benefit was promoted in the camps, volunteering was not always a valid livelihood strategy. During the autumn of 2012, most refugees undertook the 15 rupee (25 Australian cents) daily sojourn to participate in the rice harvest. Rice was a defining part of life both in Nepal and for the Bhutanese. Aside from the ubiquitous ‘namaste’ (casual ‘hello’), the other common greeting was ‘bhaat khaayo?’ (have you eaten rice?). On a practical level, it was the dietary mainstay of both the refugees and local Nepalese. It played a role in virtually every ritual—offered to the gods, given as alms, and bestowed upon friends or family to mark special occasions or rites of passage. The social calendar revolved around the life cycle of rice. The festival season coincided with the end of the growing season. In the low-lying Tarai region, both in Nepal and Bhutan, rice was planted at the beginning of the monsoon season in June. By November, the green stalks had turned golden, which signalled the beginning of the autumn harvest. The rice harvest commenced by cutting the ripe grass approximately four inches above the soil. The roughly three-foot long sections were bundled together and tied with pieces of rice stalks. These bundles sat in the sun for a few days to dry before being carried on the head, back, or underarm to a central spot for threshing. Threshing the rice against a raised, slatted platform that allows the grains to fall through to the ground was still mostly done by hand. These grains were further sorted on large, flat baskets, which were gently vibrated to reveal small stones, bits of chaff, and non-rice seeds.

Harvest days were long, with refugees often beginning to walk to the neighbouring villages or catching the first bus as the sun made its appearance on the horizon. Men and women of all ages participated. There was a sliding pay scale linked to age and gender. At its most practical level, participating in a rice harvest allowed the refugees to earn a little money. The wage for a male agricultural labourer amounted to roughly 25 rupee (40 Australian cents) per day. This is in contrast to the 170 rupee a male or the 125 rupee a female citizen of Nepal expected for similar work in the same region of Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012, p. 61). The property owner generally supplied a mid-day meal. Occasionally, cigarettes or alcohol were exchanged as a form of payment.

Those raised in the camps were very critical of these arrangements. The youth consistently described the work as exploitative and demeaning, something that should
be avoided at all costs. However, many still did participate particularly if the family needed money to participate in festivals or finance a family event. Though the wage was substandard and working as a hired hand was not ideal, older refugees seemed more willingly participated in the harvest. This was particularly true for men. Many older male participants expressed considerable sadness (that occasionally slipped into anger) at not being able to work the land. A Chetri man in his late seventies explained a widely held perception, ‘many of us still long for our country, our fields—we grew everything there: rice, cardamom, and oranges. Sometimes I wish I could take a gun and get my land back’ (Interview Nepal 2012). Participation allowed them to maintain some of the skills that defined their lives before exile. Many worked, much to the dismay of their children, when money was not crucial to the family’s survival. Almost universally, the youth viewed agricultural work as a threat to their position as Bhutanese refugees. The Bhutanese generation who was no longer agrarian consciously presented themselves as educated and civically minded. A willing participation in manual labour undermined the image of a modern, developed Bhutanese identity. Focusing on exploitation at the hands of the locals helped maintain their deserving status by emphasising the lack of legal protection they had within the state of Nepal. This redeemed the older generation’s somewhat willing participation in paid labour: their parents were being exploited and, hence, further victimised by the locals. The need to frame their participation in this manner illustrates that economic participation was a potential threat to their morally righteous status. This threat became acute in the high status and well- paid jobs, particularly teaching outside the camps.

_Educators: Refugees as Intellectuals_

Teaching was a profession esteemed by Bhutanese participants. Yet, despite teaching’s desirability, the schools in the camps suffered from a chronic shortage of teachers. This was partly due to the resettlement process: the camps were quickly becoming depopulated. Aside from refugees leaving the country, there were also pull factors at the domestic level. The teachers in camp schools received a modest stipend from Caritas. Schools outside the camps, particularly private institutions, paid considerably higher wages for teachers with a strong command of the English language. Furthermore, schools such as Montessori held international links. These schools were perceived as having the potential to help refugees find work once resettled. While the local schools
provided promising opportunities, working outside the camp was complicated. Being Bhutanese increased one’s chance of gaining employment due to the reputation of the camp-based schools, but it is also evidenced that they were not Nepali citizens. Most refugees who worked outside the camps slipped into a subnational category, focused on caste or ethnic affiliations. A female teacher who moved between working in the camps and in broader Nepal explained, ‘if they’re some 100 kilometres away, I can say that 75% don't say they're refugees; we simply say we are from somewhere else’ (Rai Female, Age 20s, Interview Nepal 2012).

Refugees recognised that this fluidity was troubling. The physical and moral boundary between who was local and who was a refugee that was so crucial in the camps became less obvious. This is akin to the Hutu context Malkki (1995a) observed in Tanzania. In a similarly protracted situation, Tanzanians living far from the camps did not describe themselves as refugees. This allowed them to blend into the host community. In turn, Malkki (1995a; 1995b) argues, the moral legitimacy of the nation-state as a means of defining and contouring people was brought into question. In Nepal, the easy traversing of boundaries threatened to blur the line between deserving refugees and undeserving local. In turn, these porous boundaries, which were presented as impenetrable, raised broader questions regarding contemporary imaginings of refugees.

For the Bhutanese, job security, high status, and independence all threatened what are increasingly key identifiers of a deserving refugee: poverty, dependency, and the centrality of national boundaries. This bears strong similarities to Gabiam’s (2012) observations in relation to Palestinian refugees. For the Palestinian refugees, improving living conditions was viewed both as undermining their ability to make demands based on victimisation while simultaneously functioning as a symbol of international support for their cause (Gabiam 2012). Like the Bhutanese, the links between suffering and political claims become unsettled as material needs are met. This highlights the broader metamorphosis of the refugee away from a group in need of political action towards a compassionate approach geared towards the alleviation of suffering (Gabiam 2012; Ticktin 2011).

For refugees who lived outside the camps for several years, many working as teachers, returning to the experience of being ‘real’ refugees required a re-orientation. The returnees I spoke with described their motivations for returning in terms of the broader theme in the camp: they wanted to serve their community. This motivation was morally
righteous yet it illustrated the conundrum these ‘successful’ rather than ‘suffering’ refugees faced. Technically, refugees living outside the camps are entitled to resettlement. Though somewhat locally integrated, they lacked citizenship and were barred from returning to Bhutan: they were still refugees. However, none of the returnees articulated that they returned to the camps to exercise their right to resettle. Rather, experiencing material deprivation while serving their community was viewed as a requisite of ‘refugee-ness’. This, in turn, illustrated the strategies refugees had to use to balance what were described by international agencies as rights with what were experienced as contingencies. As the previous chapter illustrated, the camp rhetoric promoted self-sufficiency and community while demanding the recognition of boundaries. In turn, this tension between the right to resettle and the imagined refugee who deserves resettlement reflects the following:

the evaluative principles and practices operating in the social world, the debates they arouse, the processes through which they become implemented, the justifications that are given to account for discrepancies observed between what should be and what is actually (Fassin 2008, p. 334).

In the camps, not only was the distinction between local and refugee problematic in many circumstances, so too was the performance of the Bhutanese as a united community.

Caste as Deformity, Caste as Conformity

Participants consistently drew a direct equation between Hinduism and the caste system. As a means of providing order to the social structure in the camps, however, the reach of caste was pervasive. It dictated the kinds of food people ate and shared with others, whether they could drink a cup of tea with someone, and who was allowed into their home. Caste regulated the choice of marriage partners and friends—whom they greeted in public and whom they avoided. It was omnipresent. Caste and ethnicity often were linked together leading to generalisations regarding physical appearance, the Brahmin and Kshatriya (more commonly known simply as Chetri) were described as tall, fair and possessing a pointy nose (Brahmin Male, Age 56, Interview Nepal 2013). A low caste man explained to me these distinctions “I can tell a Brahmin because he looks like a Brahmin. (I ask what he means – how can he tell?) He walks like a Brahmin (participant pulls back shoulders and raises his chin) and it is based on his complexion." (Gazmere Male, Age 30s, Interview Nepal 2012). Names, both surnames
and give names, also function as identifiers, "I can tell as Brahmin when I ask his surname and automatically I know what caste he is from. People don't lie about their surnames." (Brahmin Male, Age 70, Interview Nepal 2013). According to the religious texts (Vedas), Brahmins were associated with the head, while Chetris were linked to the arms. The middle castes, including those now considered Indigenous groups in Nepal, were stereotyped as looking ‘Chinese’ with a flat nose and tan skin. They were associated with the trunk of the body. The lower castes were generalised as possessing a dark complexion and were linked to the feet. Physical characteristics and bodily associations were directly linked to idealised occupational status: Brahmins were priests; Chetris were warriors; the middle castes were labourers or trades people; and the lowest castes performed work that was considered polluting.

Despite this apparent coherence, the term caste must be approached critically. Michaels (2004, p. 166) argues it encompasses five criteria: it must be a sufficiently sized group, maintain external boundaries, share common activities, provide a sense of belonging, and provide a system with clear roles. There were at times competing opinions regarding where a caste or ethnic group should sit within the hierarchy, highlighting the complex and contested nature of the caste system. Burkert (1997, p. 258) similarly observed in Nepal that ‘assignments to particular categories is subject to competing interpretations, and well as change over time’. Further, these are not necessarily ‘primordial, but brought into being through historical process in which deliberate design may or may not play a part’ (Whelpton 1997, p. 70). Hutt (1997, p.118) also cautions that ‘caste differentiation also varied considerably from place to place’. However, caste or ethnic affiliation was a cornerstone of social relationships in the camps and had strong parallels to the caste and ethnic categories put forth in Nepal’s 1854 Muluki Ain. This act codified Hindu caste structure, institutionalising the hierarchy in Nepal, and justified discrimination against some castes/ethnic groups (Yadav 2016).
Table 1: Nepal Social Hierarchy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchy</th>
<th>Habitat</th>
<th>Belief/Religion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) Water Acceptable (Pure)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Wears of the sacred tread</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Upper caste” Brahmin and Chetri</td>
<td>Hills</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Upper caste” (Madhesi)</td>
<td>Tarai</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Upper caste” (Newar)</td>
<td>Kathmandu Valley</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Matwali Alchohol Drinkers (non-enslavable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gurung, Magar, Sunuwar, Thakali, Rai, Limbu,</td>
<td>Hills</td>
<td>Tribal/Shamanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newar</td>
<td>Kathmandu Valley</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Matawali Alchohol Drinkers (enslavable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhote (including Tamang)</td>
<td>Mountains/Hills</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chepang, Gharti, Hayu Kumal, Tharu</td>
<td>Hills</td>
<td>Animism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) Water Unacceptable (Impure)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Touchable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhobi, Kasai, Kusale, Kulu, Musalman</td>
<td>Kathmandu Valley</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mlechha (foreigner)</td>
<td>Tarai</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Europe/USA/etc.</td>
<td>Christianity, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Untouchable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badi, Damai, Gaine, Kadara, Kami, Sarki</td>
<td>Hills</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Mulukui Ain 1854, Whelpton (1997), Whelpton (2005), and Micheals (2004)

The modern role of caste was frequently used to justify why some groups held considerable sway in the camps, maintaining positions of power, interacting with international staff, and enjoying a higher standard of living, while other groups struggled. In other words, attempts to maintain boundaries between groups and preserve internal cohesion led to distinct political and social consequences (Whelpton 1997). For instance, Brahmins were rewarded handsomely for performing rituals. The reading of sacred texts was necessary for weddings and funerals. Entire epics must be read an auspicious number of times. The priests who did these readings (sometimes upwards of six times for a single ceremony) received money and other resources as repayment. It was not only an esteemed task but a lucrative one. While the lowest castes had begun to train as priests, their perceived physical differences were used to justify their lack of employment. It was explained as, ‘to read the Vedas though is very difficult so many people ignore the pronunciations. Especially from the lower castes, they can't pronounce correctly, they have thick tongues” (Brahmin Male, Age 34, Interview Nepal 2013).
Brahmins maintained that the tongues of the lower castes lacked the flexibility to speak Sanskrit elegantly. In this way, stereotyping became a means of legitimising inequality (Malkki 1995a). Rather than access to opportunities being perceived as limited due to drastic power imbalances embedded in broader social institutions, these limitations became justified through the perception of physical differences.

Caste was a fundamental way in which the Bhutanese understood the world and their associated place within it. There was great reluctance to accept interference into this arena: hence, the steadfast and diverse resistance to discussing the intricacies of the system. The many campaigns in the camps to abolish the caste system have, in effect, made the issue a sensitive one and off-limits to outsiders. At the head of this resistance (though by no means the only group opposed to outside intervention in the caste system) was the priestly caste—generally both male and female Brahmins. However, many Chetri were similarly resistant to change, ‘The caste system helps keep our community organized and it is good to have the caste system. We're satisfied with our caste and others should be satisfied with theirs’ (Chetri Women, Age 34, Interview Nepal 2012). Their attempts to present an image of a caste system that has disappeared or been radically refashioned relates to their traditional role as the protectors of Hinduism. For most Brahmins, caste and Hinduism could not be disentangled.

The social dominance of Brahmins at times was inadvertently enhanced by ideals promoted by international agencies: namely the emphasis on education, promotion of community cohesion, and cleanliness. These were central to the Brahmin castes. As the previous chapter illustrated, in Bhutan Brahmin males did enjoy greater access to education than any other group. Virtually everyone I spoke with expected Brahmin men to be educated. In the camp, though all castes and both sexes received the same number of years’ schooling, the perception was that Brahmins were inherently more intelligent. The notion persisted that people were born with clearly defined roles (in their castes) and these roles demanded particular attributes. A key aspect of the sacred text Bhagavad Gita, according to participants, hinged on the various attributes of people within the broader cosmos (Brahmin Male, Age 56, Interview Nepal 2012). Vishnu Brahmins are expected to behave in a fashion that reflects the sacred texts: they lead by example and inspire conformity. Brahmins, and particularly the highest-ranking Vishnu Brahmins, are the protectors of the Hindu cosmic order. From the perspective of ritual cleanliness, Brahmins (and specifically Brahmin males) sit at the pinnacle: they are able to interact with their gods much more closely than any other group. Their ritual purity is
maintained through bathing, for water is exceptionally important in Hindu cosmology. It was a conduit that ritually cleanses and allows higher castes to worship closely to gods.

In the camp bathing everyday was essential for the highest castes. The Lutheran World Federation maintained the communal wells that provided clean drinking water for the refugees. These flowed twice a day: first in the morning and then in the afternoon. Generally women and young girls are responsible for collecting and transporting the water. To avoid the long waits that queueing for water often entailed, the women would line up their containers in anticipation of the water collection. These containers ‘held’ their spots so they could continue with their daily activities: preparing food for the family, tending the garden, sweeping their homes, or perhaps beginning to soak the laundry if there was water remaining from the previous day. While it was essential that women did not lose valuable time waiting with their containers at the communal wells, this also meant that containers left behind risked contamination due to their proximity to ritually polluting containers. Thus the communal water pumps were a place where the contradictions between the assertion that caste is no longer pertinent and the desire to maintain caste-based social hierarchy became obvious.

Several higher castes complained that lower castes were deliberately attempting to touch them when they went to collect water, consequently polluting not only the person collecting the water but also causing the water to be ‘impure’. Participants recognised these complaints would not be considered appropriate by the Lutheran World Federation. A few participants maintained that they did request separate wells but were informed that their motivations were not appropriate. In order to overcome this situation without sullying the image of a united community, alternative wells have been developed. These wells are deliberately hidden from international staff (and researchers) working in the camps. I was working in the camps for several months before I noticed a hand pump beside a higher caste home. The pump was on a fenced elevated platform, obscured by plants and further protected by a large padlock. The family, whom I worked with on a daily basis, became elusive when I inquired about the well. Initially, they avoided my questions but later asserted they had to protect the well because animals could damage it. Eventually it became evident that this well allowed the family to access a source of water ‘unpolluted’ by the lower castes without appearing discriminatory.
The criticisms of the system by international organisations in the camps functioned to further regulate the group and potentially legitimise further interventions into their lives. Hence, when lower castes deliberately tried to pollute the wells (from a ritualised standpoint), this was perceived as not only corrupting the Hindu social world but also, simultaneously, undermining the image of a united community by drawing attention to a still functioning caste system. The lower castes were acutely aware that the higher castes did not have recourse for such complaints through the governing institutions. A Brahmin woman in her thirties explained the strategy she employed to practise the traditional system while abiding by the camp rules:

Before, a Brahmin could say “You're no good. Don't touch me, don't come to my house.” Now we have to be quiet but they [the lower castes] understand. They come to my house and I will give them some tea, no problem, but they know they need to stay outside. We don't say no but people understand. Now we'll get in trouble if we say, but everyone understands. They won't try to enter my house. After they leave, I'll wash the cup extra times: special washing. Many people won't let them sit in a chair but I will let them. I would wash this chair many times though: special wash (Brahmin Female, Age 30s, Interview Nepal 2012).

Participants’ attempts to continue their cultural norms while appearing to conform to international ideals should not be dismissed as hypocritical. Rather, this raises broader questions regarding recognition and humanitarian value systems. The higher castes were attempting to merge the social institution that very much defined their social relationships with the ‘rules’ of the international agencies in the camps.

The higher castes were quick to publically assert that the caste system was out-dated, unpractised, or a product of the corrupting influence of the local population. One high-caste (Brahmin) family that I interacted with almost every day in the camps—including acting as the ‘official’ photographer for their daughter’s wedding—helped me develop a survey for use in the camps. As we worked through the questions regarding caste, the family consistently asked if they were getting the answers right. They were acutely aware that caste was flagged as a social problem by international agencies. The dominant rhetoric by the higher castes was that the system is gone. Their liminal status as refugees required them to publically disavow a central way of understanding their world. This requirement demonstrated that attempts by humanitarian organisations to create a more perfect world morphed into a form of governance that not only cares for but controls its subjects (Barnett 2011). This more perfect world included ‘injecting values that are presumed to do a better job of improving well-being’ than existing social structures (Barnett 2011, p. 231).
Conversations regarding extra-caste marriages, deemed ‘mixed marriages’ by participants, emerged as the most enlightening path to discuss the contemporary impact of the caste system. The following interaction with a high caste twenty-year-old male illustrated the gap between rhetoric and reality:

Nowadays, people are educated. It is loose compared to earlier days in Bhutan. People now that have no concept of caste, not thinking from this caste or that caste but all equal.

[Researcher: if you married outside your caste, how would people treat you?]

People would deny to visit my house and wouldn't eat anything that I touch. We would get bad treatment as well (Magar male, Age 30s, Interview Nepal 2013).

The idea that the group has been educated to have ‘no concept of caste’ is a performance, an attempt to show that they have internalised the values of the humanitarian groups in the camps. They were one community where everyone was equal: their emancipation from problematic social structures has been complete. This veneer of community began to break down when the specifics of caste dynamics were discussed. As I moved beyond the high-caste gatekeepers, it became evident the image of a united community was part illusion, part strategy, and part aspiration. For the higher castes, and virtually every Hindu participant, religion, caste and community were explicitly tied: if they changed religions, they ran the risk of losing their community.

Mixed Marriages

If a higher caste Bhutanese married a lower caste, irrespective of their gender, their former caste status was lost and they were no longer ritually pure. Such a couple’s children would inherit lower caste status and they would be barred from entering higher castes’ homes. This represented a significant rupture with social norms as wives were expected to join the husband’s family and provide a significant domestic contribution. Mixed marriages could result in high-caste families performing burial rights for the wayward child and ceasing all forms of communication. This was a devastating and hurtful situation, both for the children and the parents. Sometimes this was a permanent arrangement, while in other families the birth of a grandchild was enough to rekindle a relationship. This new relationship was considered a positive development but the lower caste member was still treated as impure and, as such, was forbidden from eating with the family. The treatment of the child varied by family but some higher caste families made exceptions to the strict dining rules generally observed. For most who decided to
marry outside their caste, both the lower and the higher caste families rejected them. When discussing mixed marriages with me, participants invariably spoke of a high-caste woman who married a low-caste man while in Bhutan. This couple was thoroughly rejected by the broader group. They had to build a home away from their family and communication essentially ceased. Virtually every participant in the camps knew about this transgression. Because this individual incident was so notorious and participants were unable to recall any other instances, it suggests that in Bhutan mixed-caste marriages were rare. However, in the camps, there have been several hundred of these unions.

‘Love marriages’ were frequently attributed to the schooling system in the camps. The Caritas run schools had exceptional participation rates of males and females across all castes. The schools in the camps created an environment described as ‘everyone mixed’. Groups that previously had little direct interaction found themselves studying together. When I enquired where couples who eloped in a love marriage met, they almost invariably pointed to the school. Love marriages were considered problematic but this varied based on the degree of difference perceived between social, caste, or ethnic unit. For example:

I did the love marriage and community felt this not good to do. I am Gurung (middle caste) and husband is Sarki (Untouchable). We met at school, at first my parents scolded for marrying out of caste but they were Christian and suggested that we become Christians otherwise in future we would be out of the scene, not be able to make a good future so my husband converted - I was born Christian. We celebrate all things with our church community and we invite our neighbors as well (Gurung Female, Age 21, Interview Nepal 2013).

In this instance, the Gurung family was reluctant to accept the marriage but provided a pathway for the couple to move forward. There are fewer pathways forward for marriages occurring between those at polar ends of the social hierarchy:

It was a love marriage, inter-caste. I am from Kafle caste (Brahmin) and my wife is Biswa (Low/untouchable). At the time, some people were tricky when we married, we had a big ceremony but my family did not come. My father and mother, it was quite difficult at first. I had to teach them, the society is not like the previous one and now (16 years later) they have changed (Brahmin Male, Age 31, Interview Nepal 2013).

While this participant flagged that there had been improvements over the past sixteen years, his wife is still barred from entering his parent’s home. When asked what happens when different castes marry, responses tended to be, ‘the community will hate us’ (Gazmere Female, Age 19, Interview Nepal 2012) or ‘it is better not to do these
things because it will make things very difficult’ (Chetri Male, Age 30s, Interview Nepal 2013). Yet these mixed marriages were occurring at rates that at least give the impression of greater frequency than before fleeing Bhutan. In the camps, the possibility of alternative communities not based on the Hindu social hierarchy has emerged. The Brahmin man quoted above explained to me that after his family performed funeral rites due to his decision to elope with a lower caste woman, ‘we were alone and someone said, maybe we should think about becoming Christian’ (Interview Nepal 2013).

Converting to Find a Community

Christianity was (until 2008) banned in Bhutan (U.S. Department of State 2008). One man who ran a secret church out of his home in Bhutan still used his hut in the camps to hold services. This was the only Christian I met who practiced before exile. Since then, a striking number of camp inhabitants had converted to Christianity. The Beldangi camps (I, II and Extension) had a population of approximately 26 000 during fieldwork. My visits to twenty nine churches revealed that roughly 3000 people actively attended Christian services. I was told that there were fifty churches in the Beldangi camps but either I was not able to visit all of them or they did not have rosters available. The actual number of converts was possibly higher. Even at approximately 11%, the number of Christians in the camps was considerably higher than the 1.42% (Central Bureau of Statistics 2014, p. 227) in Nepal and 1-2% estimated for Bhutan (US Department of State 2008, p. 2). There were few Brahmin converting and those who did convert tended to do so because of a mixed marriage. The middle castes represented a sizeable number of converts, though a much greater number of this group were converting to Buddhism or Kiratism (as discussed in the following section). The lower castes, particularly the youth and women, were converting in very high numbers. A lower caste participant spoke candidly regarding his motivation and experiences after converting:

I changed to Christianity because there is equality in Christianity; there isn’t a caste system. I wasn't interested in the previous religion (Hinduism). People have their wedding at the church and when we have a birthday party, people from our church come to our house to celebrate. We have a very strong community … I found that in that church, any issues between people will get support from all castes. Before, if a Biswa [untouchable]

13 The number of members was generally provided by the minister or other church official. I was concerned that there would be an inclination to inflate numbers because of the presumption that I was affiliated with Christian churches due to my ethnic/national background. To overcome this, I also examined their rosters when available.
Another convert articulated similar thoughts:

I was Hindu in Bhutan but changed to Christianity. There were many rituals in Hinduism and it is better with Christianity. I feel there is more equality, there will be a community that treats everyone equal, that is why I decided to join. I am happy with the new community. We celebrate most things with our church community- either in our home or at the church (Kami/Christian Male, Age 47, Interview Nepal 2013).

The reasons for changing religion varied and the perceptions of those converting were similarly complex. Yet the promise of equality and gaining access to a community who would not treat them differently due to their caste was repeated as the primary motivation. Some members of the lower castes, particularly the elderly, were not eager to change religions—even if their children were. One lower caste family saw all their children convert to Christianity but the parents remained reluctant. They voiced the same concerns as the higher caste Brahmins: that converting would lead to a loss of culture and jeopardise their future beyond this physical life. None of the higher caste people I spoke with entertained the possibility that people were converting because of discrimination. This understanding undermined the camp ideals they strove to reflect: that they are a united community. Rather, higher castes explained it as ‘the will of the individual’ (Brahmin Male, Age 24, Interview Nepal 2012) or ‘they think they will get more benefits when they resettle’ (Chetri Female, Age 30s, Interview Nepal 2012). This understanding undermined the moral legitimacy the converts were seeking.

Converting to escape persecution or discrimination carried very different connotations than converting to access additional resources.

Higher caste participants claimed the caste system maintained social order and group cohesion, as caste provided architectural integrity to the group. Part of this understanding linked to the way the higher castes conceptualise the role of the lower castes. High-ranking priests explained that the low-caste are valued members of the Hindu cosmic universe as the vessels for inevitable impurities. Of course, those who are pure cannot interact with these vessels but, the priests claimed, that did not diminish their importance. Participants implied that people attempting to lose their culture via conversions would regret these choices later. This further articulated the perception of the higher castes that Hinduism was intrinsically linked to an exiled Bhutanese identity. Lower castes who changed their religion to Christianity were viewed by many Hindus (but particularly the highest castes) as dissenters, destroying the fabric of what it meant to be Bhutanese.
The key holidays in the camps centred on Hindu epics. These holidays affirm social bonds and the centrality of Hindu social values. While some Christians in the camps still participated in these rituals, most viewed them as false celebrations. Instead, they promoted the celebration of Christian holidays, Easter and Christmas in particular. In the weeks before Christmas, the Christians in the camps invited everyone living in the camps to celebrate with them. The use of a written invitation—generally in English—was a distinct break from the verbal invitations generally issued in the camps. The written invitation included a sampling of the Christmas menu, which included beef.

Cows hold a central place in Hindu cosmology—dung is used to ritually purify homes, and milk sustains families as a primary source of protein. Further, oxen were crucially important in agriculture for preparing rice paddies and later converting paddies to buckwheat or millet fields. Historically, abstaining from beef may have been a way for Hindus to differentiate from invading groups (Harris 1966; Robbins 1999).

For the refugees, consuming beef was a reaction against the Hindu religious system: converts were participating in a larger process of questioning Hindu norms and values. Further, the flaunting of beef consumption was a display of difference from the nation of Nepal. The Government of Nepal forbids the killing of cows (Gov of Nepal 1990). Ogura (2007) and Shneiderman (2010) have similarly noted that Indigenous groups in Nepal consume beef as a symbolic and material means to assert a social position independent of the still strongly Hindu government. Christmas festivities became a resource and a ritual that ‘can speak clearly and centrally to aspirations towards cultural change and even assimilation’ (Braumann 1992, p. 109). Advertising their consumption of beef was a political stance. It evidenced an alternative identity, different from both the local Nepalese and the most powerful members of the refugee community. The Bhutanese were actively working out competing notions regarding what was considered good and evil, pure and impure (Douglas 2003). It highlighted their perceived difference from an agriculturally based, Hindu population and their aspirations to be actors within an international value system. But this was, again, a complicated association.

Hindu participants maintained that converting to Christianity could not change one’s real caste. Many expressed genuine concern that associating with castes who had been considered ‘for thousands of years’ as polluting was not wise. As a female Brahmin explained, ‘Maybe Christian families will allow but I won't allow low caste into my home, I won't eat with the lower castes’ (Age 30s, Interview Nepal 2012). For the
converts, the change promised a degree of social acceptance previously denied to them. The Christian churches emerged as a means of partially shedding one’s prescribed role and its associations. In this respect, it was a social and political stance. What is occurring is more complex than adopting symbols of the West. These converts were embracing and creating a new Bhutanese culture. Blatantly consuming beef and disavowing the caste system disputed their socio-political position within a Hindu-based camp hierarchy. This expression of Bhutanese-ness, in turn, fitted more directly with the nation-based understanding promoted by the UNHCR rather than the religious-based approach employed by camp leaders. Converting to Christianity thus created an alternative community that is fundamentally different from either the Bhutanese identity founded on Buddhism that the government of Bhutan promotes, or an ethnic Nepalese identity that has strong Hindu connotations. These changes suggested that through this process of conversion, people began to understand and orientate themselves in a fundamentally different manner (Robbins 1999). Camps created new conditions of Bhutanese refugee-ness.

Rediscovering Indigenous Identities

Once the resettlement process is complete, roughly 10 000 Bhutanese will remain in refugee camps. These are people who have either decided on personal grounds not to resettle or cannot resettle due to an inability to pass a security clearance. These people (and some already living outside the camps) had begun to take steps to locally integrate independent of the UNHCR and against the wishes of the Government. This had led to a strong resurgence in ‘indigenous’ identities. One of my participants, a Gurung man, followed Hinduism in Bhutan and spoke only Nepali. Living in the camps had led him to rediscover his indigenous roots. The Gurung aspects of his identity have increased in importance. Over the years, he procured books discussing Gurung social norms and took steps to learn his ‘real’ language. He also learned that the Gurungs in Nepal are generally Buddhist, not Hindu. He (along with his family) made the conversion to Buddhism in order to move closer to their genuine, Indigenous identity.

This man’s decisions were not an isolated case. Interviews and observations indicated a high number of non-Hindu religions in the camps. The vast majority of Gurungs, Tamangs and Sherpas had converted ‘back’ to Buddhism. Similarly, Rais and Limbus were converting to Kirati, an animistic religion. Surveys I conducted in Beldangi II
revealed that close to 100% of Gurungs, Limbus, Magars, Rais, Tamangs, and Sherpa were no longer Hindu. Rather, these groups were (re)discovering ‘locally grown’ religions: Kiratism is associated with eastern Nepal and Gautama Buddha was born in Lumbini, Nepal. During the Rana dynasty in Nepal, these religions were considered branches of Hinduism rather than separate religions (Gellner 2007; Whelpton, Gellner & Pfaff-Czarnecka 2008). For the higher caste Hindu participants, this understanding was still credible. One Brahmin man in his fifties explained that these religions were ‘almost the same as Hinduism’ (Interview Nepal 2013). For the Bhutanese who convert, these religious alliances were political, self-conscious and strategic. These ‘more authentic’ identities have found new life in the camps (Brown 2010)

Though participants discussed changing religions, it was also possible that presenting themselves as largely Hindu was advantageous during the early years of exile in Nepal. It might have been a strategy to emphasise their affinity to a host country that was, at that point, a Hindu Kingdom. While the high-caste community leaders still described the refugees as fundamentally Hindu, smaller sub-groups who previously had been subsumed under the label Bhutanese have moved to the fore. From a demographic standpoint, refugees who tapped into an alternative identity discourse are now the majority. For participants not planning on resettling, indigeneity presented an opportunity to increase their chances of integrating locally.

Demands based on ethnicity have increased in legitimacy both internationally and locally during the refugees’ time in the camps and ‘expressions of indigenous identity have been linked to broader social movements’ (Muchlmann 2009, p. 476). In 2002, Nepal formally recognised 59 indigenous groups under the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act. Having an indigenous claim to Nepal may provide political leverage for refugees who wanted to settle locally. Further, the UNHCR actively promoted the recognition of indigenous groups as laid out in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples. In terms of accessing resources in the camps, an indigenous angle may have translated into support or funding that previously was channelled through Brahmin-dominated community leaders. Adopting these ‘indigenous’ religions was considered less of an attack on the fabric of the Bhutanese refugee society. However, the central concern persisted that fractures in the constructed community of Bhutanese may diminish the degree of autonomy they
have worked for in the camps. As Murray Li (2000) observes in Indonesia, these attempts to funnel resources along indigenous channels represented an opportunity but were not a guarantee. Again, as with broader refugee status, there was a little discussed process of evaluation and judgement that accentuated some boundaries while minimising others to create a hierarchy of deserving. The Bhutanese had actively cultivated an image that was linked to a national identity—emerging indigenous associations articulated the boundaries that were masked behind the performance of Bhutanese-ness.

There was one group in the camps who appeared to be less transformed than others: the Sharchopas from Eastern Bhutan. This historically Buddhist group had not converted to Hinduism, Kiratism, or to Christianity. They had little engagement in the numerous projects run by international agencies in the camp and existed largely independent from broader trends in the camp. Perhaps most strikingly different was their steadfast belief that they would be repatriated to Bhutan. They had little interest in working with researchers and worried that speaking with me would compromise their future return. Though I did speak with several Sharchopas, the only close relationship I was able to foster was with a woman in her forties who decided to resettle. After living alone in the camp for two decades and receiving no information about the fate of her imprisoned husband in Bhutan, she concluded that he had died in custody. This spurred her to pursue a future in a new country. Her decision to resettle set her apart from her neighbours by opening her to a new social landscape within which to orientate herself. Her willingness to work with an international researcher suggested a fundamental realignment. For better or for worse, she was taking the first steps towards becoming a humanitarian subject—joining the broader community of Bhutanese refugees.

Resettling

During 2012 and 2013, IOM buses full of Bhutanese destined for new countries left the camps in the early morning hours. The departees’ foreheads were heavy with tikkas made of red powder and rice that well-wishers had bestowed upon them. Their departure understandably evoked sorrow, for there was still uncertainty if or when families would be reunited. Friendships had not been considered in the resettlement process and the loneliness for some, even if their family was intact, was acute. By February of 2013, the resettlement process had been occurring for seven years at a rate
of nearly 900 per month. By the early months of 2013 already 80,000 Bhutanese were resettled. An additional 20,000 Bhutanese were somewhere in the process. Where people sat in the particular timeframes of this process was a common point of conversation and reference among refugees. Remarks such as ‘how is your process?’ or ‘there is some kind of trouble with my process’ punctuated everyday interactions. The process participants frequently referred to was lengthy, with changes to family situations (births, marriages and deaths) further drawing it out. To begin the process, refugees had to submit an expression of interest to the UNHCR. After expressing interest, an application containing all the names of family members hoping to resettle together was submitted. Once this was accepted, the family would attend an interview conducted by local staff. This interview was part informational and part initial screening. After these preliminary steps, the UNHCR referred potentially eligible refugees to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), who began the processes of security clearances and health screens which would funnel refugees to various new countries. It was during this process of screening and channelling—before the cultural orientation process officially begins—that refugees began to form opinions of various countries’ expectations of refugees. These opinions also formed through conversations with members of their immediate family, extended family, and friends that already were resettled. Most, if not everyone, had contact with people already resettled and some of the first refugees to resettle in the United States have returned to the camps for visits or marriage. This both created and maintained communication links between the camps and countries of resettlement.

Generally speaking, the United States was viewed as desiring refugees who were able to become economically independent very quickly. Australia, on the other hand, was viewed by participants as deliberately seeking refugees who needed additional social support, either due to poor health, advanced age, or life experiences. The extra support afforded by Australia’s welfare system was weighed against the perception that finding work in Australia would be extremely difficult compared to the US. While refugees also had opinions of New Zealand, Canada and various European countries, due to my personal links with the US and Australia, these countries were most frequently compared. Refugees were allowed to state a preference regarding their country of resettlement and existing family links were given priority. Some refugees were able to present themselves strategically and build a case for a specific country by emphasising health concerns or a particular skill set. These refugees attempted to promote a
particular image relevant to their resettlement needs. Ultimately, the IOM, in conjunction with the respective national governments, decided the destination of refugees. Yet the impression that refugees might have some input in the decisions encouraged another form of performance.

Once a refugee was partnered with a country, a date was selected for departure. This date was occasionally known a few months in advance but generally the space between receiving the date and departure was brief: weeks at most. During this period, a three-to five-day cultural orientation took place: shopping for goods to accompany the move occurred; and farewells were made. Some refugees attempted to make pilgrimages to particular holy sites in Nepal while others arranged to see family living in Nepal, India or Bhutan before departing. While a few did make illegal visits to Bhutan, it was more common for family still in Bhutan to covertly visit the camps. Once the morning of departure arrived, the bus was boarded with much fanfare and emotional outpour. The bus would take them to nearby Biratnagar, where they boarded a charter flight to Kathmandu. The refugees would spend two to four nights in Kathmandu, staying in IOM facilities as they received their international travel documents. Here, they would also learn what to expect on a long-haul international flight; undergo a fitness for travel evaluation and have a final cultural orientation regarding their new countries.

This long, and at times frustrating, process marks the Bhutanese as the elite of global refugees. They have been consistently praised by the UNHCR and international NGOs. Participants largely understood resettlement as a reward for their good behaviour.

Participants were well aware of their status and the precariousness of that position: there are literally millions of other refugees around the world hoping to leave camps and start anew. At stake in the performance of being deserving humanitarian subjects was their future. In turn, this reflected global power disparities—geopolitical sentiments that rewarded some while denying others. This process ultimately affirmed the altruism of the wealthy countries while critiquing the social structures of the less affluent.

Conclusion

Refugee status is a legal right, but becoming a deserving humanitarian subject is largely contingent on particular behaviours. It is also a status that can be sought after and competed over. It becomes an overarching tension as participants attempt to perform the
role of idealised refugees when they are a very real human group with internal struggles, contradictions and shortcomings. Camps reproduced hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion: refugees could be included while locals were excluded. However, visions of unity are misleading. Malkki (1992; 1995a) skilfully examines the way refugees balance the competing hierarchies of the nation left and the nation they are housed in. The nation emerges as a moral category that forms and transforms its subjects, past and present. This chapter illustrated how additional hierarchies also demand interrogation, in particular, the ways humanitarian and pre-existing norms and values converged in the camps to produce new understandings of the world. Examining the interaction of these various social constructs illuminates the experience of life under humanitarian governance. Life in the camps becomes a site where competing notions of the world—how community and difference are understood, negotiated, or obfuscated—are negotiated. These tensions make:

explicit and intelligible the evaluative principles and practices in different societies and contexts, of analysing and interpreting the way social agents form, justify and apply their judgements on good and evil (Fassin & Stoczkowski 2008, p. 331).

The Bhutanese deftly negotiated expectations while simultaneously curtailing their reform efforts.

The very specific examples analysed here are indicative of a broader process of judging, condemning and intervening; a process that is obscured by the morality of humanitarian values. The evaluation of people as deserving or undeserving is a moralising discourse. To maintain a morally righteous status, the Bhutanese must appear to reflect the norms and values deemed acceptable. A successful performance, as this chapter illustrated, obscured complex forms of social organisation. As the refugees boarded the plane in Kathmandu bound for Australia, some of the lessons learned in the camps receded in importance as new expectations emerged. Politically, refugees were increasingly called upon as a means of evidencing Australia’s righteousness. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this public morality was necessary to manage the boundaries of the country and people within them.
Chapter 6

Australia’s Moral Geography

In the camps, government policy, service providers, international representatives and powerful Bhutanese actively cultivated an image of refugee-ness. In Australia, the Bhutanese found themselves in a different kind of political limbo, with new power relations to negotiate and distinct expectations to navigate. In February of 2013, these expectations were clearly conveyed to the Bhutanese when an Ethnic Leaders Forum in Adelaide hosted the Assistant Director of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection. The presentation's purpose was to explain recent changes to Australia’s on-shore visa processing program. The speaker informed the group that the Department had decided to prioritise refugees coming from UNHCR-run camps by expanding their off-shore humanitarian visa program. One male refugee at the Forum asserted that the off-shore process through the UNHCR took a very, very long time. The Assistant Director explained that this was due to the large number of people attempting to come to Australia independently as asylum seekers:

The reason why, what is linked back to this issue: on-shore protection. Reason that off-shore has slowed down is because of high on-shore visas. The UNHCR has the highest numbers ever seen but processing time has increased because our numbers are capped. We're hoping now the processing will be faster (Public Forum, Adelaide 2013).

He explained further that for people arriving as asylum seekers rather than UNHCR-referred refugees, applications lodged to reunite their families would be given the lowest priority. On the other hand, those who came through the UNHCR system attempting to reunite with family still in camps would see their applications moved to the top of the queue. The service providers present were informed that they should not be assisting asylum seekers who had not been verified and that resources should be going to refugees.

This presentation created a clear dichotomy between refugees who arrived using what was described at this forum as ‘the appropriate’ avenues and those who attempted to make their own way. The former deserved the refugee label and associated social benefits while the latter were subject to suspicion as undeserving of benefits. Beyond
the factual aspects regarding changes to the visa program, the participants also picked up on more subtle lessons. Namely, attempts to act as agents of their own destiny (during this presentation, it was framed as deciding to get on a boat) would not be rewarded: waiting in a camp was the only acceptable way to legitimately gain admission to Australia as a refugee. The message was also that only those coming through the camp system have the appropriate backstory—morally they were closer to Australians due to their apparent respect for national boundaries. Their moral superiority translated into support and, possibly, acceptance. This particular forum was not the only space where Bhutanese learned that a hierarchy existed amongst new arrivals. Between 2012 and 2014, Australia’s media was saturated with images of asylum seekers arriving on boats and being detained in various centres while their cases underwent evaluation. These media representations, paired with the rhetoric of ‘queue jumper’ juxtaposed with the genuine refugee, influenced the way participants came to understand themselves in Australia. The Bhutanese interpreted these as clear signals that if they wanted to see their families reunited, they needed to promote themselves as ideal refugees. They hoped that by presenting themselves as the most deserving and best behaved, it would sway the government to accept more Bhutanese from the camps. The strategic portrayal of ‘refugee-ness’ to service providers and the broader Australian population was an attempt to influence migration policy. To do so, the Bhutanese capitalised on portrayals of the passive refugee: having suffered in flight, languished in camps, and as gracious recipients of Australia’s generosity.

This tension demonstrated the ‘dialectic between repression and compassion [that] lies at the heart of contemporary politics’ (Fassin 2012, p. 10). Examining the distinct situation in Australia illuminated broader practices in the global moral climate. Compassion justified the admittance of refugees and in the process obfuscated the consideration that asylum seekers had a legal right to seek refuge. This chapter argues that accepting refugees allowed Australia to position itself as a charitable nation. Refugees were cast in a new role largely in opposition to politically or popularly salient stereotypes of asylum seekers. The exclusion of asylum seekers, who were depicted as greedy or socially deviant, became justified by a need to protect citizens and provide for those deemed deserving of Australia’s support. This charitable positioning, in turn, constructed refugee societies in a particular fashion. Frequently, it assumed a lack of social or political institutions. This minimised the strengths and capabilities of refugees, effectively relegating them to the periphery of Australian society.
The Politics of Regulation

Who is admitted into Australia and how admission is regulated have a long, ever-changing history. In 1901 the six British colonies united to form the Commonwealth of Australia. One of the first pieces of legislation passed by the Federation’s Parliament was *The Immigration Restriction Act*. The stated purpose of the Act was to place certain restrictions on immigration and to provide for the removal from the Commonwealth of prohibited immigrants. As a policy, it was a clear attempt to regulate boundaries: a border is foundational to establishing a nation. Heyman and Symons (2015, p. 544) argue, ‘the border is a symbol of sovereignty, territorial polity and its role in various imaginaries of outside versus inside’. As Australia grappled to differentiate itself from its colonial masters, the themes of exclusion and inclusion came to the fore. Jupp (2007, p. 6) notes that Australia is ‘the product of conscious social engineering to create a particular kind of society’. At Federation, a majority of Australians were Anglo-Celtic. This demographic hegemony was viewed as desirable—ideal even. Culturally, Anglo-Celts were imagined to be a naturally coherent community with shared values, norms, and moralities. Other races threatened the ideals that held the Federation together (Neumann and Tavan 2009). In order to maintain a racially exclusive country the policy curtailed groups deemed undesirable, economically threatening, or morally corrupt (Fitzgerald 2007). The ideal migrant came from the British Isles, with Europeans and white South Africans also acceptable, while people from Asia and the Pacific Islands were not encouraged to migrate. Acting Attorney General, Alfred Deakin (1901, p. 4805), addressed the Parliament in 1901:

> the prohibition of all alien coloured immigration, and more, it means at the earliest time, by reasonable and just means, the deportation or reduction of the number of aliens now in our midst. The two things go hand in hand, and are the necessary complement of a single policy—the policy of securing a ‘white Australia’.

Deakin’s statements and the related policies illustrate that ‘border regimes treat peoples differentially, a diversity that is shaped by and affects moral thinking’ (Heyman & Symons 2015, p. 543). In 1904, while people from the British Isles (Britain and Ireland) were actively encouraged to migrate, 7500 Pacific Islanders originally brought over to labour in the sugar industry were deported. These parallel approaches led to the *Immigration Act*’s notorious title, the White Australia Policy. While the specific wording of the Act is not overly racist (Jupp 2007), the execution of the dictation test
provided the space to regulate Australia’s boundaries in a highly selective fashion. The dictation test required that prospective migrants have a command of a European language (or languages) of the examiner’s choice. The test could be administered multiple times and in multiple languages, a policy that raised the standard of admission rather than giving potential immigrants additional opportunities to pass. Immigration officials, in effect, had exceptional freedom to reject non-Europeans. Of the 805 people who sat the test between 1902 and 1903, only 46 passed (Yarwood 1958, p. 25). These efforts were effective at regulating the population of Australia and reflected the exclusionary prejudices of the time (Jupp 2007). In the first census conducted in 1911, less than 1% of those born overseas came from areas outside the British Isles and the bulk of those immigrants arrived from Canada, South Africa, and the United States (Australia Bureau of Statistics 1911, p. 116-119). Ten years later, Australia was less diverse than at Federation. Gradually, however, due to international events and domestic concerns, these practices were abandoned in favour of less racially restrictive norms.

After the Second World War, Australia began to hold a greater international role independent of the United Kingdom. It was a founding member of the United Nations and one of the eight nations involved in drafting the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Morsink 1999). While internationally the country was at the forefront of inclusive social ideals, exclusionary policies persisted, particularly in the arena of migration and minority rights. The gap between the international image and domestic reality needed to be mediated. In 1958, strong domestic and international criticism of the dictation test led to its retirement (Palfreeman 1967; Jupp 1995). In 1964, the United States outlawed race-based discrimination and the United Kingdom passed a similar Act in 1965. The momentum of the civil rights movement reached the global stage: in 1965 the United Nations developed the *International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Prime Minister Whitlam called for an end to exclusionary migration policy, ‘we say unequivocally that there must be no discrimination on grounds of race or colour or nationality’ (Whitlam 1985, pp. 498).

The Australian government ratified the *Racial Discrimination Convention* in 1975, which gave rise to the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act of 1975*. This Act heralded a new era in Australian immigration policy. No longer concerned primarily with race, immigration policy became a means of selecting desirable people based on their potential economic contribution: skilled migrants were favoured (Hugo 1992). A points system that rewarded education, particular skills or potential to conduct business
meant a sizable number of migrants coming to Australia from the 1980s onward were middle class (Collins 2013). They joined a bourgeoning global and professional middle class (Stubbs 1996) who have accumulated a skill set ‘that will facilitate their positioning, economic negotiation, and cultural acceptance from different geographical sites’ (Ong 1999, p. 18). These emigrants, though still largely from the countries that traditionally supplied migrants, also included new groups from wealthy areas in Asia. These latest groups tended to have higher levels of education and trade qualifications than the broader Australian population, and this appeared to translate into higher incomes (Inglis & Wu 1992). The exceptions to this trend were refugees who experienced ‘a massive loss in occupation status’ regardless of qualifications and levels of education (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006, p. 203).

Humane Regulation

At its core and since Australia’s inception, there has been a preference for the controlled movement of people into Australia. The humanitarian program was no different (Dauvergne 2005). In Australia, as the previous section illustrated, immigration was largely policy driven. In contrast, refugee policy was initially reactionary, with the response tailored as the situation arose. While refugees articulated some aspects of broader immigration policies, they also represented distinct ruptures. During the Second World War, Asians and Pacific Islanders fled to Australia. After the end of the War, most refugees returned home. However some, particularly those who married Australians, wanted to stay in the country (Neumann 2015). These refugees were gradually removed from the country and those refusing to leave prompted the drafting of the 1949 War-Time Refugees Removal Act. A federal election in 1950 led to a softening policy on wartime refugees from outside Europe. In 1950, of the 853 refugees who could be deported under the Act, 832 were allowed to stay (Neumann 2015).

Parallel to the deportation of Asian and Pacific Island refugees, the Australian government was participating in an ambitious resettlement program of European refugees. Through the International Refugee Organisation, the UNHCR’s predecessor, Australia resettled 171 000 refugees between 1947 and 1954. After the UNHCR was founded, Australia became a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Rights of Refugees. This convention protects people seeking asylum and provides a legal framework for refugees. Australia’s status as a signatory ‘means that Australia has legal
and moral obligations to fulfilling the terms of these instruments’ (McMaster 2002, p. 280). While it might appear that resettling European refugees was predominately driven by humanitarian motivations, Neumann (2015) argues this is not the case. Rather, the refugees coming from Europe were selected based largely on the hope that they would bring skills to Australia. In order to maintain its economy, Australia needed a growing population that British migration was no longer providing. The acceptance of refugees was tied to the development of the nation and helping refugees was secondary in importance. Economic need, rather than political or humanitarian ideologies, provided the justification for accepting large numbers of European refugees. What Neumann overlooks in his analysis is the desire for Australia to be involved in the international arena. Accepting refugees buttressed Australia's image as both economically prosperous and an international actor independent of the United Kingdom. Refugees represented an asset in international relations while also providing a boom for the economy. Before the 1950s, the political nature of the refugee seemed relatively insignificant, yet the international credibility from resettling refugees was paramount. This focus began to change in the 1950s as various consular officials from the Soviet Union defected to Australia. The 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne saw the defection of a further 56 athletes from the Soviet Union—most from Hungary. These defectors were deemed political refugees and accepted into Australia with little popular or political protest. Australia accepted 14,000 Hungarian refugees between November 1956 and December 1957 (Jupp 2007). These defectors transformed the image of refugees, morphing them into political symbols of the Cold War: ‘the struggle between the forces of Evil and Good’ (Manne 1987, p. 233). The acceptance of these defectors crystallised a new image of refugees as not only economically capable but politically acceptable.

In 1977, increased arrivals of Indo-Chinese asylum seekers prompted the government to introduce a clear refugee policy rather than respond to events on an event-by-event basis (Mence, V, Gangell, S & Tebb, R 2015). Australia was entering into a period of economic stagnation: the fleeing refugees were viewed as a potential economic drain. Global political powers, such as the United States, pressured Australia to accept the refugees, maintaining that they were an extension of Cold War politics. Thus accepting refugees from Vietnam was marketed by the government to the larger population as supporting political refugees while also providing humanitarian support. Again, the imagining of refugees was evolving. The refugees fleeing war in Vietnam were still
considered political refugees but humanitarianism began to emerge as motivation for acceptance and support.

In response to the arrival of asylum seekers, in 1977 the Department of Immigration created the Humanitarian Visa Program. This program was designed to protect those already legally in Australia through the on-shore (asylum seeking) component and to resettle people off-shore (refugees) deemed in need of humanitarian assistance (Phillips, Klapdor & Simon-Davies 2010). It was a program similar to broader immigration policies in Australia in that it functioned to regulate the movement of people. In turn, this underscored the validity of national borders.

Australia is not unique in attempts to regulate its borders. Globally, migration from the third to the first world, both legal and illegal, leads to fretful discussions about national security (McAdam 2013, p. 435). An increase in suspicion of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom has been observed by Schuster (2003) and Squire (2009). Fassin (2005) argues convincingly that in France, access to asylum was restrained yet France continued to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees in camps. In the United States, asylum seekers were subject to detention, particularly if they were fleeing countries that were considered to present a security risk (Welch & Schuster 2005). While subjecting some asylum seekers to detention, the United States remained the largest government donor to the UNHCR (UNHCR 2015b). These tensions and contradictions appeared more generally as well. In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly passed two protocols regarding the movement of people: the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the accompanying Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (the UN Protocol). These protocols were developed with humanitarian aspirations, coupled with practical concerns. In effect, these protocols strengthen the legitimacy of strong border protection measures, potentially limiting people’s right to seek asylum. Troublingly, ‘particularly on the part of the major destination countries, attempts to counter trafficking and smuggling seem to be motivated by a growing intolerance of all forms of irregular migration’ (Gallengher 2002, p. 25). This focus suggests the border has a powerful symbolic and moral quality. Those who upset this moral quality are subject to suspicion.

Asylum seekers are presented politically and popularly as coming ‘to Australia for their own personal benefit rather than for humanitarian reasons’; namely, they are seeking economic opportunities (McKay, Thomas, & Kneebone 2012, p. 129). Asylum seekers
are considered to be exploiting Australia and posing a threat to Australia’s culture and are not perceived as genuine refugees (McKay, Thomas, & Kneebone 2012). Assumptions of hidden motivations have led to asylum seekers being described as illegal migrants or as queue jumpers. This labelling process results in asylum seekers becoming constructed as inherently different, a deviant social group who threatens national security and national identity (Pickering 2001). These concerns surfaced during the 2013 Australian federal election. The conversation was particularly charged regarding the role of each respective political party in protecting national borders. Tony Abbott, representing the Liberal Party—which would ultimately win the election in coalition with the National Party—campaigned strongly on his party’s ability to protect the country’s borders and ‘stop the boats’ (Abbott 2013). ‘The boats’ refers to asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by sea to access their right to protection through the onshore component within the Humanitarian Visa Program. The Abbott Government actively fostered the image of a dichotomy between good refugees and bad asylum seekers. While this fieldwork was being conducted in 2012 and 2013, the division between these two categories became particularly pronounced. From a policy perspective, the overseas component became prioritised: ‘Beginning in 2013–14, the programme is being refocused to ensure that priority for places is given to people overseas entering as part of a planned process’ (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2013, p. 4). Genuine refugees emerged as synonymous with protracted humanitarian situations—living in refugee camps and coming through a planned process (i.e. the UNHCR referral system). These refugees became acceptable due to their experience as contained or managed subjects.

During my research, as noted earlier, there was a clear attempt to differentiate between the refugees and asylum seekers by the major political parties. A 2015 poll—roughly a year after these policy divisions became promoted—found 49% of Australians agreed that ‘asylum seekers should be allowed to stay in Australia if they are found to be genuine refugees’ (Essential Media Communications 2015, n.p.). However, the vast majority did not believe those arriving on boats were genuine refugees. A United Nations survey conducted in Australia found that two-thirds of Australians felt sympathetic towards refugees, particularly ones arriving from refugee camps (Gordon 2012). In contrast to these positive attitudes, the Lowy Institution Poll found 71% of Australians agreed that the government should strongly deter people attempting to seek asylum by turning boats back towards the country of origin (Oliver 2014, p. 3). That
same poll found 42% of people agreed that ‘no asylum seeker coming to Australia by boat should be allowed to settle in Australia’ (Oliver 2014, p. 10). Though these polls have limitations, they hint at the broader argument put forth in this thesis, that accepting some refugees allowed Australia to reconcile a strict migration policy. Despite attempts to exclude asylum seekers, Australia still desired to be viewed as a humane, righteous country. Australia was willing to accept genuine refugees from camps. In this context refugees, though outside their nation, theoretically did not challenge the validity of national borders because they were contained in camps. Further, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection prioritised those deemed most vulnerable by the UNHCR. This resulted in an interesting cross-section of the population categorising the elderly, disabled, single mothers and key political leaders who had been tortured in one category. This category was linked by the assumption that all these people needed additional assistance; either due to social structures or to the presumption they were traumatised.

In an era defined by national boundaries becoming ever more selectively porous, who constituted a ‘victim’ becomes increasingly essentialised (Ticktin 2011). Trauma emerged as a significant barometer on the moral hierarchy of victimhood (Fassin & Rechtman 2009). Trauma is significant because it (inaccurately) sets refugees apart from asylum seekers and thus legitimised their admittance into Australia. Experiencing trauma, being traumatised and needing assistance to deal with traumatic events have become cornerstones in assessing humanitarian assistance. By defining refugees as traumatised, Australia’s moral standing was enhanced. Assisting someone who was traumatised suggested a profound power imbalance between the patron and benefactor. The nation accepted the beneficiary, regardless of this assumed hindrance. Trauma was often invisible and thus any refugee could be considered as slightly less mentally stable, slightly more vulnerable—in short, slightly less than a complete citizen. This hinted at the perception that the traumatised refugee, despite appearances to the contrary, was never quite on equal footing with un-traumatised Australians. This more humanitarian focus created quite different imaginings and expectations than earlier understandings of refugees. Far from the economic skills European refugees brought, or the political solidarity of Soviet (and to a lesser extent Vietnamese) refugees, the attribute of the new refugees was helplessness.
Refugees were no longer considered economically proficient or politically capable but were perceived as dependent on the charitable impulse of Australia. In turn, this affirmed the notion of the nation as ‘good, prosperous and generous’ (Dauvergne 2005, p. 4). Assisting some refugees absolved the moral ambiguity that the policy of offshore detention, mandatory detention, and the act of turning back the boats necessarily presented. By creating a hierarchy of deservedness and then assisting the most deserving refugees, Australia’s humanitarian actions functioned ‘as the mirror in which the nation seeks a reflection of its benevolence’ (Dauverge 2005, p. 5). Jupp (2007, p. 182) argues further that accepting refugees served to foster Australia’s status in the global community through the performance of charity. The acceptance of some refugees was framed as an ethical act, effectively downplaying the legal obligations of the nation. In turn, this imposed particular expectations and understandings on refugees as they attempted to represent everything asylum seekers were not. The end of 2013 saw the Minister of Immigration, Scott Morrison (2013a), inform asylum seekers of Australia’s expectations regarding their behaviour once in Australia:

You must not harass, intimidate or bully any other person or group of people or engage in any anti-social or disruptive activities that are inconsiderate, disrespectful or threaten the peaceful enjoyment of other members of the community... If we are going to release people into the community who have arrived illegally by boat from very different backgrounds, language groups and cultures with no prior exposure or connection to Australian society, we should at the very least explain what is expected of them in terms of their own behaviour, and be prepared to remove them from the community if those expectations are not met.

This information reached beyond the specific audience of asylum seekers but was more than real politick. Morrison’s discussion of expectations of what makes asylum seekers problematic was telling: different backgrounds, languages and cultures were a potential threat to Australia. It suggested a degree of national insecurity that could become secured through specific measures, particularly through exclusion. Also, more troubling, Morrison suggested that disruptive behaviour—conceivably political protest or requests for additional support or recognition—becomes an act of deviance when performed by people of different cultural backgrounds. The following section will introduce the policy of multiculturalism in Australia before examining the specific ways refugees are approached by service providers.
The Poetics of Inclusion

Once people are admitted into Australia, particularly if they are from a non-Anglo background, they begin interacting with a set of policies in place to minimize their exclusion. These are admirable aspirations. A policy of multiculturalism was adopted by Australia in the 1970s and reached its zenith in the 1990s (Jupp 2007). It has been defined in Australian policy in the following way:

All members of our society must have equal opportunity to realise their full potential and must have equal access to programs and services. Every person should be able to maintain his or her own culture without prejudice or disadvantage and should be encouraged to understand and embrace other cultures. [The] needs of migrants should, in general, be met by programs and services available to the whole community. But special programs and services are necessary at present to ensure equality of access and provision. Services and programs should be designed and operated in full consultation with clients, and self-help should be encouraged as much as possible with a view to helping migrants to become self-reliant quickly (Galbally 1978, p. 1-2).

Multiculturalism is a series of government policies that strives to celebrate diversity and combat racism. A key aspect of how the government approaches diverse cultures in Australia is through the premise of ethnic communities and funding flows through these groups. This has historic precedence: post-World War Two refugees were expected to form ethnic community groups to ease the transition into Australian culture. Ethnic communities had an important role in providing social support (Colic-Peisker 2009; Westoby 2008). Thus, although they were partially bureaucratic constructions ethnic community associations were not necessarily just the reflection of a government-level conflation of ethnicity, religion, and nationality. These groups functioned as an additional social safety net and fostered a sense of community for recently arrived members. A sense of community could lessen the stresses of resettlement (Lewis 2010). Regardless, ethnic community was a fraught category; ethnicity was often directly linked to a nation state left behind. This paralleled the state-centred settlement ideal and promoted the ‘myth of the national family’ (Arendt 2013). In reality, there was often very little community in terms of social interactions or even a sense of primordial oneness. Yet for administrative purposes, the group was an ethnic community. This created an expectation for newly arriving groups to behave in a particular fashion, displaying certain community values and well-being and headed by a natural ‘leader’:

Public agencies, politicians, and the media search for ‘leaders’ of ‘ethnic communities’ in the apparent belief that these are tribally organised with recognisable and generally accepted chiefs. Nothing could be further from the truth (Jupp 1984, p. 187).
What emerged were quasi-communities that learned to engage with the discourses of expectations headed by specific ethnic leaders. This approach minimised all the very real fissures, politics, and potentially longstanding animosities within groupings condensed into ethnic communities.

Hage (1998) argues further that events designed ostensibly to celebrate multiculturalism in effect strive to contain and manage diversity. New arrivals are encouraged by service providers to showcase their ethnic backgrounds particularly through the mediums of dance, crafts, music, or food. These displays suggest a positive desire to provide a space to celebrate difference. However, as Hage (1998, p. 87) argues, it represents a ‘strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of power in society or being reproduced through that disguise. It is a form of symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism’. These are benign and non-threatening displays of difference presented largely for the consumption of a white audience (Duffy 2005; Hage 1998). This selective representation obscured the fact that minorities are still relegated to the political fringe, normalising social hierarchies that set the terms of participation for less powerful groups.

Despite these insightful critiques, Australia has made remarkable strides from being ‘the most British’ country in the world towards ‘the most multicultural’ (Jupp 2007, p. 1). Castles (1988; 1992; 1995) observes that though Australia's post-war immigration programme was designed to keep the country white and British, it ultimately resulted in one of the world’s most diverse societies. Further, Hugo (1986) argued that a mere ten years after the introduction of the multicultural policy Australia was one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Again, this transformation took place due to international pressure and domestic agitation. In terms of government support, multiculturalism has since been experiencing a slow decline (Inglis 2009), punctuated most recently by the demise of the Ministry of Multicultural Affairs in 2013 (Department of Social Services 2014). The ideals of multiculturalism ‘in Australian public debate and reflected in the policy and rhetoric of both major parties’ are being replaced by a neo-assimilationist ideal (Nolan, Farquharson, Politoff & Marjoribanks 2011, p. 670). While multiculturalism may be falling out of favour, its effects have been profound: Australia is demographically and culturally vastly different from what it was in 1973 when the first official multicultural policy was introduced. However, the shortcomings identified by Hage (1998) became particularly acute for refugees. The
assumption of trauma and social disintegration further relegated these new groups to the social fringe, allowed to perform but not to fully participate.

Once in Australia, refugees began encountering ‘differing expectations for refugees upon arrival...which are manifested in the services offered and the pressure that refugees face to become self-reliant’ (Fanjoy, Ingraham, Khoury, & Osman 2005, p. 20). They received assistance through several service providers, both governmental and non-governmental, to facilitate their eventual self-sufficiency. This was achieved through (but is not limited to) English language classes, support with obtaining housing, general counselling, and health care in addition to assistance in gaining employment. Considerable emphasis was placed on becoming integrated into the mainstream vis-á-vis becoming economically independent (Department of Social Services 2012). However, Australia took a measured approach and recognised the very real challenges new arrivals faced by providing sustained financial assistance, particularly in comparison to the United States and Canada (Fanjoy et al 2005). This was largely due to Australia’s more robust social welfare program rather than a particular generosity towards refugees. It must be further noted that the financial support was virtually identical to the amount an Australia citizen in a similar situation would be entitled (Department of Social Services 2015). However, as the following chapter illustrates, prioritising vulnerable refugees resulted in a high number of refugees dependent on social welfare.

Successful resettlement remained a crucial goal of the government. This goal was multifaceted and not limited to economic participation. TAFE provided 550 hours of free English tuition for refugees and activities provided by other service providers tended to centre on acquiring spoken English skills. Successful resettlement was also understood to include obtaining citizenship, sending children to school, and attempting to fit into the broader Australian population (Fanjoy et al 2005). At a 2013 citizenship ceremony, the Immigration and Border Protection Minister Scott Morrison (2013b) stated,

> we will celebrate our democratic values, equality and respect for each other and what unites us as Australians. We encourage anyone who is eligible to formally become a part of our community as Australian citizens (Public Event 2013).

The themes of democracy and egalitarianism were further highlighted in the *Australia Values Statement* refugees receive before arriving in Australia during cultural
orientation conducted by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM). Once in Australia, they received the study guide *Australian Citizenship: Our Common Bond* to prepare them for the citizenship examination. Democracy constituted the belief system to which new citizens pledged their allegiance during their citizenship ceremony. Thus, refugees such as the Bhutanese found themselves in an ambiguous position in Australia: as refugees they were incapable and passive but as future citizens they needed to be capable and active.

**Arrival Statistics**

Australia agreed to accept five thousand Bhutanese refugees, reaching this quota at the beginning of 2014 (See Chart 2). The first group arrived in Adelaide on May 13th, 2008 and between 2008 and 2013, they represented on average the fourth largest off-shore/humanitarian group arriving in Australia (See Chart 3).

Chart 2: Bhutanese Humanitarian Entrants by Year

![Bhutanese Humanitarian Entrants by Year](chart)

Produced from data provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2014)

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14 “From this day forward, I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey” (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2015)
The largest population (approximately 1500 of the 5000) of Bhutanese resided in South Australia. South Australia, in 2011, had 289 316 migrants within the broader population of 1.64 million (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2013). There were some smaller communities of Bhutanese in Queensland and Tasmania. South Australia, and Salisbury in particular, has become a destination for some newly arrived Bhutanese. Though refugees do not get to select their initial destination city, those resettled in other areas in Australia viewed South Australia as the ideal destination for higher case Bhutanese. This is partially because the group has gained support from the local service providers and the Salisbury Council. The Salisbury Council was not a refugee resettlement agency but provided multiple services (English speaking lessons, art programs, and social outings) to the Bhutanese in the Council area. The Salisbury Council, due to the demographic concentration of Bhutanese in the council area, had a central role in the social life of the refugees.
The Bhutanese in South Australia were concentrated in the City of Salisbury (referred to hereafter as Salisbury), a suburb with a population of 7,551 approximately 20 kilometres north of the Adelaide city centre (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2011). Salisbury, along with its sister suburb Elizabeth, had ambitious beginnings. Although Salisbury was organically founded as a farming community in 1843, it became an auxiliary suburb for purpose built Elizabeth. Construction of Elizabeth began in 1955 to provide housing for the employees of the automotive and manufacturing factories. Modelled after British ‘new towns’ springing up around London it was expected to be largely self-contained with shopping, industry and social facilities independent from the Adelaide city Centre. Elizabeth was strongly marketed to potential blue-collar British migrants, described in housing trust videos distributed overseas as ‘a place to grow’. It was, as Stretton (McCarthy 2005 para.17) describes, a striking aspiration:

a decent house and a garden for working class people, who quite often couldn’t get that in other Australian cities. They tended to have the working class down here in the flat and the professionals up on the hills...the segregation wasn’t so severe.

These marketing endeavours were successful to the extent the city held the nickname ’pommie-land’. Elizabeth and Salisbury, as ‘British industrial districts’ had their own form of segregation: until the 1970s houses were not available to non-British (Jupp 2007). This period of utopia was short lived. By the 1980s, Elizabeth had entered into a period of decline, mirroring broader economic shifts away from manufacturing. By 2014, the few remaining factories continued to downsize as the automobile industry
dissolved. Elizabeth’s unemployment rates topped 33%, one of the highest inner-city jobless rate in Australia (Department of Employment 2016, p. 29).

Salisbury, adjacent to Elizabeth, followed a similar life cycle. Unemployment plagued the area, averaging over 16% compared to the Australian average of 6% (Department of Employment 2016, p. 6, 29). Average income was lower than the broader South Australian average as were overall education levels (ABS 2011). Salisbury and Elizabeth were some of South Australia’s most violent suburbs (ABS 2014). All of these statistics impacted on the perception of the North Suburbs as violent, undesirable, and socially deviant as viewed by the broader population in Adelaide. The service providers working in these regions, and particularly the council workers, were tasked with grappling with suburban decline, social marginalization, and classism. Salisbury was a cash-strapped suburb, and in 2012 the mayor publicly offered to sell council lands in order to attract much-needed funds to rejuvenate an outmoded town centre. While grappling with a more general suburbanization of poverty (Goode & Maskovsy 2001) the town aspired towards gentrification and linked this to the increasing ethnic diversity of the suburb. Exotic otherness was one example of affirmative orientalism that the group adopted as a central aspect of their performative identity in Australia (Fox 1989; King 1999). Thus, the Bhutanese played a potential role in this potential transformation, as the following chapter illustrates.

Upon arrival, the Bhutanese were assisted by a plethora of groups including the local councils, organisations focusing specifically on refugees or migrants, and associations’ that stemmed from multicultural projects. Others focused on helping women or facilitating projects geared towards the youth or elderly. The non-governmental organisations included the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC), Survivors of Trauma and Torture Rehabilitation Services (STTARS), and the Australia Refugee Association (ARA). Others, somewhat more peripheral but highly valued by participants, included Multicultural Foodies, OzHarvest, and Penguins. While these were technically non-governmental organisations they relied heavily on government grants. Federal and state governmental organisations such as Centrelink, South Australia Health, Housing South Australia, and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) featured prominently in their lives. This multiplicity of social mediators had diverse affiliations and expectations although most received their funding through the government. Grants were scarce and
competitive – providers who had overlapping service profiles found themselves in competition.

Some organisations had clear timeframes regarding how long they would provide support. For example, the ARA provided leadership and development programs for humanitarian entrants who had been in Australia for less than five years (ARA 2014). Nearly every service provider came from a non-English speaking background though they all spoke fluent English as part of their jobs. They represented various migration backgrounds – some arrived as children from Europe in the late 1950s, some from Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s. Others came to Australia via arranged marriages. These experiences and personal understandings, in turn, coloured their interactions with the Bhutanese. The attitudes of service providers and council representatives were significant: they provided the Bhutanese with a social window into the broader Australian population. It was through these people, fleeting interactions with representatives of the government, and day-to-day life in their new suburbs that the Bhutanese learned what was expected of them, as refugees in Australia.

**Conclusion**

Australia’s multiple social hierarchies define who belongs and who does not belong in the nation-state. The Bhutanese, once the pawns of Bhutan, Nepal, and India, again in Australia have become incorporated into broader political agendas. The Bhutanese have presented Australia and the suburbs they settle in with a chance for redemption from harsh immigration policies. As refugees they represent the humanitarian heart of a broader migration policy that is premised on exclusion. Rather than highlighting the legal obligation Australia has to protect refugees, the moral aspects have become central. The powerlessness of refugees has developed into their crucial attribute. They have passed a moral barometer in order to gain entry into Australia but once in the country, their cultural norms and values have again become regulated and scrutinised. In Salisbury, they offer to the suburb a promise of both cosmopolitanism and community solidarity with which a dying city desperately wants to associate. This, in turn, has influenced their interactions with broader members of Australia.
This chapter highlighted the way humanitarian ideals can reinforce the centrality of the nation. There is a necessary bureaucratic managing of people within the politics of humanitarianism. Those being managed are willing to participate—to a point. The following chapters explore the way resettled Bhutanese in Adelaide confirmed, pandered and skirted the multitude of expectations they encountered in Australia to further their unique aspirations. The Bhutanese refugees were well aware of these hierarchies and attempted to work within them. They were versed in the most current debates, discussions, and potential consequences (positive or negative) of these dialogues. Although they were eager to integrate, there was also a desire to maintain cultural integrity and identity (Ager & Strang 2008; Feldman 2007). Heavily institutionalised relationships combined with very personal processes to birth a particular collective ‘Bhutanese-ness’.
Chapter 7

Managing the Margins

During an interview with the director of the Migrant Resource Centre in Adelaide in 2012, I asked why she thought so many Bhutanese were settling in Salisbury. The director straightened in her chair and proceeded to clarify that not only did she not encourage the Bhutanese to settle in the northern suburbs. She expressed concern that their settlement in this area would lead to a ‘ghettoisation’ of the Bhutanese. This possibility was, understandably, far from a desirable resettlement outcome. Her statements provided me with my first impression of Salisbury: they highlighted the widespread perception of the suburb as socially backward and even morally corrupting. As vulnerable refugees living in this ‘dysfunctional’ suburb, the Bhutanese required management, guidance, and intervention to avoid becoming ghettoised.

Salisbury is a marginalised suburb of Adelaide, struggling to reinvent itself. Due to their status as vulnerable refugees, the Bhutanese have become an asset for the Council: just as the Bhutanese are a means for Australia to present a virtuous image as a nation, for the Salisbury Council the ability to manage the Bhutanese appropriately promises redemption from a reputation of social backwardness. As vulnerable refugees, the Bhutanese have a worthiness that is a scarce commodity in Salisbury. This has constructed the Bhutanese as a coherent community but it has also placed them within a hierarchy of ‘deservedness’. Fassin (2010, p. 239) describes this tension as ‘the politics of life (the values and meanings attributed to lives) which is related to an implicit evaluation of humanity (the distinct worthiness of human beings)’. The successful resettlement of the Bhutanese has been an opportunity for the local government to ‘prove’ their capacity to host refugees. In turn, they hope that this enhances their social standing within the broader Adelaide, providing an alternative discussion to the more common conversation regarding the decline of the suburb. The resettlement of the Bhutanese has provided a model of domestic humanitarianism. First, the group was re-created as a community with distinct, moral credibility. Once created as vitreous refugee-subjects, they found themselves at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of human values in Salisbury. This resulted in competition over who ‘manages’ those deemed deserving (Calhoun 2010; 2011).
For the Bhutanese, resettlement promised the long-awaited possibility of self-management. This chapter argues that, despite this promise, resettlement became an extension of the humanitarian paradigm. This is illustrated through the construction of the Bhutanese as an exceptional refugee community who needed to be made manageable. This chapter argues that the ability to manage refugees successfully reflects strategic uses of power embedded in the humanitarian system of values. This produces complex social outcomes.

**Managing Multiculturalism**

Australians living outside the Salisbury Council area (some whom I met through their roles as service providers, others during exchanges in public spaces such as libraries or local transportation, as well engaging with Adelaide based academics) were quick to dismiss it as a racist, intolerant suburb full of people unwilling to redeem themselves. These perceptions characterised the problems the suburb faces (high unemployment, poverty, and crumbling infrastructure) as problems unique to Salisbury rather than due to broader political, social, or economic issues. There was little commentary that identified the suburb's decline as a consequence of the collapse first of the local agricultural industry, then of the automotive industry in neighbouring Elizabeth. As well as the contracting employment market, there was a steady decline in state funding for bus shelters, street lighting, housing assistance, the public library, and bike paths, to name a few (City of Salisbury 2014). Yet these were endeavours that fostered liveability and public safety. One of the few areas to remain robustly supported at the state and federal level was the Crime Prevention Program. Further, in 2015, Salisbury received two separate grants for the installation of closed circuit television cameras; combined, this amounted to the largest grant awarded in South Australia (Attorney-General’s Office 2015). These funding decisions both reflected and contributed to the dominant perception of Salisbury—security measures were necessary to regulate the unredeemable.

Rather than ‘a shared feeling of empathy or a moral imperative of solidarity’ (Fassin 2012, p. 30), the suburb was largely stigmatised. As Australia reshaped itself economically, those who found themselves increasingly marginalised were imagined as inevitably ending up in that position (Peel 2003). In regard to Salisbury, it was concluded that the occupants of the suburb brought about its ‘inevitable’ descent into
poverty. Ethically, it became a space that was unworthy of broader egalitarian ideals. This helped obfuscate the political responsibility of those beyond the local Council area, further relegating the suburb to the social fringe.

Despite a shrinking body of financial support and a dismal reputation, the Salisbury Council consistently tried to mirror mainstream values of egalitarianism and multiculturalism. They had not given up on the possibility that their Council area could redeem itself. The means of the Council’s transformation, the following sections argue, was increasingly linked to their ability to govern new arrivals and, most crucially, refugees.

There were a myriad of ethnic groups in Salisbury. I met people from Vietnam, Guatemala, Burundi, the former Yugoslavia and Sudan as well as persons from India, Nepal, England, New Zealand, and Italy. In May 2013, these diverse groups converged at the local Council offices to participate in the Harmony Day celebrations. The multicultural event included singing, dancing, cultural costumes, and the presentation of a carefully made quilt—to be hung in the Council’s office. Each quilt panel was created by a different ethnic community to symbolise an aspect of their culture. Some groups painted a map of their country, others a symbol of the nation they left. The panels were joined together yet at the same time remained contained within their specific region of the quilt. The Harmony Day events concluded in the singing of an abridged version of ‘I am Australian’:

We are one, but we are many
And from all the lands on earth we come
We share a dream and sing with one voice:
I am, you are, we are Australian (Woodley & Newton, 1987).

The key ideal of public performances hosted by the Salisbury Council was one of bound, coherent ethnic communities as the vehicle for organising difference. In Australia, as in the camps, ‘community’ again emerged as a central strategy to organise and govern new arrivals. Communities became imagined as a ‘bureaucratic apparatus of political administration and control’ (Rose 1999, p. 169). Thus, these formal promotions of multiculturalism were an important affirmation of governmental capacity. The Salisbury Council gained credibility by appropriately managing these diverse groups. However, Hage (2002) and Peel (2003) have both noted that the role of the government—local and otherwise—in managing multiculturalism may be overstated. Both authors have argued that suburbs experiencing an influx of new arrivals may be
more tolerant than government and media narratives allow and that government policies of multiculturalism may not be the glue holding these suburbs together (Hage 1998; Peel 2003). Nevertheless, the way the local Council managed different groups did impart clear lessons for the Bhutanese. The expectations of community coherence were perhaps the most obvious. They learned that, as in the camps, community is institutionalised as a sector of the government. A clearly delineated community became a crucial mechanism to claim recognition (Rose 1999). There were also subtle lessons regarding selective inclusion and exclusion. As an ethnic community there were clearly defined parameters regarding acceptable cultural practices and unacceptable cultural problems: both required government stewardship. These mediated events coloured the way the Bhutanese saw their role in Australia. They learned that to gain acceptance, they must be willing to publicly perform some aspects of their culture. In turn, this also created a clear role for the Salisbury Council as the directors of these performances.

Across the many groups in Salisbury, the Bhutanese emerged as a uniquely publicised and valorised group. They were consistently invited to ‘showcase’ their culture at events in the Salisbury area. This elevation of status related to their willingness to publicly perform what the Council staff viewed as ‘good’ refugee behaviours—an exotic community orientated towards virtuous values. Faced with few economic hopes for transformation, the Council pinned its hopes for gaining credibility by appropriately managing the Bhutanese. They promised ‘a new moral contract, a new partnership between an enabling state and responsible citizens, based upon strengthening the natural bonds of community’ (Rose 1999, p. 186). The local Council had a clear role in producing humanitarian subjects. Honing the lessons learned in the camps, the Bhutanese (re)presented themselves as a community deserving recognition by reflecting certain hallmarks to maintain what was a tenuous, and perhaps fickle, acknowledgment.

**Directing Difference**

The Salisbury Council hosted a Bhutanese Speaking Seniors\(^\text{15}\) group on Thursdays and Saturdays in a hall leased from a local church. Though technically the group’s focus was on the elderly, every age group was represented—attendance on Thursday

\(^{15}\) The program is jointly funded by the Home and Community Care Program (a Commonwealth and State Government Project) and the City of Salisbury. See more at: http://www.salisbury.sa.gov.au/Our_City/Community/Seniors/Cultural_programs#sthash.CZ6kWMYO.dpuf.
frequently reached two hundred. A member of the Salisbury Council facilitated the
group. Representatives from service groups, government institutions, and social welfare
groups frequently attended. Guests were generally invited by the Council staff, though
there was one guest speaker (a Hindu religious leader from India) was invited by
members of the Bhutanese group. These guests spoke on a variety of topics such as:
healthy eating; the importance of exercise; how to access different support networks;
and upcoming events in the area. Rarely did a week go by without guests in attendance.
These people were introduced to the Bhutanese beforehand as ‘coming to see what we
do’, giving the impression that funding or the program’s longevity depended on being
able to show what the group does. Thus the guests performed a dual functioned: to
impart knowledge and witness the Thursday meetings. In response, the meetings took
on a decidedly theatrical tone.

A semi-communal yoga class consistently opened the Thursday meeting (though if
guests were not in attendance, this took place in a room adjacent to rather than in the
front of, the main hall). The smell of incense drifting above the chanting of the yoga
participants. Women bustled about preparing vats of sweet tea seasoned with black
pepper to be served after the morning activities. Fresh flowers—roses, marigolds, or
daisies—from participants’ gardens were placed in small vases on the makeshift desk
the facilitator sat behind. Those not interested in yoga began their craft activities at a
trestle table adjacent to the facilitator. Men congregated towards the back of the room,
playing cards. It was a hive of activity that stimulated all the senses. The visitors filtered
through the Thursday meeting, taking in the spectacle while the facilitator glowed with
pride. The image of the Bhutanese presented was very exotic and heavily influenced by
the Council representative’s expectations.

The meeting was explained as a space for the Bhutanese—not Nepalese or Indian
nationals with whom they may have ties—to practise English. Again, this underscored
the importance of a cohesive community defined by national boundaries. For the
Bhutanese, historically, these boundaries have been malleable. In the camps, this
malleability became increasingly problematic for resettlement. Marriages across
national boundaries were a severe hindrance to resettlement. In Australia, the national
boundaries of Bhutan became re-emphasised. As the previous chapters argued, refugees
affirm the sovereign ability to regulate their borders (Schmitt 1985). Organising
refugees along national boundaries further normalises this arrangement—again giving
nation-states precedence over other forms of social organisation. In doing so, ethnic
communities based on national affiliations become naturally legitimate, effectively obfuscating alternative orderings.

The need to perform for visiting guests was equally a reflection of the Council’s capacity to govern as it was the participants’ ability to participate. The Council representative went to great lengths not only to showcase the Bhutanese cultural exoticism but also the Council’s central role in supporting that culture. This became acutely evident during the creation of cultural crafts. Various art initiatives undertaken by this facilitator were designed to highlight the group’s culture. The group initially used the supplied canvases and paintbrushes to paint flowers or practise the English alphabet. Unfortunately, the facilitator was frustrated that the product was not sufficiently cultural. The participants had to be consistently coached to paint things from their past, things representing their culture. Eventually they produced landscapes of mountains and images of an agrarian lifestyle, and these were evaluated by the facilitator as appropriate.

The Bhutanese, as newly arrived others from underdeveloped nations, were understood as primarily rural and uneducated (Buchowski 2006). Yet, in terms of the Bhutanese broadly, the Bhutanese in Australia were disproportionately well-educated and skilled. This was partially due to the prioritisation of vulnerable refugees who were victims of torture. Australia hosted several of the key leaders of the protests that led to exile. Additionally, many of the participants served as priests in Bhutan. Others were government agents or teachers rather than farmers. Most of this group, in contrast to the vast majority of Bhutanese refugees, had little experience of ploughing a field. Yet it was the educated leaders who produced these agrarian paintings in the Salisbury Council’s art initiatives. The artwork reflected an imagined population who was deserving in the contemporary humanitarian paradigm. Rather than political activists or skilled refugees, the Bhutanese were moulded into a popular imagining of refugees: marginally skilled and practising subsistence-based livelihoods. These imaginings could be interpreted as a guiding measure with very real repercussions: ‘regulating humanity entails creating humanity—the humanity of oneself and the humanity of others’ (Barnett 2013, p. 385). Here, at the behest of the Council staff, refugees were creating an image that supported an idealised understanding of a ‘Bhutanese refugee’.

Despite these contradictions, activities were undertaken with singular gusto. The Bhutanese participants were eager to meet the facilitator’s expectations. The facilitator
and the participants both hoped this culturally unique art would be exhibited at the local Council. This potential exhibition was understood as a means of elevating the status of the program and participants. Though the Thursday meeting was ostensibly for Bhutanese, it was also for the Council. The Salisbury Council was actively contesting its own reputation. The facilitator, and the Council more broadly, had a vested interest in illustrating their effectiveness at appropriately managing the Bhutanese.

Just as Australia gained international credibility by accepting refugees, the Council gained domestic credence by welcoming them. As a microcosm of the nation, Salisbury could emphasise its efforts to embrace those in need. The Bhutanese offered a chance to show greater Adelaide that Salisbury was a multicultural suburb with capable (and benevolent) managers. This helped position them ever so slightly closer to the centre, shifting into a more powerful role as benefactors. Rather than being a problematic Council area requiring either external management for anti-social behaviour or charity due to its relative poverty, Salisbury emerged as an area that provided support for those in the most need—refugees. This domestic example highlighted broader power dynamics within the humanitarian framework: compassionate gestures can also be politically advantageous.

If compassion emits this kind of public signal and has become something of a status symbol, then it might also unleash a competitive dynamic. Once a norm of compassion becomes solidly rooted, then actors will compete to demonstrate who is the most compassionate and attempt to avoid giving the impression that they are not (Barnett 2013, p. 385).

Globally, nations vie for the status of being appropriately compassionate (Dauvergne 1999a). Just as there are implicit humanitarian hierarchies that determine who deserves to be alleviated from suffering globally (Fiddian-Qaymiyah 2014; Fox 2011), these hierarchies also find traction domestically. The finite power of compassion creates a dynamic in which groups must compete against each other.

For the suburb of Salisbury, the compassion quota had been largely exhausted. As deserving refugees, the Bhutanese had access to a language of compassion that others did not. For the Salisbury Council, resettlement of the Bhutanese became a credible cause worth championing, ‘which implies not only neglecting other ones but also constructing them by choosing the best way of representing the populations assisted’ (Fassin 2012, p. 226). This underscored the persistence of humanitarian hierarchies but also their selectivity. The selection of causes or groups deemed worthy not only
precluded some from accessing opportunities for recognition but effectively regulated those who were granted the privileged role.

The local Council was struggling into the mainstream by highlighting their ability to effectively create and manage spaces of cultural difference. They were responding to a constraining local environment where economic transformation was unlikely but caring for and shepherding deserving refugees—manifesting Australia’s humanitarian heart—was possible. Humanitarian hierarchies were actively used by the Salisbury Council in an attempt to transform their reputation, a powerful demonstration of the way humanitarian ideals are incorporated into domestic governance. In turn, this mirrored broader processes that narrowed the scope of who deserved recognition and compassion: the hierarchy of deserving became acute on the margins of society. In Salisbury, this was further obfuscated by the very complicated problems of economic exclusion and social marginalisation of the poor. While the Bhutanese represented a group deserving of compassion, there were some within the group who were considered more deserving than others.

Casting Decisions

In Australia, the Council facilitator of the Thursday group told me she had to retrain the group regarding gender roles. She recollected that when the Bhutanese group first started meeting, the women would sit in the back of the room while the men claimed the seats in the front. This was, in her mind, unacceptable and at odds with egalitarian aspirations. She worked to change the way men and women physically positioned themselves in the room. While women still walked behind the men when going to a social gathering, in the Council-mediated space, women became the primary focus. This change, at the behest of the facilitator, reflected broader values regarding which refugees were most deserving—women. They occupied the front seats, were called upon to dance or sing for guests, or pose for photographs. The most photographed Bhutanese were two women in their eighties, both illiterate, who looked simultaneously exotic and vulnerable. They rarely attempted to speak to the visiting guests who wanted to share a photograph, but the two elderly women never failed to smile graciously. I cannot recall any visitors requesting a photo with individual men. These reflected broader imaginings of the ideal refugee as female and non-threatening (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). These two women articulated Malkki’s (1996) description of the
refugee figure as a ‘speechless emissary’—their task was to appeal to a depoliticised, ahistorical yet universal imagining. The key performers at Harmony Day, across all groups, were the women. This was in-line with the Bhutanese-specific performances I observed.

Council staff and service providers described men to me as wanting to dominate the public space and attempting to silence women. Female refugees, on the other hand, became a group that needed to be given a voice. They were allies to the local government, while refugee men became problems who threatened gender relations. The creation and maintenance of this divide, while providing additional spaces for women, also led to cleavages. One Council staff member consistently wanted to ‘bring domestic violence out in the open’ and encouraged women to publicly confess, during community events, when their husbands were abusive (Australian service provider Female, Age 40s, Adelaide 2013). When this did occur, this Council employee saw this as an affirmation regarding her ability to create a liberating social space for women. This is not to suggest that creating a public space to discuss and transform social issues is inherently negative. However, as in the camps, domestic violence was presented to the group as a template with pre-delineated contours. This had the effect of excluding violence that did not conform to expectations, such as women against women violence, which did not fit easily into the stereotypical ‘male-as-problem’ model.

Attempts to create women as a coherent group, with gender transcending all other forms of difference, were problematic (this is discussed in Chapter 8). Further, these interpretations facilitated and naturalised control over women. Liberating female refugees ultimately re-constructed them as a category in need of exceptional guidance. This overlooked not only their existing capacities but also very profound variations. The women, like the men, were far from a homogenous category with the same experiences or aspirations.

The Salisbury Council’s attempts to establish the boundaries of a ‘Bhutanese refugee community’ occurred in conjunction with an evaluation of the group’s pre-existing norms and values. These norms were often intimate, personal, and political. At an everyday level, the Bhutanese became subject to critique and evaluation that led to ‘unacceptable’ norms becoming problems that Council staff or service providers needed to fix quietly. Norms such as polygamy and the exchange of dowry were flagged in the camps as inappropriate and unacceptable. After resettlement, the persistence of these
behaviours required attention, intervention and possible eradication by the service providers and the local Council. In essence, difference that was deemed morally unacceptable needed regulation.

In Australia, as in the camps, a distinctly humanitarian language of suffering and compassion was employed to transform the Bhutanese. Though the Council actively shaped, managed and directed the Bhutanese regarding public events and—as this section illustrates—private behaviours, the staff did not see themselves as participating in a form of governance. This may seem paradoxical: the Council is the local government. Yet the Council staff I worked with did not interpret these ‘necessary’ changes as a form of governance. Rather, they self-described as facilitators—helping or guiding those in need. This steadfast disavowal of governing illuminates broader power dynamics within the humanitarian framework and the ease with which politics becomes obscured by the language of compassion. The Bhutanese became both the ‘object and the target for the political exercise of power whilst remaining, somehow, external to politics and a counterweight to it’ (Rose 1999, p. 168).

The Critique of Dowry and Polygamy

As the earlier chapters illustrate, the UNHCR in Nepal functioned as a supra-government, governing at a distance through moral regulation and reconfiguration. A robust education in international values strove to mould the refugees into a very specific humanitarian subject. This political process of re-socialisation was obscured by the language of protection, community, and compassion: ‘humanitarian governance justifies acts of interference on the grounds that they are necessary to save lives and reduce human suffering’ (Barnett 2013, p. 389). In Australia, governance became increasingly intimate as local government representatives again constructed the Bhutanese in an image that furthered the former’s political goals. This produced what Fassin (2010) describes as ‘aporia’: apparent inconsistencies that illuminated the tensions embedded in humanitarian forms of governance.

Government requests for refugees to change and transform were presented as a means to help women—fulfilling egalitarian aspirations. The reluctance to recognise this as a form of governance functioned to depoliticise the requirements for social reforms. This became acute when discussing norms outside the acceptable. The practice of polygamy
and the exchange of dowry were norms flagged by several service providers as ‘cultural problems’. Yet rather than dispensing with norms that could be considered a sign of unacceptable otherness, Bhutanese refugees reconceptualised them to fit into a narrative that was better suited for a broader, Australian audience.

Polygamy was becoming less common in the camps due to several situational factors. People no longer had large farms that required considerable family labour to maintain. Men also faced fewer options for a well-paying livelihood that could provide the financial means of supporting multiple wives. Resettlement further accelerated the move away from polygamous marriages, but it also forced existing partnerships to be legally dissolved. Polygamous couples were not recognised as a valid family unit. Before resettlement, polygamous couples separated to expedite a process that could take several years.

In Australia, there were few instances of polygamy. Though there may be more families than I was aware of, it is unlikely that they occurred much more frequently than the research could establish (the impact of the disbanding is discussed further in Chapter 9). While the Commonwealth recognises a polygamous union that occurred overseas, polygamy is technically illegal in Australia. Once resettled, polygamous families may initially live in different cities and then move to reunite. In the large polygamous households in Australia, families rented adjoining apartments or houses in the same neighbourhood to be together. Regardless of these efforts to maintain their family structures, participants recognised that polygamy was an inappropriate family arrangement in Australia. Thus these changes were framed as necessary for the broader public good: a means of protecting Australians from immoral norms.

The group was very concerned that public discussion regarding the practice of polygamy would undermine their status as deserving refugees. This was further reinforced when a man proposed marriage to a Council worker with whom he had developed a strong attachment. The woman was aghast at the suggestion she become his subsidiary wife. She emphasised such an option was not only illegal but morally questionable. Thus for participants, polygamy became a site of tension: though encouraged to practise their culture some very intimate social institutions were deemed

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16 FAMILY LAW ACT 1975 - SECT 6 Polygamous marriages: For the purpose of proceedings under this Act, a union in the nature of a marriage which is, or has at any time been, polygamous, being a union entered into in a place outside Australia, shall be deemed to be a marriage.
unacceptable. Family is a central value in Australian culture (Dauvergne 1999b), yet it is a very specifically defined institution: largely nuclear. This is the family structure that is imagined to be naturally in line with egalitarian ideals (Kingston 1975). This highlights that alternative family structures may be understood as a threat to accepted, foundational social structures.

Dowry was another ‘cultural problem’ needing to be abolished in order to help the Bhutanese women. There were campaigns in the camps, led by NGOs, which depicted dowry as a social ill. Despite these efforts, and the constraining social climate in the camps, it remained a significant social norm. In resettlement countries, the exchange of dowry is similarly rejected as a cultural crime against women or a social evil (Oldenburg 2002). The exchange of dowry was deemed illustrative of a broader social system that favoured males. However, it can have multiple roles. It can function as a social safety net by ensuring women have access to some resources—often gold jewellery that can be liquidated if necessary. Dowry, for many participants, was evidence of the high status of a woman and one of the few pathways women had to acquire property. Failure to provide a dowry suggested the bride was not valued in her natal home. Perhaps even more significantly, a lack of dowry negated the groom’s obligation to provide gifts to the bride’s family. While the gifts to the bride’s family were not as substantial (they included cooking implements rather than gold jewellery) the exchange showed that dowry has a complex social role, helping solidify social bonds.

Participants were keenly aware that these alternative understandings of dowry were not considered legitimate and could undermine the moral legitimacy of the group. During conversations, women sought to distance themselves from the practice of dowry. Female participants speculated that a few conservative or ‘maybe some backwards people’ still maintained this norm ‘from the past, the old way of thinking’. They, on the other hand, were modern and righteous. The women I worked with adamantly denied that a dowry was paid to their husbands. Still, they all conceded that their husbands received a considerable amount of gold during the wedding negotiation process and they brought ample amounts of jewellery into their new family home. This was not done by a compulsion, a point the women felt was significant, but rather was simply a very generous gift. This shift in the stated underlying motivation (gift versus payment) enabled the women—and the community because they were tasked with the role of
representing the group—to maintain an image of progressive ideals and behaviours, minimising norms and values that cast them in a negative light.

Abolishing polygamy and dowry were framed as necessary measures to oppose patriarchy and the oppression of women: in short, they were seen as norms that directly undermined the ideals of egalitarianism. Framed this way, these transformations became a necessary means to protect women from a patriarchal value system. This was a clear moral evaluation regarding how a spouse was selected. The Bhutanese were acutely aware that cultural or ethnic difference was acceptable, even celebrated, but only to the degree that it did not deviate too far from mainstream norms. The group did not feel that they were in a social position, even if they held Australian citizenship, to discuss in public these social institutions. Open discussion threatened to re-brand the Bhutanese: from good refugees to social deviants. Marriage arrangements were both moral and political, but approaching polygamy and dowry as problems that need fixing depoliticised them (Ferguson 1990; Fisher 1997). These became problems that needed regulation and fixing rather than being complex social systems requiring considered discussion. While framed as necessary transformations to equalise men and women, it was not a given that these changes would reduce the suffering of women. For the women left behind in Nepal when polygamous families had to decide whether to stay together in the camps or pursue a new life, these moral frameworks probably directly contributed to an increase in suffering. This highlighted the unintended consequences that occur when ‘an ethics of care meets the will to control’ (Barnett 2013, p. 389).

Fitting into Australian culture was of fundamental importance for this group and they were eager to maintain that their Bhutanese identity was highly compatible. Yet, it was a complex process:

[p]olitical identities have to be worked out, negotiated, creatively compromised between peoples who have to or want to live together under the same political roof … and this coexistence is always grounded in some mixture of necessity and choice (Taylor 2011, p.140).

Here, norms excluded from the cultural space of inclusion became pushed further into the social margins. This dynamic again illustrated that ‘though the borders can be opened to some … getting through them [the borders] still involves fitting into a very Australian mould’ (Dauvergne 1999b, p. 44). Deeming some norms to be beyond the sphere of political discussion functioned to sustain the status quo. For the Salisbury Council, the ability to effectively convey the lessons regarding acceptable and
Legitimate Managers

As discussed in the previous chapters, the concept of a Bhutanese refugee community was deliberately cultivated in the camps. Though the refugees were encouraged to be self-sufficient and self-regulatory, the camp system precluded this outcome. In Australia, refugees from the same nation, with few exceptions, were similarly categorised as a community (with tiers of ‘deservedness’ embedded within). In such a situation, non-Bhutanese facilitators, Council workers, and service providers made a considerable effort to create a coherent, strongly linked community of Bhutanese. These communities provided the cornerstone for organising multiculturalism, promising access to resources and recognition. During resettlement, refugees adhering to this model gained the ability to self-regulate. Achieving this ideal was presented as obtainable in an undefined future and before this point, refugees needed to be managed.

The Salisbury Council actively promoted themselves as legitimate managers of the Bhutanese resettlement. They provided the appropriate spaces for the Bhutanese to practise their culture and educated them regarding acceptable norms and values. In turn, this emphasised Salisbury’s attempts to move beyond its status as a suburb that needed fixing to a suburb that had the capacity but required support. This was a clear and deliberate effort to claim positive recognition. It also articulated the hierarchical relationship embedded in the humanitarian framework between those who received and those who gave (Agier 2010; Barnett 2013). One reaped positive political rewards while the other saw basic needs met. Yet this power dynamic was not absolute. The Council’s ability to manage refugees (and multicultural groups more broadly) was punctuated with a sense of insecurity. One Council facilitator expressed uncertainty on several occasions regarding her ability to ‘do it’ the right way. This self-consciousness was demonstrated in their reactions to my research.

The service providers based in downtown Adelaide or in one of the more affluent suburbs were satisfied with the fairly standard information sheet that I provided to all respondents. Some expressed an interest in seeing the final ethnography. These service providers seemed confident that even if my research was not glowing, their work would
be little affected. Their capacity to perform the necessary work never seemed to be in question. The Salisbury Council, on the other hand, made frequent requests for specifically tailored letters, reviews of my research, and updates regarding what participants were saying. Initially, I thought this related to bureaucratic considerations. Then I assumed it related to strategies of governance: information could be used to manage the population more effectively (Hage 1998). While these may be factors, the requests were best understood as a reflection on the Council’s status in relation to greater Adelaide. As a Council area, they were subject to strong criticism because their populace was viewed as fundamentally dysfunctional. While the Adelaide-based service providers were quick to explain the Council was doing ‘good work’, the sense from the Council staff was that they did not have the luxury of a margin for error. Already pushed to the far fringe of society, they could not afford to mismanage new arrivals. The Bhutanese provided a means for the Council to illustrate their righteousness, which had the potential to transform into improved political and social recognition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the more powerful Bhutanese shared the same goal – they too wanted to shed stereotypes of incapacity and social backwardness in hopes of self-managing ‘their community’.

The Bhutanese in Salisbury, headed by the Bhutanese Australia Association of South Australia (BAASA), responded to this ideal of community. BAASA is a democratic organisation that provides support to new arrivals in Australia. Though lower caste refugees started the Association, they lost control of the organisation as higher castes became the demographic majority in South Australia. During fieldwork, BAASA was the largest and most dominant Bhutanese-run group, not only in Adelaide but also in broader Australia. Its stated goals were to provide services for the Bhutanese community while promoting the ideals of inclusiveness and human rights. These goals mirrored the ideals of the UNHCR, whose stated purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It also mirrored the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The adoption of these models was perhaps a product of their long interaction with international donors in the camps and illustrated the manner in which globally circulated ideals permeate everyday life. It also illustrated the group’s astute reading of which values carried moral weight and their strong desire to be viewed as global peers. While BAASA strove to be the representative body for all Bhutanese in Adelaide, the complex caste dynamics challenged their ability to regulate and manage the image of a unified Bhutanese community.
The members of BAASA, almost all of whom also volunteered for the City of Salisbury, started an ethnic school which ran on Saturdays. Participants frequently described the banning of the Nepali language in the classrooms of Bhutan as a ‘human rights abuse’ that contributed to their eventual exile. This was further compromised in the camps, as the schools were English-based and most parents viewed learning English as a valuable opportunity for their children. As a result there was a generation of children who could speak Nepali but could not write it. In Australia, the importance of everyone becoming fluent in English resulted in several people voicing concern that the culture they fled Bhutan to preserve would be gone within one generation.

Consequently, the idea to start a school emerged. In addition to helping preserve the Nepali language, the school gave people who experienced difficulty securing employment (particularly older male participants) a means to maintain social status. From 2012 to the beginning of 2014, approximately eighty students between the ages of five and fifteen attended the school each Saturday morning.

In early 2014, this school became a contentious issue. Classes were held in a space provided by the Salisbury Council. The group started the school without adequately informing the Council of their plans. The founders further attempted to skirt the Council by securing funding from a separate government agency that specialised in funding ethnic schools. Once the Council became aware of the school, after it had been running for several months in the building they provided for adult English classes, they also faced an insurance restriction that only covered the space for the use of adults. An inability to secure insurance for children to use the space led to the suggestion that the school might have to close. Eventually the Council was able to arrange a compromise with their insurance provider. Though a satisfactory solution was found, the matter was not immediately settled. The attempts by the Bhutanese to navigate the channels of bureaucracy independent of the Salisbury Council facilitator were met with a rebuff. The Council worker explained the following to the school’s founders in an exasperated tone:

You need to go through me. You don’t directly approach people, like the mayor or the Council and tell them you are doing these things. They come to me and I don’t know what they are talking about. There is a process here in Australia. I don’t know what it was like in Nepal or Bhutan but here there is a process. I have told you this before. You cannot just do these things.

One of the key volunteers (and a driving force behind the formation of the ethnic school) responded, with darting, downcast eyes:
Oh, oh yes. Oh, we are refugees. You know, our English isn’t that good. We don’t know—we don’t understand these things. The system here, you know, it is different. Yes, oh, I am sorry. We don’t know these things (Brahmin Male, Age late 30s, Adelaide 2014).

This incident suggests that the Bhutanese were not completely satisfied with a contained relationship. In the camps, projects were largely dictated to them or selectively funded to promote a larger agenda. The actual day-to-day running of endeavours was largely independent of ‘outside’ oversight. While international staff visited occasionally to provide further training, map outcomes or perform an evaluation, they were not present on a weekly basis. In Salisbury, the Council had a more intimate, everyday presence in the lives of the Bhutanese. They actively mediated the social spaces, ensuring the Bhutanese reflected well on them and learned the ‘right’ behaviours. The above exchange, perhaps more than anything else, speaks to the Council’s fear of losing their role as managers.

The actions of the Bhutanese went against one of the basic tenets of expected refugee behaviour as many of my participants understood it: refugees are not capable. To reclaim the secure position of refugee, they deliberately downplayed their obvious capabilities for the service provider. The refugee slipped into the role of passively grateful beneficiary. The volunteer quoted has impeccable English and is a skilled (and employed) translator from Nepalese to English. It is particularly interesting he slipped into a syntax that supported his claim of a lack of English skills. He appeared to recognise that an assumed lack of English capabilities was significant: it underscored his helplessness in Australia. Bhutanese leaders glided back into the patron/patronised relationship that the Council facilitator needed them to maintain. Here, the slippage between compassionate helpfulness and political aspirations was manifest.

The Bhutanese, despite their desire for more autonomy, could not risk the loss of patronage. Though they were attempting to strike out on their own, they were still bound to their providers. As such, it was not their desire to sever relationships with service providers. Rather, they wanted to maintain those relationships while building their own parallel (and more autonomous) organisations. These efforts, though perhaps a perfect example of a community acting as agents on their own behalf and exercising the skills of self-reliance service providers claimed to be promoting, were not met with praise. Refugees were told they should be striving towards self-reliance but concrete attempts to do so were deemed problematic: threatening the acceptable image of a deserving refugee. This further demonstrated that refugees played complex roles, not
only internationally but domestically. Being in a position to help can be powerful—as the dynamic in Salisbury illustrated.

Salisbury’s marginal status made it somewhat dependent on the Bhutanese. Though there were clear attempts to manage the Bhutanese, the Council could not afford to question all their values. This could risk the Bhutanese, their ‘model community’, no longer being willing performers. However, the central Adelaide-based service providers were in a different position. They had taken a firm stance that one of the group’s central values—the caste system—required reforming. Service providers located downtown, due to more secure social standing, had more autonomy than the Salisbury Council. While the Bhutanese in Salisbury were able to negotiate with the local Council representative to leave this issue (largely) alone, they were not in the position to negotiate with the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC). This led to a very different pattern of interaction.

### Shifting Dynamics

The Bhutanese Australia Association of South Australia (BAASA) and the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) originally enjoyed a close relationship. Initially, the MRC director went out of her way to support the group by attending their events, writing letters of support on their behalf, and actively recruiting Bhutanese to work as volunteers. After a few years, however, there was a falling out. The director of MRC explained why she decided to cut ties with them:

> BAASA maintains a very tight grip on power that bars women and lower caste individuals from accessing positions of prestige within the community. They effectively silence certain members of the community while putting on a cheery ‘we are democratic, look how democratic we are’ façade. I spoke at the big party last year to celebrate three years in Australia and then noticed that the lower caste was not allowed to eat – at a party to celebrate democracy! (Australian Female, Interview Adelaide 2012).

The MRC did not forbid members of BAASA or the higher castes from attending events. Rather, they distanced themselves from the political organisation but continued to work with the *community* of Bhutanese. This is a vital distinction. Although community is a crucial political category in Australia, it is idealised as apolitical. Communities are imagined as beyond ‘any calculated assessment of self-interest’ (Rose 1999, p. 177). Evidence to the contrary suggests the need for further education and increased efforts by service providers to re-create the ‘natural’ community.
After cutting ties with BAASA, the MRC took additional steps to support and facilitate Bhutanese whom they perceived BAASA were excluding—the lower castes. BAASA, in response, attempted to call the services provided by MRC into question by having Bhutanese request additional items of support. One request that elicited particular frustration was for electric rice cookers.

The basic goods provided on arrival in Australia included food, linens, white goods, and some kitchen equipment (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2015). In the United States, where resettlement is more ad hoc and variable (Ong 2003), several Bhutanese families received a rice cooker either from a church group or a similar agency helping with the resettlement process. After living without electricity for decades, news of luxury items being literally given away to the Bhutanese in the United States spread quickly through the social grapevine. This led to the requests in Adelaide. The MRC interpreted this as a lack of gratitude for the support Bhutanese refugees received during the resettlement process, describing the group as being like a squeaky wheel—always demanding more. Requests for additional things, particularly material goods, were not considered good refugee behaviour.

The rice cooker had additional significance beyond being a simple luxury good. For the Bhutanese, rice is synonymous with food. A meal is not complete, nor even considered a meal, without it. Women, almost exclusively, prepare the food for the family. Much discussion surrounds a woman’s ability to cook rice properly. It should not be at all crunchy but also should not be gluggy. It should hold together when mixed with cooked dhal (lentils) and khargati (vegetables) but not stick to the fingers when eaten. Ill-prepared rice elicits negative comments. Food, due to a long-standing lack of refrigeration and persistent cultural norms, must be freshly prepared for every meal. Rice is cooked a minimum of twice a day; attempts to recycle rice from lunch in order to save time are frowned upon. Rice must be picked through, washed, and cooked in the pressure cooker—with the cook staying vigilant for the necessary two whistles. A rice cooker promises perfectly prepared rice that can sit—warm and still fresh—until the evening meal. It can save the women of the household a tremendous amount of time.

Due to the central importance of rice, the MRC’s failure to supply these items led BAASA to suggest they were not sufficiently aware of the group’s needs. Most, if not all, participants could afford to purchase a rice cooker. However, the rice cooker issue provided a crucial means for BAASA to wrest power away from a service provider who
was publicly critical of them. BAASA drew upon their power within the Bhutanese community to critique the services provided by groups with whom they did not get along. To add insult to injury BAASA lost their government grant shortly after the MRC (South Australia’s largest migration organisation) withdrew their support.

While this may have been a coincidence, BAASA remained suspicious of the MRC. A BAASA member commented on this:

we have the spirit to give. Here smaller voluntary work does much good but it is not rewarded, now we don’t have the space to give. Now, the government just wants to give to bigger organizations but they have so much bureaucracy. The smaller ones can work much more effectively. We want to help each other (Brahmin Male, Age 30s, Interview Salisbury 2012).

By suggesting the Migrant Resource Centre had not provided a basic need for the group, the balance of power between benefactor and beneficiary was subtly shifted. BAASA used this request to deflect attention away from their internal power dynamics by suggesting the MRC did not understand the group at a very basic and fundamental level. This, in turn, also undermined the MRC’s critique of the caste system. These tense power struggles revealed that willingness to perform the role of an ideal refugee did have limits. Ong (2003) found Cambodian refugees in America similarly adept at shifting the power balance. While refugees become subjects within a value system with particular norms, ‘they also modify practices and agenda while nimbly deflecting control and interjecting critique’ (Ong 2003; XVII). The Bhutanese were asserting themselves but also attempting to maintain, and work within, the framework of expectations.

**Conclusion**

Humanitarian ideals mesh with multicultural aspirations to create a script of acceptable or ideal refugee behaviour. The Bhutanese interpret the cues from government agents, service providers, and the broader Australian population to determine how refugees should behave. Crucially, they must continue to represent a coherent ethnic community eager to transform into righteous subjects – a transformation achievable if they work through their service providers. These interactions illustrated the tension between assumptions regarding the behaviour of refugees, as well as the lengths and limits of willingness to conform or contest those expectations.
Humanitarian ideals are expressed in a variety of ways: sympathy; a desire to help others; the need to guide the vulnerable. As agreeable as these ideals seem, they obscure unequal relations between those who require help and those who help. As politics becomes increasingly redefined by its incorporation of the language of humanitarianism, groups no longer credible within a humanitarian framework are further silenced (Fox 2001). In turn, this framework lends itself to the reproduction of power dynamics, rather than their transformation. In Salisbury, the morality of those living in the Northern suburbs was subject to scrutiny and evaluation. The broader South Australian community found them morally deficient. The Bhutanese, on the other hand, were a morally deserving group willing to work with the Council. They conformed to the multicultural framework that naturalises the role of the government as the mediator of cultural difference. Yet conformity in some arenas did not mean that a clear process of either domination or emancipation was occurring.

Attempts to manage the Bhutanese were met with mixed results: the Council staff was not trying to create ‘robots programmed with cultural rules’, but they were trying desperately to assert themselves as competent and capable managers (Abu-Lughod 1991, p. 158). The means of doing this was linked with the ability to reinforce Australia’s national culture as morally apt and ensure the Bhutanese were not corrupted by the suburb nor were themselves a corrupting presence. This chapter has illustrated that this leads to uneven power relations. In turn, this articulates broader themes of social relations between those with the power to govern through compassion and those who are governed by compassion (Barnett 2012).

In Australia, community was consistently stressed as a necessary social attribute of new arrivals. The Bhutanese in Australia had a vision of their community—as defined by caste and ritual purity—that is distinct from the Australian ideal of egalitarianism and equality. The Bhutanese also had their own complex power relations that became obscured in the promotion of bound communities. Bauman (2001, p. 4) observes that ‘there is a price to be paid for the privilege of “being in a community” … the price is paid in the currency of freedom’. The following chapter examines the power struggles within the community.
Chapter 8

Being Bhutanese, Becoming Australian

Adelaide, bounded by the Mt. Lofty Ranges to the east and the Gulf of St. Vincent to the west, sprawled north and south for kilometres. This low-lying urban space was anchored by a similarly low-slung downtown. Rising up from the city centre was Adelaide’s tallest building—the 31-storey Westpac House. Crowning the structure was a stylised ‘W’ that resembled the tikka worn by higher caste Vishnu Brahmins. Both men and women wore a tikka made of ash, sandalwood, clay or coloured starch mixed with water on the forehead. The shape and colour of the mark provided visual information regarding one’s position in the caste hierarchy and the associated level of purity. The lower castes in Adelaide drew parallels between the building’s domination of the skyline and the higher caste’s ability to control an image of a ‘Bhutanese community’. While drawing this parallel, they were similarly quick to downplay its significance. One of the favourite jokes among the lower castes was to call Vishnu Brahmins ‘the Westpac-ers’—an attempt to ridicule the mark that functions to remind the lower castes of their polluting status.

The lower castes saw the Westpac building more frequently than the higher castes because they had moved to suburbs closer to the city centre while the higher castes remained in the north. This is a reincarnation of settlement patterns in Bhutan, where the lower castes were expected to live away from the higher castes. In the camps, this was not possible, as huts were allocated without consideration for the caste system. There was little autonomy over where people lived and who their neighbours were. The higher castes found it difficult to exercise control over things that affirmed their status in the caste hierarchy. This included broad aspects, such as maintaining a monopoly on education and, at a more basic level, regulating who had access to water sources. In Australia, the perception that people had ‘freedom in our homes’ allowed them to revive a system that was seriously compromised in the camps. For the higher castes, and particularly those of the Brahmin caste, reviving a caste system was part of shedding their status as refugees and returning to a ritually pure Bhutanese community based on a caste hierarchy. The lower castes, on the other hand, were anxious to be free of the caste-based order and appeal to the broader Australian notion of community linked to
the ideals of egalitarianism. This was an understanding that liberated some and challenged others, providing pathways for particular kinds of action while blocking others.

The previous chapter argued that refugees play a central political role in local governance—not as actors but as objects of care. Underpinning these interactions was the assumption of a unified ethnic community—linked to a nation and further solidified by a common refugee experience. Part of the attraction of community ‘lies in their apparent naturalness: their non-political or pre-political status’ (Rose 1999, p. 189). Further, community is buttressed through the assumption of ‘purity or naturalness, wholeness or wholesomeness of origins … communities, cultural traditions, or nationalities’ (Malkki 1995b, p. 516). However, ‘[c]ultural identities are in a constant state of flux and attempts to define them as statistical and administrative categories—for example, through the idea of “ethnic communities” —are problematic’ (Colic-Peisker & Farquharsan 2011, p. 581).

This chapter argues that the resettlement process encouraged a particular model of Bhutanese community that ignored social realities. It is through an examination of the caste system that ‘the difference between the imagined figure and its enactment’ can be fruitfully analysed (Tickin 2011, p. 15). In this context, it is the imagined Bhutanese refugees who are an apolitical, naturally united community butting against the living and breathing Bhutanese who are politically organised and highly stratified. Competing notions of a Bhutanese community emerge: one based on the values of hierarchy and the other on the values of egalitarianism. As the Bhutanese found themselves jockeying for support and recognition in Australia, caste again became a site of intersecting ideals regarding how the world should be ordered. New performances were necessary to maintain an image of unity.

**Caste as Community**

Due to several decades of education about caste in the refugee camps and similar education programs in Australia, higher caste\textsuperscript{17} participants recognise that caste is

\textsuperscript{17} Higher castes and high caste was generally how participants referred to the ritually pure castes (both Brahmin and Chetri) in Australia. However, Brahmins did not always consider Chetri to be ‘high caste’ but did consider them higher caste than most others. Lower castes and low caste was the colloquial way participants to refer to ritually impure and untouchable castes.
viewed as an inappropriate social stratification system. Yet for the higher caste Bhutanese, caste provided the central way of organising virtually every aspect of their world: from what they ate and drank, to whom they married, and the names of their children. After decades of compromise in the refugee camps, Australia promised the chance to become pure Bhutanese—a return to an earlier notion of community based on ritual hierarchy. For many Bhutanese, of all castes, this understanding of community held great value. A community organised along caste lines was understood as a means of ordering their social world in which everyone has a clearly defined role.

Abiding by these structured roles ensured the possibility of future positive reincarnations. As a closed system of social stratification, these potentially positive future reincarnations were the means of moving up the social hierarchy. In mainstream Australia, there was a similar emphasis on community but with a radically different meaning. Community, ideally, is based on egalitarian values, the capacity for self-determination, and the chance for everyone to have a ‘fair go’. A ‘fair go’ in Australia is a value related to enjoying equal opportunities but it also links to the hope that the socially downtrodden can—and should—succeed. Of course, there are contradictions in the manifestation of these ideals.

Despite these shortcomings, these aspirations did have an influence on how an Australian community was imagined and what it should be striving towards. Caste, with its emphasis on stratification and restricted social mobility, was viewed as incompatible with the Australian ideal of community. Service providers targeted the caste system, due to the perception that it was at odds with egalitarian notions of community, as a ‘cultural problem’. They described cultural problems to me as pre-existing norms or values that had the potential to fetter successful settlement in Australia. As the previous chapter highlighted, these included behaviours that were perceived as being harmful to women or at odds with Australian values in general. Service providers attempted to reorganise the group from a firmly gradated scale into an egalitarian community. Yet, for the higher castes, this was the first opportunity in decades to be wholly Bhutanese—able to live away from the lower castes and reaffirm a social framework based on ritual purity. Balancing external demands with internal ideals lead to distinct performances that publically affirmed the rightness of broader Australian ideals while privately affirming social hierarchies.
In June of 2013, the Bhutanese responded to these competing notions of community by holding the caste-affirming sacred thread ceremony but rebranding it as an exotic interpretation of an Australian norm: the housewarming party. As a ritual it affirmed the Bhutanese concept of community based on social hierarchy but was presented to an Australian audience as a non-threatening cultural performance.

The party was just beginning when I arrived. I sat with several neighbours and a few representatives from the Salisbury Council under a covered carport. The host informed me that he had invited many people from the broader Australian population, expressing disappointment that the Mayor and other higher-ranking officials could not attend. The higher castes in Salisbury continually made efforts to engage with the Mayor, hoping such a relationship would eventually lead to greater autonomy and social independence. Seats were procured for the visiting non-Bhutanese, while close to fifty Bhutanese participants stood. After a few minutes of chatting, the host’s son appeared. It immediately became obvious to me that we were not witnessing a housewarming party but a sacred thread ritual—one of the most significant religious ceremonies in a male Brahmin’s life. Before a Brahmin male reaches the age of ten, he is not bound by the rules of purity and pollution that dictate food consumption and personal interactions across castes. He can eat and play with anyone he chooses. When he dons the sacred thread during an elaborate ceremony, he is expected to live his life in line with the Vedic scriptures. He can no longer consume meat or eggs, alcohol and smoking are prohibited and he must now avoid ritually polluting people. The three plain cotton threads are twisted to make one rope worn across the chest representing his unique link to God (Bennett 1983) and symbolising his position at the apex of the caste system. It is only removed when he marries (to be replaced by a six-threaded rope to symbolise greater responsibility) or during the once-yearly purification ritual during which he receives a replacement thread. If a Brahmin chooses to disregard the Vedic teachings by consuming meat, drinking alcohol, or transgressing other taboos he should remove the thread and is only entitled to wear it again after extensive purification rituals.

The ceremony around the sacred thread was aesthetically beautiful and highly theatrical. The young man was carrying a sceptre and was wrapped in a single piece of cotton cloth. His head was freshly shorn (aside from a small tuft of hair) and an exceptional tikka denoting his status as a Vishnu Brahmin stretched across his brow. He began collecting ritualised alms and outsiders were given uncooked rice sprinkled with flowers to present as an offering. Singing, incense, cedar garlands, rice dotted with flowers, and
the colourful attire of the smiling Bhutanese created an intoxicating spectacle. To the untrained eye, this was a spectacular interpretation of a housewarming party. Yet all of these acts stressed the structural component of the Hindu caste system. The boy was wrapped in a single piece of cloth because, according to the caste hierarchy, clothes are sewn by the lowest castes and hence polluting. Further, cotton is used for the cloth and the thread because it is considered more pure than silk which is an animal by-product. His shaved head had a small tuft of hair towards the back, representing not only his ritual cleanliness but also his unique connection to the gods. His tikka represented Lord Vishnu’s (the supreme God’s) footprint—again affirming the Brahmin relationship with the head of the Hindu Pantheon. The rice and flowers are given to bless the young man with knowledge, health, and purity. These two gifts are considered non-polluting and thus it is acceptable for lower castes (including Australians) to present them to higher castes. The sacred thread ceremony was about highlighting social boundaries. Here, the Brahmins were distinguishing themselves as not only different but ritually purer than other people. However additional steps were necessary to balance dual aims: conducting a ritual that reinforced the cosmic-moral order that elevated Brahmin males above all others while appearing to be an inclusive community.

A crucial ceremony in a young, high caste Brahmin male’s life was reframed for outside guests as an exotic performance of an Australian social norm: a housewarming party. This performance was successful: the higher caste Bhutanese presented a ritual as a cultural performance that did not test the fundamental expectation of Australian egalitarianism. Though alternative interpretations of this event are possible—such as not wanting to confuse Australians with an elaborate ritual—this explanation fits with broader patterns that occurred both in the camps and in Australia. Durkheim understood rituals as fundamentally concerned with internal organisation (2008) and while this interpretation cut to the core of the sacred thread ritual, arranging an audience of outsiders suggested something more was occurring. Baumann (1992, p. 100) looked specifically at rituals in multicultural contexts. In these settings, rituals can be understood as ‘a claim to public attention, public space, and public recognition’ and attempts to make a symbolic statement. The sacred thread was a potentially divisive subject due to its confirmation of the caste hierarchy. Neighbours and city officials might have been reluctant to attend a ceremony that affirmed the caste system, a hierarchy participants were told was at odds with the Australian ideology that everyone has the right to a ‘fair go’. As such, the Bhutanese deliberately attempted to manage the
image of the event to fit within Australia’s version of community. Those involved in organising this ritual staked an active claim to the creation of a Bhutanese identity in Australia. Involving Council staff and bringing them into the high-caste network, even partially, was strategic. Presenting a ritual fundamentally about caste hierarchy as a cultural performance functioned to mask the persistence of the caste system. It was an exercise in displaying public boundary markers—clothes, music, dance, and food—in a ‘celebratory’ multicultural framework (Hage 1996; 1998).

The strength of appealing to the concept of community lies in its natural authority (Rose 1999). Naturalising ‘community’ as an organic institution makes it difficult to dispute—it exerts a moral legitimacy (Selznick 1994). However in Australia a community defined by caste is viewed as un-natural: a social creation governed by clear rules and codes of conduct. The political construction of a refugee or ethnic community undermined its credibility (Rose 1999). The Bhutanese caste system called the inherent goodness of community into question not only because the behaviours appeared to contradict egalitarian ideals, but also because the very basic imaginings of community were threatened (Selznick 1994). It was a community structure that articulated the inequalities and hierarchies that were largely hidden or publically disavowed in acceptable notions of community. Thus, caste had to be performed in a way that these contradictions were minimised.

While Australian guests were invited by the hosts to attend this ceremony, the lower castes were not. When I asked one Brahmin man in his early forties why he would eat food with me but not with lower castes he explained, ‘we have been taught for thousands of years that the low castes are not good. It is hard to change these things just because someone says’ (Interview Adelaide 2013). Here, the almost contradictory inclusion by exclusion of the lower caste became clear. The lower castes were firmly entrenched in the purity spectrum and in this way they were intrinsically tied to hierarchical notions of community. As an outsider, I was also integrated into the purity index but in a less absolute fashion. Some higher castes would eat with me and accept cooked food or tea from my hand. Others would eat with me but not eat food I had prepared. A few would not eat or drink in my presence. Most participants approached Australians and Westerners more generally as being similar to an impure but touchable middle caste,18 although this was not a concrete position. I, like most Australians, was not fully integrated into the community hierarchy and thus my level of purity was

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18 See Table 1 in Chapter 5.
somewhat fluid. For the lower castes, their ritual pollution was well-established as the
man stated, ‘for thousands of years’. They were concretely integrated into the
community hierarchy. This presented a particular intersection between competing
notions of community. The Australians in attendance had a less definite role than the
lower castes, who were more integrated into the community hierarchy. As non-
Bhutanese Australians were not full members of the community, our liminal status
allowed us to be treated in a more egalitarian fashion—eating in proximity to the higher
castes, taking part in their ceremony. Our lower degree of integration into the social
hierarchy meant that our presence was tolerated while a fully integrated member of a
similar status was not welcome at such an event. In turn, this illustrated that although
excluded from the event, the lower castes were actually considered fuller members of
the community than the non-Bhutanese guests in attendance. Their role, in the eyes of
the Brahmins, was not to witness ceremonies or share food. During this gathering,
everyone could appear to be equal as we ate together and participated in a ritual. Within
the caste-based social structure it was expected that the lower castes would be excluded,
and on this basis a ritual that centred on social stratification could be presented to
outsiders as affirming egalitarian ideals.

Though involving outsiders was strategic in terms of controlling the image of the group,
it was also problematic. Despite the success of this performance, service providers were
aware of the dual concepts of community. In Australia, service providers had an active
role in transforming the Bhutanese from a community segregated along caste lines to a
community bound by the ideals of unity. In order to bring about this transformation, the
service providers had to be informed of internal dynamics. When they were not
informed of the nuances of the cultural performances they witnessed, they frequently
expressed a sense of betrayal. Internal dynamics that suggested the group was not united
as an ethnic community threatened to undermine the carefully crafted patron-benefactor
relationship the Bhutanese had cultivated in Australia. Caste, in effect, threatened to
undermine the image of Bhutanese as a deserving community. Not only did its presence
counter the dominant value system, more crucially its persistence suggested an attempt
to skirt service providers’ reforming efforts. This partly reflected the expectations (as
argued in Chapters 4, 5, and 7) that the Bhutanese should willingly reform themselves
to project the appropriate set of values. The following section analyses the attempts by
service providers to reform the caste hierarchy and the actions of some of the lower
castes who took an active role in attempting to transform the group to mirror Australia’s
expectation of community. The Bhutanese needed to be made aware of their pre-existing community and what that membership entailed.

Transforming Caste, Reforming Community

In Australia, as in the camps, there were different ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and languages subsumed under the label Bhutanese. In the camps, the higher castes (Brahmin and Chetri) represented a demographic minority yet they exerted considerable power and viewed themselves as the public face of the Bhutanese. In Adelaide, they had become a demographic majority and essentially monopolised the image of the Bhutanese in relation to service providers, the general public, and researchers. The public performances were strongly influenced by service providers’ expectations. The Thursday social group (described in the previous chapter) welcomed newly arrived Bhutanese with a scarf-giving ceremony. Scarves, a symbol of goodwill, were commonly exchanged in the refugee camps when a person departed, began a new stage of life, or returned from a journey. In the camps, white silk scarves printed with the ashtamangala (eight auspicious symbols) were given on special occasions, such as weddings, departures or arrivals in groups which were predominantly Buddhist. Yet, I also observed Hindus practising this ritual in the camps, with woven cotton, rather than silk, scarves. For many Brahmins, silk was considered impure. I observed Brahmins giving cotton scarves to those within their social strata but not those below them. The physical contact necessary for such an exchange to occur between a higher caste and a lower caste would entail unacceptable exposure to ritual pollution. However, in Australia the desire to maintain a physical distance from the lower castes was deemed unacceptable by service providers and fundamentally at odds with Australia’s egalitarian values.

While the scarf-giving ceremony in Australia bore some similarities to those in the camps, these subtle distinctions appeared to have collapsed. The Salisbury Council’s non-Bhutanese facilitator ran the events and oversaw the inviting of guests. She was adamant that the group not become ‘an elite Hindu club’, and went to considerable effort to ensure that all newly arrived Bhutanese received an invitation to participate in the community event. During one ceremony, new arrivals (including myself after returning from Nepal) stood in front of the group of roughly 200 Bhutanese and
accepted scarves as a symbolic gesture of goodwill. The Salisbury Council staff member did not present the scarves. Rather, the duty to present scarves to the new arrivals fell to the higher caste volunteers that essentially monopolised the Council’s volunteer positions. This ceremony was intended to affirm an assumption that this was a community reuniting, that their nationally based identity bridged ethnic, religious, and caste differences. Some of the new arrivals were invariably from lower castes—some were Hindu, others had converted to Buddhism or Christianity. While the Council member saw this as a chance to affirm Australia’s notions of community, the acts expected to be performed by the higher castes ran counter to many of their notions of community. The ceremony became an elaborate, if somewhat awkward, performance. The unease between the higher caste presenter and the lower caste recipient was palpable—such an exchange ran counter to sanctioned caste interactions. In the face of discomfort, the ceremony was performed, scarves accepted, and photographs taken by the Council employee. The lower caste arrivals were publicly welcomed to Australia and an invitation to participate in the group was extended.

New arrivals, if they were from lower castes and most acutely the ritually polluting castes, might attend the Thursday meeting in Salisbury once but quickly realised the welcome ceremony was not a genuine invitation by higher caste Bhutanese to join the group. For the higher caste Bhutanese in Salisbury, balancing the demands of the Council with their own value system required considerable social manoeuvring. They had to go through the motions of publicly inviting the lower castes to participate while privately visiting them and making it known they were not welcome. I learned of these ‘revoked’ invitations through service providers, politically engaged lower castes, and from interviews with lower castes in Adelaide. It was generally the more politically engaged lower castes that approached service providers to intervene in these situations. Social hierarchies were still firmly in place and though service providers considered them all to be Bhutanese, differences had not disappeared.

In this example, service providers attempted to transform the Bhutanese into an egalitarian community. They tried to do this by changing the expectations of the lower castes and the behaviours of the higher castes. The lower castes were consistently informed that they were part of a Bhutanese community that was welcoming and encompassing. This increased the degree of integration the lower caste expected. The higher castes were informed they had to embrace the lower castes not as inferiors in a social hierarchy but as equals. The lower castes approached these interactions with
elevated hopes of a transformed community, while the higher castes desperately tried to return to a ‘pure’ model without upsetting their benefactors. This balance became increasingly difficult to maintain when lower castes were given access to public space or became employees of the service providers.

Generally, as the previous chapter illustrated, the public spaces were used strategically to further political agendas of the higher castes by reflecting the values of the audience. However, the lower castes, due to their partial exclusion, were not as tightly regulated as the higher castes. They used these public spaces in ways the higher castes deemed inappropriate. One lower caste refugee man used a public forum hosted by the Migrant Resource Centre to discuss the caste system, highlighting the on-going discrimination perpetrated by the higher castes. In this very public setting, he framed the caste system as being at odds with the egalitarian norms and values of Australia. Further, he questioned the behaviour of the group in Salisbury suggesting they were attempting to mislead service providers with a performance of community equality. In the days after his talk, the higher caste Bhutanese in Salisbury spoke of his outburst with disdain (Conversations Adelaide 2014). They speculated that doing such a thing was a deliberate attempt to undermine their efforts in Australia. They felt he should be punished for such a transgression. Angry participants thought they should attempt to talk to his employer in order to get him fired or, at the very least, ban him from speaking publicly. His public conversation about the internal group dynamics defied not only the image of a cohesive group but also the story of a group bound by the ideals of human rights. Not only was he not behaving as a good refugee, he was tarnishing the carefully cultivated image of the group.

This public sharing of behaviours considered by service providers to be ‘cultural problems’ was particularly distressing. Several participants explained to me that they have a culture that people in Australia love. This culture includes the way they dress, the food they cook, songs, and their presumably strong sense of community. It was through the sharing of their culture that they gained social recognition in Australia. Cultural problems, on the other hand, threatened not only opportunities for positive recognition but the relationships they were actively building with their benefactors.

Occasionally, service providers or Council employees were approached to intervene on the behalf of lower castes. For example, one Thursday, the meeting of Bhutanese in Salisbury was coming to a close. The guests had departed—only the Bhutanese and
their Council facilitator remained. The volunteers were preparing to collect tea cups and begin the final cleaning when the facilitator called out for everyone’s attention. An incident had been brought to her attention over the weekend: a love marriage had taken place between a higher caste man and a lower caste woman. In line with responses I observed in the camp, after the marriage the man was banned from returning to his home and the bride’s family had reluctantly allowed the couple to stay with them. This was in stark contrast to the socially acceptable arrangement after marriage, where the bride joins the groom’s home. The son risked not only homelessness but excommunication (and his family performing premature funeral rites) due to his decision to marry outside his caste. The lower caste family approached the council member to help find a solution; they did not want to appear to be actively supporting the marriage and thus become subject to further stigmatisation. The Council worker informed the group, ‘This kind of behaviour is not acceptable. People here are free to marry whom they want.’ A high caste, Brahmin priest replied defensively ‘This issue does not concern you, this is a community issue and we are capable of fixing it.’ The Council worker countered, ‘it becomes my issue when people come to me and are upset.’ The higher caste participants used the very language promoted in Australia—particularly the notion of community—to distance themselves from incursions by the Council staff. Partially due to the unique power dynamic in Salisbury, the facilitator did not push the matter further. Though unsuccessful at persuading the group to defer to her guidance, she was able to maintain her role as a legitimate manager of the Bhutanese. Pursuing the issue further risked the very image both the Council and the group had carefully cultivated: a united Bhutanese refugee community. For the higher castes, external intervention into the caste system was the least desirable course of action. As the earlier discussion of the sacred thread ceremony illustrated, they actively tried to maintain their understanding of community despite the potential for it to undermine their status as a deserving community that shared Australian values.

A few of the lower castes had entered into paid employment with refugee or migrant resettlement agencies—particularly the MRC. One woman who was a nurse in Bhutan divided her paid employment in Adelaide between refugee specific health projects and the MRC. Another lower caste man, who was a university teacher in Bhutan19, was also

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19 It is difficult to discern the degree of marginalisation lower castes experienced in Bhutan. Based on surveys I conducted in the camps, the lower castes had significantly lower education levels than higher castes. Most participants shared stories that suggested a rigorous caste system with clearly defined social roles. The lower castes that achieved a high degree of education in Bhutan attributed their educational opportunities to the Royal Government of Bhutan’s sponsored study programs.
employed as a community resettlement facilitator through the MRC. One of these two people’s jobs was to visit the homes of new arrivals to ensure they were settling in and their basic needs were being met. Due to their position in the caste hierarchy, they were deemed ritually polluting and thus often barred from entering the homes. The MRC was alerted to a perceived lack of community cohesion and responded by actively attempting to renegotiate the inner-group power dynamic in Salisbury to foster a more inclusive Bhutanese community.

One such effort was to place the lower caste woman in their northern outreach office. Women, as the idealised figure of refugee, were positioned as natural bonding agents, not only holding their community together but mediating between the Bhutanese and broader Australia. Here, the MRC was attempting to ‘engage and instrumentalize the forces of individuals and groups in the name of the public good’ (Rose 1999, p. 171). The MRC employee was not entirely happy to have to commute to the northern suburbs from her more central suburb. She also seemed unhappy about interacting predominantly with the higher castes. The higher caste women, in turn, were furious when they learned of her placement at the Salisbury MRC. The MRC building in Salisbury was utilised nearly every day of the week by higher caste Bhutanese women. The Bhutanese women held sewing circles and gardening groups. They also used the space to participate in Multicultural Foodies, OzHarvest, and the Penguin’s Group. They had a high degree of ownership over the space: a few held keys to the building and a higher caste Bhutanese woman was one of the centre’s two employees. The other employee was a refugee from Sudan who allowed the Bhutanese a wide berth to use the space as they saw fit. For the women who used the area on a nearly daily basis, the news that a lower caste woman was entering their space was an unacceptable development. They complained to me that there was no need for another caseworker in the northern office.

Part of this concern linked to the higher castes’ participation in a group called Multicultural Foodies. When I returned from fieldwork, this group had lost its funding but during fieldwork this was one of the Bhutanese’s favourite groups. Multicultural Foodies encompassed two arenas: learning to grow fruit and vegetables in the Adelaide climate and expanding the women’s repertoire of cooking techniques. Though the Bhutanese women dominated the group in terms of numbers, other refugees from Burundi, Sudan, and Vietnam also participated. Gardening was a favoured pastime of the Bhutanese. Their photos on their mobile phones tended to depict children and
grandchildren in their vegetable garden. They greatly appreciated guidance regarding suitable vegetables for Adelaide’s environment with its unique growing climate.

In principle, the higher caste women did not eat with this diverse group of ritually impure people. Yet aside from one woman, they prepared and ate food together. This woman abstained due to her obligation to fast for her family. Many older women fasted once a week to increase the merit of their family thus ensuring future success and health. Eating with a diverse group was understood as part of learning to live in Australia. However, preparing food and eating with the lower caste woman was considered untenable. These higher caste women wanted to reproduce the structure of community that provided them with power and prestige—they were trying to maintain their collective understanding of a community with clearly defined roles and boundaries. They were willing to subordinate a degree of their ritual purity by eating with non-Hindus but unwilling to concede to the authority of the MRC and abolish the caste hierarchy.

A second activity also illustrated the women’s rejection of the value of an egalitarian community. The Penguin’s Group was a fortnightly meeting held in Salisbury that focused on developing female literacy and increasing public speaking confidence. These efforts were premised on the notion that some women were disadvantaged and needed additional support to have a ‘fair go’ in Australian society. Many of the higher caste women who participated were illiterate in both Nepali and in English. There were limited educational opportunities in Bhutan and though a few participated in the adult literacy classes in the camps, their confidence was still developing. The Penguin Group was co-ordinated by native Australian-English speakers and provided a rare opportunity for the Bhutanese to practise the local English pronunciation. The women who attended were diligent yet learning a new language was challenging and many expressed embarrassment at their pronunciation. The possibility that a lower caste woman, already possessing these skills, would infringe on these lessons was unacceptable for the higher castes. Worse still was the possibility that caste roles could be inverted, with the lower caste women functioning as a teacher for the higher castes. One participant informed me she was concerned that the lower caste woman was mentally unstable: ‘not right’ (Brahmin Woman, Age 50s, Interview Salisbury 2013). This genuine concern stemmed from the perception that the lower caste woman had usurped the social hierarchy in an entirely unacceptable manner.
Rather than framing their concerns in terms of caste and pollution, the higher caste women questioned the skills and capabilities of the new MRC employee, the lower caste woman. The lower caste lady spoke impeccable English. She had worked for an international NGO in Kathmandu rather than living in the camps. She had a vastly different refugee experience from the majority of women living in Salisbury. In Australia, she was employed to host workshops regarding public health and wellbeing. Recently, she had a hand in compiling recipes from different refugee groups to produce a cookbook. These skills and accomplishments did not elevate her role with the Bhutanese but rather problematised it. This was not because the higher caste women did not think these skills were useful—quite the contrary. Their efforts with the Penguin Group accentuated this. Indeed, the existing MRC employee in the northern office was a higher caste Bhutanese who had a similar skill set. Participants spoke glowingly of this woman’s efforts, capabilities, and skills. The lower caste woman held many of the skills the higher caste women increasingly viewed as important and were actively struggling to gain. However because she was a lower caste, these skills had the effect of further isolating her from the very group the employer wanted her to help transform. Her capabilities and successes were not celebrated as a demonstration of a down-trodden person succeeding despite social obstacles. Rather, her skills accentuated the degradation of the caste hierarchy the higher castes were striving to maintain. Her caste-ordained role was not to hold the employment positions that were considered high-status and in line with ‘Brahmin’ or higher caste type behaviours.

Having lower castes in sought-after positions with resettlement organisations, particularly when they were tasked with educating the higher castes regarding social norms and values in Australia, was viewed as an affront to the very foundation of a Bhutanese community. As a lower caste woman she was expected to serve, not direct the higher castes. The tension between the performance of an egalitarian community and the desire to maintain a hierarchical social structure became evident at larger events hosted in Salisbury. Often, these events were coordinated by service providers or Council staff and were described as community celebrations. The social unease between the groups was perhaps most accentuated when Hindu festivals were hosted in Salisbury.
Community Events

Due to the efforts of the Council and the large population of Bhutanese, Salisbury hosted numerous festivals on the Hindu calendar. On these occasions, the lower castes had to weigh whether to enjoy the spectacle of dancing and singing that such an affair promised against the high likelihood of being treated like interlopers.

One Saturday morning, I joined the lower castes while they were having their weekly meeting in the Adelaide city centre. That afternoon, the Teej celebration in Salisbury was being held at a local hall that the Bhutanese Australia Association of South Australia had secured for the event. The festival was also doubling as a fundraiser for the Bhutanese Youth Radio Station. Service providers, Council staff, and the local newspaper were all invited to see ‘the Bhutanese community celebrate Teej’. Teej is one of the most important festivals in Hinduism. Coinciding with the beginning of the monsoon season, it commemorates a marriage myth centred on the devotion of Goddess Parvati to her husband. This goddess underwent an extended period of fasting in an attempt to beguile her future husband, Lord Shiva. Due to her efforts, she won his favour. This myth highlights the devotion and sacrifice a wife makes for her husband.

To celebrate this commitment, married women return to their natal home, reconnecting with family and friends. Historically, due to patrilineal and virilocal marriage practices, this was the only time in a year when a daughter would return to her village. She would only be able to make the journey if her brother accompanied her as an escort. In the maternal village, lavish feasting and then strict fasting occurs as women don red saris and worship Lord Shiva. Singing and dancing convey the heartache women feel for the maternal home they left behind. This occurs in conjunction with the pujas (prayers and offerings) undertaken in the hope that their husband remains healthy so they will enjoy a long life together.

Though this festival reinforces a male-dominated society (Stirr 2010) through the worship of the husband figure, the women I worked with call Teej ‘a woman’s festival’. The event was much anticipated. For most Bhutanese women in Australia, their mothers were either resettled in other countries or still in the camps. A visit to any of these places was difficult due to the formidable cost. Thus, most looked forward to the festivities as a chance to express female solidarity and an opportunity to celebrate the sacrifices they made throughout the year. Leading up to the event in Salisbury, the higher castes spent weeks rehearsing and organising—the youths perfected Bollywood
inspired dance numbers with the older women busily writing songs and choreographing new dance steps. The Bhutanese in Salisbury buzzed with excitement, reflected in the invitations they issued to council staff and the local newspaper. For the higher caste women, it was the jewel in their social calendar.

The group of lower caste women who met in downtown Adelaide, and particularly the newest arrivals, similarly looked forward to the prospect of celebrating Teej. On the morning of the festival, they proudly displayed the new saris they purchased in anticipation of the event. Yet the members of the lower castes who had been in Australia longer seemed more hesitant. One told me that she was only attending because the event was also a fundraiser for the youth radio station and the young co-ordinator specifically promised there would not be any caste issues. The youth co-ordinator explained that the highest caste had prepared momo so that the food would be ritually pure. Additionally, it was packaged individually so that the attending lower castes could not touch and pollute the food. These elaborate measures seemed to do little to ease the minds of the potential attendees. If anything, it reminded them of their polluting status in relation to the Bhutanese in Salisbury.

As we walked across downtown Adelaide to the train, we lost close to half of our small group. Those who expressed reluctance to attend disappeared over the four blocks to the train station, quietly turning off onto side streets or ducking into shops. We arrived at the hall in Salisbury to find it already filled with ornately dressed high-caste women and smartly attired high-caste men. Every woman’s wrist seemed heavy with chuddas (bangles) and every man’s head was topped with a smart topi (hat). In addition to the ornately dressed Bhutanese, several Australians representing various organisations were in attendance. As the dancing and singing began, the lower castes stood in the back of the room and a few remained outside, not wanting to offend the ritually pure higher castes inside. Yet not everyone conformed to this expectation.

During the Teej festival, I spent the majority of time with a higher caste woman who married a lower caste man. Due to this marriage, she was considered untouchable. She was not satisfied with this arrangement and consistently tested the boundaries of ritual purity and pollution. Upon our arrival, she immediately navigated me towards the table selling momo (dumplings). We purchased our food, motivated as she explained to me, ‘to support the youth’. Rather than taking our food outside, as would be expected for the lower castes eating around the higher castes, she insisted we begin eating adjacent to the
table selling food. As higher castes filtered past the strategically placed table between the door outside and the door to the main theatre area, she offered to share her *momo*. Sharing food and feeding other people are a common occurrence during festivals. The exchange of food tends to reinforce the caste hierarchy: lower castes accept food from higher castes but not vice versa. If food moves down the caste hierarchy, the higher castes should still not touch the recipient. Further, eating in the presence of the lower castes is considered polluting. Some higher castes pretended not to see what was going on while others stopped when she identified them by name. As my companion cheerfully offered her food, my presence compounded the awkward situation. This woman threatened to undermine the group’s cultivated image of an egalitarian community.

The high-castes actively strove to minimise outward evidence of the hierarchical implications of the caste system. One of the observable manifestations of the caste system is the refusal to accept food or water from lower castes. While this refusal may not be common knowledge in the broader Australian population, it is one that service providers were acutely aware of. The Bhutanese were also aware of my familiarity with the system. One high-caste man, whom I worked with extensively, very reluctantly accepted a *momo* from her while simultaneously inquiring about my research. She was obviously pleased that a high-caste male ate from a low-caste female in a public arena. Her pleasure, set against his discomfort, articulated the tense negotiations occurring within the group which were consistently approached by service providers and Council workers as a community.

Behind the public display of community—the spectacle of dancing in ethnic garbs—internal politics persisted. Despite the marketing of a community event, this was not an occasion for all Bhutanese. The treatment of the lower castes during the festival illustrated why many decided not to attend: it was clear they were not welcome. They were largely ignored and most did not feel comfortable sitting inside the hall. Those who were bold enough to go inside did not behave in line with caste protocol. In the minds of the higher castes, this further legitimised the need to exclude the lower castes. Several higher castes explained to me that these interactions where physical contact is a possibility, are akin to being forced to eat rotten food—the physical effect was profound and sickening. Yet the higher castes eagerly told outsiders that they prided themselves on the happiness they derived from ‘sitting close’, being physically close. Part of this sentiment related to their time in the camps, where the managing institutions stressed
community values based on national unity. Further, it mirrored a discourse of humanitarianism that identified community solidarity as an ideal social attribute. In Australia, this sentiment underscored competing notions of community. The higher castes viewed the community they would ‘sit close’ to as those within their strata of caste. Due to a shared nationality, the lower castes, in Australia and in the camps, were lumped into this same community by managing institutions. Service providers attempted to reorganise the group from a hierarchical into an egalitarian community. Faced with these vastly different notions, it was unsurprising that the attempts by service providers only resulted in public performances of unity and acceptance. The lower castes found themselves in an awkward social situation. They were quite aware of the caste-based notions of community, but the well-meaning service providers preserved their hopefulness for an egalitarian transformation.

The exclusion of the lower castes during the Teej festival sent a clear message: the caste system and its associated hierarchy were firmly entrenched and the lower castes had no place in Salisbury. The recently arrived, low-caste woman, who earlier in the day had fawned over her new sari, was systematically excluded. As a low-caste woman (though it would apply to a low-caste male as well), the rules of etiquette did not require the higher castes to welcome her. Yet she obviously thought she would be welcomed because they were now in Australia—a country described by participants as a place where everyone is equal. She fought back tears as we rode the train back to the city. The woman who attempted to share her momo, despite her small victory, was similarly distraught. She asked me, ‘Why do we do this to each other?’

Australian values and the service providers who mediated them had changed the expectations of the lower castes. In the camps, as the previous chapters illustrated, exclusion from events hosted by the higher castes was unsurprising. However, the lower castes were not happy with this exclusion, and actively sought forms of community based on alternative religions or heightened ethnic affiliations. In the camps, there was less of a sense that a drastic reform of the caste system was probable. In Australia, service providers consistently emphasised the ideal of Bhutanese unity. They went to great lengths to ensure all Bhutanese were aware of events occurring in Salisbury and, at times, even arranged transportation so that those living outside the northern suburbs could participate. Unfortunately, this raised the expectations of the lower castes who continued to hope that these well-meaning invitations were a reflection of a radically different community—one defined by egalitarian rather than hierarchical values. As service
providers made efforts to foster a community in line with Australian expectations, most of the lower castes were deciding to look beyond their community and appeal to mainstream social values.

**Bhutanese the Australian Way**

In Australia, Salisbury emerged as a destination suburb for the higher castes. Several higher castes in the camps, bound for other parts of Australia stated their desire to move from their initial place of resettlement in order to be closer to their community. A few higher caste participants who had been resettled in other states in Australia had already made the transition to Salisbury. Originally, some lower castes lived in Salisbury. Due to the degree of exclusion and segregation the lower castes experienced in Salisbury, this group began to explore alternatives. Most moved to different suburbs to avoid interacting with the higher castes. A lower caste participant clarified, ‘Many do not go to Salisbury because they don’t feel welcome. Sometimes transportation is also an issue but many just find it easier to avoid.’ Somewhat ironically, the lower castes had been pushed into more affluent suburbs in closer proximity to universities, with better infrastructure, more educational opportunities and less violence. Thus, while this settlement pattern was a reincarnation of earlier social norms, in Australia it had unintended social effects.

Woodville is a suburb that has attracted some lower castes. Woodville is far from an affluent suburb. It experienced a period of decline similar to what happened in Salisbury and Elizabeth after the local manufacturing industry collapsed in the 1990s. As a positive outcome of this manufacturing decline, the refugees could afford to purchase homes here. However, unlike Salisbury, it was gradually gentrifying. Woodville enjoyed a more central location, had lower rates of crime than Adelaide’s northern suburbs, and has higher rates of tertiary education (ABS 2011, Table 16). Residents holding a Bachelor’s degree or higher were the fastest growing segment of the population—14% compared to 10% of the broader population of South Australia (ABS 2011, Table 16). Woodville residents are primarily employed as professionals. When I asked lower castes (male and female) if they would ideally live in Salisbury they responded that Salisbury was violent, ‘had shootings’ and was too far from the universities where their children studied (Interviews Adelaide 2012 and 2013). Though nearly all Bhutanese under the age of 30 were enrolled in some sort of educational
program, many of the highest caste were getting skilled training from the technical and vocational school, TAFE, located in Salisbury. A Certificate III in Home and Community Care appeared to be the most widespread training course for the higher castes in Salisbury. This is an entry-level qualification that commands a salary roughly half of the average wage within South Australia (ABS 2011). The lower castes, living in more central suburbs, were attending university with the hope of becoming nurses and engineers, and two young women were pursuing a desire to become doctors. This suggests that the lowest caste were trying to establish their social status with respect to the wider Australian population, as a high degree of education did not enhance their position within a caste-conscious community.

As discussed in Chapter Five, conversions to different religions were viewed as one means of opting out of the caste system while in the camps. In Australia, many lower castes were actively shunning the many visual signifiers of caste. Clothing and related adornments of the body are highly significant, particularly for women. One informant suggested that one could tell virtually everything about a person’s caste based on their dress (Brahmin Female, 30s, Conversation Nepal 2012). Women of the highest castes are visually striking, with elaborate (and hierarchically specific) tikkas; heavy green necklaces bound with beaten gold; colourful saris; chuddas (bracelets); nose piercings; and waist length hair. They are quite literally wearing their caste on their sleeve—though this is not obvious to the Australian public. To the untrained eye, some Bhutanese simply looked more exotic than others.

Several of the lower-caste women had removed markers that would signify to the trained eye their caste and had adopted a western appearance. One young, lower caste lady told me that ‘[I] lost my nose piercing down the sink, my mother was very mad but I didn’t want to put it back in’ (Kami Female, Age early 20s, Interview Adelaide 2012). Another frankly explained that she had removed her piercing because she did not like its caste associations (Gazmere Female, Age 40s, Interview Adelaide 2012). Though not all of the low-caste women had switched to wearing pants, they were doing so with greater frequency than the highest castes. As the lower caste shed these exotic trappings, the image of Bhutanese-ness became increasingly high-caste centred. Inadvertently, this reinforced the caste hierarchy by naturalising the higher castes as the representatives of exotic Bhutanese-ness in Australia. However, it moved the lower castes into alternative spaces within Australia which are not necessarily defined by their ethnic community.
Because the population was smaller and they were effectively rejected from the main group, the lower castes were striking out on their own. A point of discussion for the lower castes during their Saturday meeting was their progress making friends. While they frequently lamented that this was difficult, often due to language difficulties, making friends with the broader population was deemed important, necessary and achievable. For the higher castes, their engagement with the broader population was mediated through a well-defined multicultural framework: ethnic groups interacted with ethnic groups. For the lower castes, because they were outside the group, the emphasis shifted towards individuals interacting with individuals rather than communities interacting with communities. Their exclusion from Salisbury drastically changed their experience of resettlement, effectively accelerating the need to make connections beyond their group’s boundaries. The internal power dynamic of the group shifted as the lower castes accessed alternative opportunities outside institutionally mediated relationships with broader Australia.

Articulations of expected Bhutanese-ness in Australia privileged and constrained people in different ways. As the high-caste Bhutanese became increasingly wedded to the performance of a bound, ethnic community, they risked becoming perpetually peripheral subjects versus central participants. The lower castes, though consistently orientated towards ‘their’ community by service providers, were actively pursuing alternatives. They were able to tap into broader notions of community in an attempt to transform their social roles.

**Conclusion**

The Australian service providers were aware of the complicated social dynamics within the group but desired a united community—this came in conflict with the internal organisation of the Bhutanese. Caste was a central way the Bhutanese, and particularly the highest castes, understood the world. For many in Australia, and Salisbury in particular, resettlement represented a long awaited opportunity to practise their culture by living in line with ritualised, hierarchical forms of purity and pollution. Yet there were pre-existing expectations in Australia regarding the behaviour of communities. Ethnic communities served as the foundation of multiculturalism in Australia, and new groups had to actively try to conform to this understanding. Communities were expected to be coherent, to care for each other, and to fit into specific models of ethnic
behaviours. A caste-based community suggested suffering—unacceptable inequality that demanded reform.

Multiculturalism, humanitarianism, and the caste system (despite their many differences) are moral systems that attempt to organise people. By extension, it is through these norms that societies are regulated. Unequal power relationships within the expected community become the site of intervention, obscuring the broader power imbalance between benefactors and beneficiaries. Thus, refugees must remain alert to the expectations of their benefactors, carefully balancing their cultural values within a predefined parameter of acceptable behaviours. Similar to their experience in the camps, refugees have to conceal certain constructions of themselves while highlighting others. There are complex motivations behind the resulting performances. These performances are an imposition but also a political strategy. An image of community unity is a political asset for powerful Bhutanese leaders, particularly when they are able to promote an effective narrative that counters the constraining understandings of what it is to be a refugee.
Chapter 9

Recipients of Compassion

During fieldwork, I frequently purchased supplies for the female-dominated Thursday craft session held for the Bhutanese in Salisbury. The women reciprocated these purchases with bracelets or necklaces. Every lady went to great lengths to clarify that the gift was a new item or handmade. Many left the tag on and took pains to draw my attention to it. Initially, I was reluctant to accept these gifts, assuring them these gifts were not necessary or expected. Eventually, I stopped protesting and realised the transformation they were trying to bring about. They were attempting to establish our relationship as an exchange of equals. These women were not simply recipients but able to reciprocate.

The desire to reciprocate in a dignified manner (by giving a new item or a product of their labour) became crucial as the Bhutanese found themselves increasingly embedded in Australia’s social welfare system. In the camps, though people were well aware of Australia’s robust social welfare system, no-one imagined they would find themselves dependent again. Rather, virtually everyone I spoke with anticipated the accoutrements of citizenship and the contributions they could make in their new countries. Upon arrival in Australia, they realised contributing was not necessarily expected, or perhaps even desirable. They found themselves still humanitarian subjects rather than potential citizens.

The previous chapters argued that refugees are made manageable—both in refugee camps in Nepal and once resettled—through a series of interventions. Physical regulation and moral parameters have attempted to create a unique humanitarian subject: a Bhutanese refugee community bound by righteous ideals. In Australia, vulnerability and victimisation are not only expected, but the very hallmarks of an exceptional, and thus acceptable, refugee. Despite the benevolent sentiment, seeking the most vulnerable effectively regulates refugees in two ways. First, it makes the pool of deserving refugees smaller, whereby the status is ‘no longer a right but a prized status’ (Zetter, 2007, p. 188). Second, the suggestion persisted that vulnerable refugees are expected to rely on social welfare indefinitely. These understandings legitimised a
strict border policy. In order to maintain Australia’s egalitarian ideals, only a select, deserving few could be supported. Approaching refugees as ‘naturally’ dependent becomes a means of both maintaining borders and regulating the few refugees who were granted sanctuary. This both ‘creates and guarantees the situation that the law needs for its own validity’ (Agamben 1998, p. 17). This has the effect of creating an exclusive group of refugees who were kept aware of their ‘prized status.’ In turn, this minimised the possibility that they would threaten the system that allowed them to enter Australia.

This chapter argues that humanitarian sympathies focus on victimisation, vulnerability, and trauma—understandings that effectively regulate and further exclude refugees. For the Bhutanese, the roles available to them in Australia run counter to the hopes they accumulated in the camps. To bridge the gap between their hopes and their experiences, they attempted to transform their role as incapable victims. In doing so, they construct themselves as vital to the society of their new hosts. However, the necessity of this construction and reconstruction highlights the precarious acceptance refugees experience in Australia.

**Helping the Helpless**

The Bhutanese began to form opinions regarding the role of refugees in Australia while still in refugee camps. During the resettlement screening process people had very little control over their destination. With the UNHCR as their proxy, nations were viewed as selecting refugees based on attributes they considered desirable. The United States was understood as a country that sought refugees who could work; Australia was a country that wanted refugees to care for (traumatised, disabled, or otherwise vulnerable). This understanding was expressed in the following quote by a Bhutanese man resettled in Australia:

> [A]t first, I wanted to go to America. There it is easy to find the job. Because I was a victim of torture the UNHCR decided I needed to go to Australia (Brahmin Male, Age 40s, Interview Salisbury 2012).

A woman in Salisbury, who wanted to bring her mother from the camps to Australia, explained the perceived differences between the countries:

> They [UNHCR] want my mum go to the USA because my brother is there. I want her to come to Australia with me. She has this eye problem and Australia is better if you are
sick. What could she do in America? Here she will have some support (Magar Female, Age 30s, Conversation Salisbury 2013).

As discussed in Chapter 6, Australia does not provide support for a refugee that exceeds the provisions for natural-born citizens. Rather, refugees made comparisons to the United States because the Australian welfare system is, overall, more robust. Crucially, these two quotes highlighted the impact of the Australia government’s recent emphasis on accepting vulnerable refugees. It illustrated the way refugees interpreted the selective criteria for admission: refugees were expected to be vulnerable and in need of additional support.

An earlier refugee settlement policy in Australia strove to accept those with the most settlement potential (Jupp 1995). This has been replaced by a more humanitarian approach, accepting those most vulnerable: traumatised, incapable, and primarily victimised. While noble, these understandings can ‘facilitate and solidify processes of exclusion and marginalization in different contexts of displacement’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010, p. 64). Australia’s policy level decision to prioritise vulnerable refugees is part of broader, global transformations that have narrowed the canon of acceptable refugees. Refugees, now considered ‘useless to the political economy … finds (their) place in a new moral economy that values suffering over labour and compassion more than rights’ (Fassin 2012, p. 85). Fassin (2005; 2007; 2012) critically examines the transforming motivations behind accepting refugees for resettlement in France, arguing it creates a pronounced tension between compassion and repression. In France, like Australia, increasingly strict migration policy and suspicion of asylum seekers has shifted the attributes of a refugee entitled to resettlement. For asylum seekers to be considered genuine refugees, they must be physically ill or sufficiently traumatised to gain admission into the country (Fassin & Rechtman 2009). Dependency is not only expected but, in some regards, deliberately sought through a focus on those who are physically diseased or suffering from debilitating trauma (Fassin 2005; Fassin & Rechtman 2009; Ticktin 2006). Once resettled, the attributes that facilitated their admission based on compassion have on-going consequences.

Arriving as presumably incapable communities, refugees are perceived as being in acute need of their benevolent host’s assistance (Ong, 2003; McKinnon 2008; Colic-Peisker 2005). In the Netherlands, the way the welfare state helps refugees ‘is such that it
transforms active participants into passive dependants on the state’ (Ghorashi 2005, p. 195). In turn, their passivity and dependence mark them as a social problem requiring charitable assistance rather than members of a broader society entitled to support. Further, in Finland robust social welfare arguably obscures other forms of social marginalisation and exclusion during refugees’ experiences of resettlement (Valtonen 2004). Robust financial support fetters criticisms of broader practices of hiring discrimination, and a general underrepresentation of refugees in the political arena (Valtonen 2004). It also illuminates the creation of two subjects:

> [o]n the one hand, the subject is passive and pathetic, the one who suffers. On the other, the subject is active, the one who identifies suffering and knows how to act’ (Englund, 2006, p. 32).

For refugees, ‘helping’ effectively masks broader practices of social exclusion—both in terms of a strict migration policy and the degree of social integration refugees can hope to achieve. Changing imaginings of refugees raises barriers against integration into their new societies. Though the context of Australia exhibits unique attributes, it also demonstrates that the way refugees are helped can similarly confine them to the role of dependent sub-citizens.

The Bhutanese were celebrated amongst service providers due to their levels of employment. Though they were by no means approaching a national average of employment\(^{20}\), service providers informed me that in comparison to other groups of refugees they had higher rates. Service providers flagged employment as an exceptional, rather than a realistic, outcome in refugee populations. There seemed to be little expectation by service providers that the Bhutanese would become self-sufficient. Of the numerous resettlement activities I observed, many involved teaching the Bhutanese how to access social welfare programs and use ‘the dole’. There was a strong emphasis on teaching the refugees how to manage a budget. These exercises, deigned to ‘teach’ welfare-dependent refugees fiscal responsibility, spoke to broader understandings of refugees: specifically that refugees lacked the ability to move beyond perpetual dependency on social welfare. These expectations and understandings effectively normalised the exclusion refugees experienced from other social realms in Australia.

Nearly an entire community who aspired to be recognised as competent, successful, and

\(^{20}\) Australia had 94% employment in 2015 (Department of Employment 2016, p. 6).
independent found themselves very much dependent on the patronage of the government. Few Bhutanese were satisfied with this arrangement and actively tried to renegotiate that relationship away from dependency. The first response brought the Australian government into an existing family framework of obligation. Women and young adults generally relayed this understanding. The second shift, actively promoted by men, created a role in Australia based on being capable activists. In response to the narrow scope of participation, the Bhutanese created roles for themselves not defined by their status as recipients of charity, but as contributors to the nation. Faced with the prospect of on-going dependency, some Bhutanese attempted to transform the role of the government-as-benefactor while others transformed their refugee-as-beneficiary role.

Caring for Women, Corralling the Men

Large, extended families with anywhere from three to four generations living under one roof (or in one instance spread between three neighbouring houses) are the norm among Bhutanese in Adelaide. In an ideal Bhutanese family arrangement the parents provide for their children until they marry. Once they marry, the senior male child will remain in the family home. His wife joins the household, contributing to the running of the household while the son contributes economically. For parents, their efforts are partially reciprocated when their son brings a wife into the household.

Ideally, wages flow up the family structure to the senior men and women. These can be parents or grandparents and occasionally older uncles or aunts. These senior members are the stewards of the family; decisions move down the family structure. They determine the family’s livelihood strategies and social arrangements (such as marriage), and the redistribution of money. This is considered the model family. There are complications in its expression, particularly when marriages occur outside caste groups, when personalities clash, or as children attempt to assert undue social authority. Regardless of complicating manifestations, this idealised arrangement provides a reference point for the Bhutanese. The task of the parents is to care for or guide children, perhaps long into adulthood. A forty-year-old man who is married with children explained, ‘you know, it is this way. Still I answer to my father’ (Chetri Male, Interview Salisbury 2013). Another male informant explained to me, ‘I am 33 and under
some guardianship’ (Brahmin Male, Interview Adelaide 2014). The parents maintained most family affairs. Women were under the ‘guardianship’ of their husbands, his parents, and other senior household members.

When discussing the social support that the government provided, young men who were still studying, and women of all ages, often framed it in terms of ‘love’ towards their community. One young man, enrolled at university, explained, ‘Australians must really love us because they care for us!’ The role of the Australian government in supporting the Bhutanese was subtly reframed to fit into existing expectations of family. For some, the government has become an integrated member. The government morphed into the role of ‘parent’, caring for the children. It was socially bound to care for the Bhutanese until they could, in turn, reciprocate. It was crucial that this care be returned in the future. Accepting this support from the government was explained as being contingent on the young generation ‘repaying’ Australia through their future involvement with the broader Australian community. Generally this would be through skilled employment or political engagement. Similar to the expectations within the domestic sphere, ‘We have hopes for our children so they can give back to Australia.’ This noble aspiration highlighted the dearth of opportunities to contribute which refugees, particularly men, faced. For women, the public performance of ‘good refugees’ emerged as a contemporary means of repaying their social debt.

During resettlement women were the target of numerous activities. Through the local Council and service providers, the government facilitated public speaking courses, educational opportunities, and social clubs catering specifically to women. Women were frequently invited to represent the Bhutanese through dance, song, or cooking at various social events. These spaces for participation in the broader Australian population reflected a feminisation of the image of refugee observed more generally: women (and children) had become representative of the ideal refugee due to their perceived helplessness (Malkki 1996; Hyndman 2010; Hyndman & Giles 2011). As Chapter Seven illustrated, women were encouraged by service providers to speak at events, perform their culture, and be the public face of the Bhutanese. The Bhutanese women were well aware of their representative role and took pains to ensure the public image they projected mirrored the expectation of service providers. They dressed the part, and performed accordingly. Service providers encouraged women to move out of the domestic arena and into the public or economic sphere. Some women found
employment, particularly in areas that were an extension of their domestic roles—
providing childcare or care for aging parents; cleaning; or working in vegetable
cultivation and harvesting.

Though women were encouraged to be the public face of the Bhutanese, this did not
reduce the difficulty of resettlement that the women faced. Their English skills were low
in comparison to the men and the social networks developed in the camps partially
disintegrated due to resettlement. However, the feminisation of the figure of refugee,
though problematic, had opened up spaces for the women. In turn, this opening of
spaces, however marginal, emphasised the attributes of an idealised refugee, ‘an ethical
ideal of a politically blameless self, untainted by compromising political allegiances or
economic self-interest’ (Pupavac 2008, p. 276). The emphasis by service providers on
making women the public face of the Bhutanese ‘acts as lessons on which aspects of
refugees’ identities are to be recognised and which have to be suppressed as a
precondition for acceptance’ (Szczepanikova 2009, p. 30). Women grasped these
lessons, viewing the showcasing of their culture and ‘refugee-ness’ as a means of
repaying the support they received in Australia. They not only conformed to, but also
attempted to exemplify, the role of ideal refugee.

Bhutanese men, on the other hand, found themselves less than ideal refugees. Further,
they found few options to move beyond refugee status. There was a profound dearth of
full-time, well-paid jobs in Adelaide’s northern suburbs. As women found themselves
increasingly expected to be socially active and perhaps even employed, men became
increasingly entrenched in the domestic sphere. One man in his early thirties explained
his changing role:

I used to be a teacher in the camps but here I cannot find a job. Normally, my wife
would take care of the children but she found a job – our neighbour helped her. Now, I
volunteer but I am mostly the house minister now. I take my girls to school and keep
everything running (Brahmin, Conversation Salisbury 2013).

For most men, this was a striking change from the camps, where they dominated
schools as teachers and the camp’s internal management structure. In Nepal,
opportunities to work outside the camps were fairly common (see Chapter 5). In
Australia, Bhutanese men still commanded a powerful role within the household and,
despite the singing and dancing performed by women at public events, actively
regulated the image of the Bhutanese as a community. Yet Bhutanese men perceived a
lack of available roles in Australia. One woman explained her perspective of the men’s
experience in Australia, ‘here, they say everyone can be empowered. But we know, someone has to give up a little.’ Several men who were farmers reflected that before arriving in Australia, they aspired to own farms akin to the ones they had in Bhutan. Owning a farm promised self-sufficiency, autonomy, and status. In Adelaide, they did not think owning a farm would be possible due to cost, the urban/suburban setting, and the strikingly different climate. Others, particularly those with college degrees, hoped for employment proportional to their qualifications. While a few had been able to move into paid employment, these were viewed as exceptional accomplishments. This is not to suggest paid employment is the only pathway towards social status either in Australia more broadly or for the Bhutanese specifically. However, the men I spoke to both in the camps and in Australia consistently spoke of the value of gainful, paid work. ‘Eating another man’s sweat’ either through camp rations or social welfare payments in Australia was not considered a desirable way to live.

In the camps, men imagined that after resettlement they would have jobs capable of supporting their families. One male refugee explained his chance of contributing to Australia was lost due to his status as a refugee—the status was viewed as undermining his ability to fulfil his obligations to his family. This man was not particularly old, had the equivalent of a high school education, spoke English, and held leadership roles in Bhutan and in the refugee camps. He volunteered for a local resettlement organisation and hoped to one day find gainful employment but did not think this was a realistic aspiration. He pinned his hopes on his daughter, who would outgrow her status as a refugee and be able to aspire towards being a contributing member of Australia. He, on the other hand, found himself without a role beyond ‘a refugee the government is helping’.

This particular experience elucidated a widespread concern among the generation of men roughly between ages 20 and 60. For men, recognising the government as an additional ‘parental’ figure was an unsatisfactory way of making sense of ongoing dependence. They worried that they would never be in a position to reciprocate, not due to a lack of capabilities, but due to the prevailing expectations linked to their status as vulnerable refugees. While women were expected to expand their social roles through the assistance of service providers, men found their role to be increasingly confined to the ‘traumatised refugee’.
Hutchinson and Dorsett (2012, p. 57) observed the funnelling of refugees in Australia into the category of traumatised: ‘new arrivals were routinely referred for specialist trauma counselling services. These routine referrals seemed to be based on an assumption of trauma.’ At a very practical level, in Australia, being a traumatised refugee is a recognised disabled status, converted into additional monetary support. One trauma counsellor explained his concern regarding this precedence:

The problem is, people come and they see how hard it is to find a job and then people [service providers and other Bhutanese] tell them there is extra support if they are traumatised. So they call and ask how they can get this benefit – that they are refugee and they are traumatised. They say, “Yes, I was tortured, I am from Bhutan, I have been tortured – Where is my payment?” The problem is then they are stuck and it is even harder for them. For some men it is very shameful to get money from the government – if they had a way to earn it would be better. Here, they focus on the pain because they want people [Australians] to know they are here because they have suffered (Australian service provider, Male, Interview Adelaide 2013).

Despite what may be noble intentions, naturalising the relationship between refugees and trauma can have the consequence of further alienation from mainstream Australia. While trauma can have a powerful legitimising effect, it also reinforces refugees’ status as primarily victims. Marlowe (2010, p. 195) found that the emphasis on helping Sudanese refugees by focusing on their traumatic experiences effectively regulated their ability to make ‘a meaningful contribution to society’. This hints at the perception that the traumatised refugee may never quite be on equal footing with un-traumatised Australians.

For Bhutanese men, trauma morphed into a dominant feature of refugee identity in Australia. In the camps, trauma was a peripheral concern. Though there were counselling services available, not a single participant I spoke with sought such services. They were worried the locals would consider them traumatised and thus incapable of employment, educational achievement, or acceptable social interactions. In Australia, trauma assumed other, potentially positive, aspects. Trauma provides recognition and speaks the language of compassion that the contemporary moral climate rewards (Fassin & Rechtman 2009). Refugees’ trauma legitimised them and also translated into tangible, monetary support or recognition from the government. However, trauma was also equated with a presumed lack of mental capabilities, or of social skills, and with being of questionable value to the nation (aside from illustrating the nation’s charity). Many worried that these associations had impacted on their reception and prospective degree of inclusion in Australia, explaining that ‘people won’t
recognise the skills that we are bringing, people just think refugees are poor people without any skills’ (Chetri Male, Age 20s, Interview Salisbury 2013). Another expressed a similar concern that the refugee/trauma relationship minimised their employability: ‘the skills that we have will not be valued’ (Brahmin Male, Age 40s, Interview Salisbury 2013). Participants frequently voiced concern that while trauma helped people understand their journey to Australia, it also undermined future aspirations. They worried that they would always be viewed as negatively different to their Australian hosts.

The humanitarian focus on suffering, trauma, and help can have unfortunate consequences. Rather than integrating refugees into citizenry, it positions them as ‘poor people beseeching the state’s benevolence … the obliged cannot assert a social right or demand precise rules: they must submit to the modalities imposed on them’ (Fassin 2012, p. 78). Normalising the image of the helpless female and traumatised male has the consequence of mediating their ability to engage with the broader population. By expecting widespread trauma, Australia effectively regulates a portion of the refugee population who are viewed as potentially problematic refugees—men. Because they are approached as impaired, they are not expected to participate in Australia. These constrained understandings result in defined power relations being framed as compassionate efforts to help. This obscures the ‘power-structured relationships maintained by techniques of control’ (Fisher 1994, p. 446). Trauma both regulates and relegates the male refugees. At a practical level, it normalises their absence from an already crippled local labour market. Crucially, it curtails their potential for participation in other spheres—political or social.

Trauma has emerged as a significant barometer of the moral hierarchy of victimhood but it is also a measure of the receiving nation’s moral credentials. The nation accepted refugees, regardless of this assumed debilitating trauma. While the idealised figure of the refugee is the helpless woman, representing refugee men as traumatised functioned to transform them from political actors (and a potential threat to the nation) into non-functional dependents. In these circumstances, the allocation of social welfare may be functioning as a pressure valve, minimising the risk of social protest or demands for political transformation (Piven & Cloward 1971; Halper 1973; Giddens 1985). The Bhutanese men responded to the limited opportunity to participate in Australia by actively promoting a male-dominated narrative of their journey to Australia. This reinterpretation questioned the expected attributes of a refugee yet it stopped short of
challenging the moral authority of the nation. In doing so, the moral credentials of the nation remained unsullied.

**Crafting Effective Narratives**

A politically charged, male-centric origin story dominated the public sphere. Men were fiercely possessive of their democratic story. If I was speaking with a married man about democracy or political advocacy and requested his wife participate, I was met with a rebuttal. The following response, by a man in his mid-thirties, was typical: ‘oh, my wife doesn’t understand these things. Women don’t have time for politics. They have to worry about the house and those things. They are very busy’ (Brahmin Male, Age 30s, Interview Adelaide 2013). Despite this explanation, the women I spoke with had well developed, nuanced understandings of democratic values and the group’s history. Yet, the powerful men in Adelaide only wanted me to speak with other powerful men. While this may reflect an older domestic-public dichotomy, it was also a reaction to the limited roles available to male refugees. Women were perceived by both men and women as having greater social flexibility in Australia while a central social role, motherhood, was still available to them. Men, on the other hand, recognised that their ideal social role as the families’ economic providers was becoming increasingly unrealistic. In response, they consistently tried to present themselves as political activists in exile.

The story powerful Bhutanese men promoted was based on democracy and egalitarian aspirations. It exemplified ‘how they valorised themselves in order to negotiate their predicament’ (Gatrell 2013, p. 283). The following story was shared at a public event hosted by STTARS (Survivors of Torture and Trauma Association Rehabilitation Service) in Adelaide. This event was help in a public space adjacent to the main shopping centre in Salisbury. The coordinator and the Bhutanese participant went to great effort to set up displays that chronically their journey to Australia as well as their cultural and national heritage. There were ‘Nepali’ swords sitting alongside ‘Bhutanese’ darts, ethnic costumes were similarly intermeshed on a folding table covered with woven fabric. It was a windy day and the Bhutanese were kept busy ensuring carefully selected photographs, photocopies of legal documents, and drawings from the camps did not blow away. Though unique to the speaker, the following narrative was illustrative of the particular themes the men strove to promote:
Today I am going to talk about how we reached here in Australia from Bhutan. Bhutan was ruled by the Wangchuck dynasty since 1907 and was without a written Constitution, Bill of Rights, or Rule of Law until 2008. We used to live in peace and harmony until the fourth King enacted a policy of one people/one nation. He forced the north Bhutanese culture, language, and customs on the south Bhutanese with threat of the death penalty. Ones who spoke against the government and appealed to human rights faced the death penalty. Many people were tortured and imprisoned during this time. We tried to appeal to the King to lift these terrible and treacherous things. Instead of hearing our appeal, they employed the army and forced the south Bhutanese into exile in Nepal. We fought for many years for democracy and human rights in Bhutan. Now, there is a so-called democracy but we are still not enjoying. After living for so many years in the refugee camps, we were forced to accept the option of resettlement. With that option we are now in Australia. We are very thankful to be with you all (Brahmin Male, 40s, Public Event 2013).

While this story was unique to the speaker, it highlights the key themes that male participants consistently shared both with me and in public spaces. Women, on the other hand, tended to minimise the causes of their exile when speaking publically and, instead, focus on the assistance they received. The following speech was shared at an International Women’s Day Luncheon hosted by the Migrant Research Centre in downtown Adelaide:

My life history… I was born in Bhutan—it is a very lovely, mountainous country. I left and the most miserable days of my life where in the refugee camp in Nepal. Slowly, organizations like the UNHCR and CARITAS came. I spent nearly 18 years in the refugee camp before I got opted to come to Australia through the UNHCR. In Australia, I faced many difficulties including language and the transportation systems. I began to attend language courses at TAFE in Salisbury… I started volunteering for MRC, in all I spent 18 months as a volunteer and luckily there was a job for Bhutanese settlement officers. I love my current job because I like helping the people here. Many thanks to the MRC and the Australian government for empowering me (Chetri Female, 30s, Public Event 2013)

While women would discuss the complex, politically charged events that led to and (perhaps) maintained their exile in private, these were rarely shared publically. For men, the publically shared back-story centred on political action became increasingly important. It relayed a version of the conditions that forced the refugees into exile: namely a tyrannical king imposing on a minority group. The words ‘terrible’, ‘treacherous’, ‘forced’, ‘torture’, and ‘death penalty’ all attempted to convey the degree of hardship the group faced. They suffered, they were desperate for help, and it was traumatic (and dramatic). This story suggested that the Bhutanese did not willingly forego their nation: first they were forced out and only after many years did they accept resettlement. Their camp experience demonstrated they were good refugees and was
proof that they came to Australia through the correct channels. This narrative stressed the significance of reassuring people that they arrived in Australia through a particular process—affirming the sovereignty of Australia’s borders. In turn, how refugees arrived became evidence of the moral aptitude of the group—a group deserving of support. Both of these talks, given at a public events, underscore that the Bhutanese were self-consciously highlighting a narrative that affirmed the strongly gendered expectations of the host community.

This narrative was more than mirroring expectations: the refugees were actively renegotiating what refugee status entailed. In Australia, their status as refugees required that the Bhutanese represented the humanitarian heart of Australia: they were admitted due to compassion rather than capabilities. The stories that circulated were carefully selected to confirm suffering and cast the community as genuine or deserving refugees. These tropes assured the audience (and by extension, the nation) of their own goodness in accepting the Bhutanese for resettlement. The story that was told was the story the Bhutanese thought the audience wanted to hear.

These expectations and responses illustrated that ‘being a refugee also naturally suggested, even demanded, certain kinds of social conduct and moral stances, while precluding others’ (Malkki 1996, p. 381). The Bhutanese men were precluded from some forms of social conduct and responded by taking a strategic moral stance. In response to stifling expectations, the Bhutanese reincarnated an earlier understanding of refugees based on political skills as a barometer for future social contributions. The publically promoted version of experiences justified their presence in Australia while subtly rejecting a language of victimisation—asserting an alternative identity based on political activism. In this new understanding they were not ‘helped because they are helpless’ (Stein 1981, p. 185) but supported because they are skilled. Rather than their political experience marking them as crippled by trauma, it highlighted their abilities. They worked within what they perceived as a framework of expectations that assumed—and perhaps demanded—that a male refugee had experienced trauma but on the other hand they simultaneously contested the implications of such a story.

The men’s efforts to present themselves as freedom fighters pushed against stereotypes of refugees as passive, incapable recipients. By embellishing a version of events in which they were political freedom fighters, the Bhutanese countered assumptions of both statelessness and lack of institutional strength. This provided a path for them to
shift social margins ever slightly closer to the mainstream. Problematically, the limited pathways available to the men in Australia constrained the sharing of alternative stories and experiences. Because an effective narrative was created, it became subject to careful regulation in order to maintain its operative potential. Men in particular, had to manoeuvre between being simultaneously ‘an object of care and a source of anxiety’ (Feldman & Tickin 2010, p. 6). Balancing these conflicting attributes of the ‘refugee’ necessitated good performances.

**Humanitarian Hierarchies**

The Bhutanese reframe their experiences to orientate themselves away from the constraining role of apolitical, dependent victims. They did this by adopting a moral interpretation of their origins as refugees. This refashioning of the causes of their exile was akin to the process of mytho-history making Malkki (1995a) observed in the Burundi refugee camps. In that context, refugees created a historic trajectory that gave moral credence to their present situation. Malkki’s (1995a) analysis focused on the public performance of refugee-ness and the formulaic narratives that buttressed it. While this approach underscored the coherence of the Hutu’s mytho-history, analysing experiences considered outside the realm of public performance also merited consideration. Values and ideals masked in public performances provided illuminating insights regarding hierarchies within a specific group, as well as the broader hierarchy of humanitarian values they negotiated.

During fieldwork, diverse versions of the public narrative emerged. As Chapter 8 illustrated, caste was deemed problematic in Australia, as it threatened not only notions of community social relations but egalitarian aspirations. In Bhutan, some of the higher castes protested because clothing and accessories were central ways of relaying information about the Hindu-based caste structure—ensuring that ritual purity was maintained. It was difficult to avoid a polluting person if they were not clearly distinguished. By extension, because Brahmins and particularly Vishnu Brahmins saw their task as the protectors of Hinduism, these changes threatened to undermine the broader social institution of Hinduism. Democratic reforms could, in the minds of the higher castes, help them maintain a social status that was coming under threat. A Brahmin priest explained, ‘Personally, I used to perform ceremonies and give the red tikka, our worship was too strong so the Drupka [Government] banned it and that is the
reason I am here’ (Male 60s, Interview Adelaide 2012). Several participants revealed that they left Bhutan because they worried they would be forced to consume beef or convert to Buddhism. These were overtly religious concerns.

While freedom of religion is considered a basic human right and fleeing due to religious persecution is enshrined as a legal way to claim protection as a refugee, this motivation was not the most readily relayed story. Motivations were reconfigured from preserving the caste system to promoting democracy. This distancing from alternative (though related) motivations may be in response to the number of interventions in the camps and in Australia critical of the caste system. The Bhutanese were well aware of the contingent nature of their deserving status, the thin line between acceptance and rejection. Distancing themselves from versions that could appear at odds to the moral framework of Australia required them to relegate some of their most deeply held convictions and beliefs to a subsidiary role.

The lower castes also sought democratic reforms and were some of the original leaders in Bhutan. Similarly, most participants asserted they wanted to protect a Hindu-based culture that was perceived as being under attack by the Bhutanese government. However, they saw democracy as a chance to transform the caste system by increasing the social and political power of the lower castes. Democracy was viewed as the same means to different ends. One low-caste participant in Australia identified the caste system in Bhutan as the key reason that their movement was not successful:

The prime reason that we were not more successful in Bhutan was because the caste divides … These issues could have all been resolved if people could have come together but it was so fragmented (Gazmere, Male 40s, Interview Adelaide 2012).

These complex motivations and competing understandings of the exile were not frequently shared publicly. These ‘cracks’ threatened to undermine the cultivated image of a ‘Bhutanese refugee community’ and, by extension, their inclusion in the public space of Australia. Their narrative, on the other hand, contained the ideals they wanted to be associated with. The carefully crafted and regulated story has been sanitised of competing notions of community and disputes over the image of a democratic world. Instead, they reflected values refugees felt they must perform. These performances obscured competing notions of community and democracy.

The need to hide these cracks demonstrated the limited acceptance Bhutanese refugees experienced in Australia. This reinterpretation of the events leading to and the experience of exile provided a way for men to maintain a functional position for
themselves in the face of rapidly changing gender roles and increasingly narrow possibilities in Australia. The moral interpretation of exile presented one of the few pathways towards establishing themselves as respected equals within their new country. Here, the ultimate importance of embracing the governing value systems—the international and the domestic—was highlighted. Espousing the values of democracy and equality provided the only legitimate way to counter a constraining recognition based on victimisation.

The Bhutanese, as the previous sections argued, were not satisfied with being the recipients of compassion and actively seek to transform their social role. Sharing their narratives was a significant and important means of achieving that. Yet these opportunities orbited around their experiences as refugees. The credible narrative hinged on past actions. This both created and rewarded ‘a limited version of what it means to be human’ (Ticktin 2006, p. 34). For the Bhutanese in Australia, to be accepted as a human was to be perpetually a refugee. Though the Bhutanese were able to use the limited parameters of accepted ‘refugee-ness’ in a strategic manner, there was also a strong push against a role defined by the past.

Contributing as Australians

The spaces provided to refugees to speak publicly often had a clear, pre-defined agenda. Generally, refugees spoke at events designed to raise funds or awareness and centred on refugees sharing their experience of flight or exile. In Australia, there were limited platforms to showcase contemporary actions. The Bhutanese leaders were not satisfied with this. Public spaces were sought out and creatively employed to illustrate they were more than their past experiences but contemporary contributors. For example, in 2012 the Migrant Resource Centre hosted an Ethnic Leaders Forum to discuss the redevelopment of a suburban community centre. After the representatives of government shared the proposed plan, the floor was opened to the audience for input regarding facilities different groups thought were necessary. The president of the Bhutanese Australian Association of South Australia (BAASA), sitting with several Bhutanese men, raised his hand to speak:

I am not sure if you are aware but BAASA has organised to host the 2013 interstate soccer match. As you know, we have organised several programs that have been very successful. We would like to do even more. The top Bhutanese teams from all over Australia will be playing here in Adelaide. We have been organising all of this. If there
was some priority to soccer fields, that would be good. We are looking for support and sponsorship, it is going to be a very big event. There will be hundreds of people coming. We will also have several important performances with Bhutanese dancers and singers that will allow the wider community to develop an appreciation of other cultures (Brahmin Male, late 20s, Public Event 2012).

His statement appeared surprising because the community centre slated for redevelopment was in a suburb where few Bhutanese lived. Further, the project was not going to be completed until the end of 2015, the upcoming soccer tournament had little relation to the redevelopment. The participation by the Bhutanese man suggested more than a desire to partake in the planning process of a suburb in Adelaide. It was a strategic political presentation. Though the Bhutanese were asking for additional support, the message was clearly that they had undertaken this endeavour on their own accord. They were capable organisers and planners. Rather than passive recipients of charitable gestures, they reframed themselves as equals in a new country. They presented themselves as more than just ‘good refugees’—they were actively creating a clear role as contributors to Australia. They aspired to be viewed ‘as people with capacities, in short, people “like us”’ (Harrell-Bond & Voutira 2007, p. 282). Further, they were reflecting values that had the potential to move them into the mainstream. Sport and fair play strongly underpinned the ‘social, national and cultural landscape’ in Australia (Zakus, Skinner & Edwards 2009, p. 994). Organising an inter-state soccer tournament was an attempt to connect with the national character, reflecting their similarity to the broader community. However, the need to seek out and transform unexpected, and perhaps inappropriate, spaces demonstrated the constraining social framework the Bhutanese inhabit. As a community of refugees, they were wedded to a label that rewarded a narrow cannon of experiences and behaviours. ‘Refugee’ became an inescapable essence that allowed them entry into Australia while curtailing their ability to move beyond the role of recipient.

Many participants viewed formal citizenship as the final step on a long journey—the official transformation from refugee to citizen. Gaining citizenship in Australia required a four-year residency period and the passing of an English based test. In 2013, the group in Salisbury devoted considerable time preparing everyone who reached the residency requirement for the test. They coordinated with the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to have a ‘special’ day during the 2013 Refugee Week when 185 Bhutanese took their citizenship oaths. One excited man explained before the event:
There are many migrants here in Australia but the organisation is doing this just for the Bhutanese … we have been here only for four years and already they are giving us citizenship … They [The Department of Immigration and Border Protection] are going to do all of this for us, they are going to do the ceremony, refreshments, everything. They’ll call the head authorities, maybe in Canberra, and the media—the media will be there (Brahmin Male, Age 40s, Interview Salisbury 2013).

The perception of special treatment and talk of an expedited process was conceived as a means of verifying their status as special refugees. The perception that their democratic ideal and good behaviour allowed them to gain citizenship status sooner than other migrant groups validated the interpretation of their journey to Australia. Rather than passive recipients of social welfare, traumatised and incapable, they had become vital members of Australia.

Citizenship was widely viewed as the realisation of political voice. A man in his sixties, looking forward to citizenship, explained, ‘I will have a say with my voting rights. If there is something or some point in the constitution that I have a question about then I can ask it’ (Chetri Male, Interview Adelaide 2012). Many parents expressed the hope that their children would hold elected roles in government. One former activist from Bhutan suggested, ‘to come to Australia, a new country and see my children elected would be wonderful’ (Chetri Male, Age late 40s, Interview Adelaide 2013). Again, this goal mirrored the expectations they encounter in Australia—refugees will not be able to contribute but, if their resettlement is successful, their children will. It is only through their children, who were theoretically not as firmly wedded to a refugee identity, could they hope to transform into full members of Australia.

Most adult participants, even after gaining citizenship, remained bound to the refugee label. This understanding highlighted the limits of formal citizenship and the constraints that contemporary approaches to refugees presented, ‘although equality of citizenship rights can be taken as a starting point, this legal equality does not necessarily lead to equality of respect, resources, opportunities or welfare’ (Valtonen 2004, p. 75). While the Bhutanese were quick to describe themselves as special refugees, as refugee-citizens they were still defined as not quite equal to the Australian-citizen.

Not Quite Equals

Despite attempts to incorporate their support in Australia into a pre-existing framework of familial obligation or by creating roles for themselves as contributors, social support
and acceptance in Australia was still perceived as discretionary. There was uncertainty that refugees had a right to be in Australia and a strong impression they had been resettled due to a charitable gesture. As a charitable gesture, ‘it constitutes a relationship of dependency, not of equivalence’ (Calhoun 2010, p. 35). While the motivations for accepting and caring for vulnerable refugees may be framed as purely altruistic, some Bhutanese still found it degrading. One man explained, ‘we can say we are Australian now but we are all still beggars’ (Brahmin Male, Age 60s, Interview Adelaide 2012). Though most participants imagined their children would shed the refugee label and its associated relationship as beneficiaries, some expressed apprehension that refugee status would follow their children, ‘I am happy that the government wants to take care of us but I worry that our children, even if they have a high level of education, will not be able to get jobs’ (Chetri Male, Age 40s, Interview Adelaide 2012). The awareness of this unequal relationship impacted on the everyday life of the Bhutanese, producing a fixation with exhibiting good behaviour.

The Bhutanese had a hyper awareness of the potential negative consequence of mundane transgressions. For example, using pedestrian crossings (cross-walks) to move across the road was viewed as a marker of being a well-behaved refugee. One woman, who had been in Australia for several years, explained to me that they came from a place where these things were not important but in Australia ‘they represent the law’ (Gazmere Female, late 30s, Interview Adelaide 2012). Many worried that the transgression of crossing the street outside the acceptable parameters could potentially jeopardise their status as deserving refugees. Behaviour such as urinating in public, not caring for others in the community, and not being respectful of service providers meshed together to form what were considered dangerous markers of social deviance.

Participants of all ages frequently worried that poor behaviour could form a legitimate basis for complete exclusion from Australia—a possible return to exile in camps. One lady, who recently gained citizenship, explained ‘for a long time I was very scared the local people would throw us out’. Another refugee, a young man, explained, ‘we are only recently born here, we’ve not grown up here yet so we cannot do silly things.’ These concerns were not isolated to people who had arrived days, weeks, or even months earlier. Some of them had arrived in Australia in 2008 and still others held Australian citizenship. The persistence of these concerns highlighted the refugees’ sense of precarious acceptance. The perceived risk of losing their position as deserving refugees functioned to regulate their everyday choices and experiences. Because
resettlement was framed as a charitable gesture, rather than a right, refugees remained beholden to the nation long after they had shed the official status as refugees and became citizens. The Bhutanese were experiencing, ‘a politics of compassion that emphasizes benevolence over justice, standards of charity over those of obligation—or that ultimately protects and encourages a limited and limiting notion of humanity’ (Ticktin 2006, p. 42). In turn, what appeared to be compassionate and benevolent ultimately favoured the interests of the nation over the rights of people.

In January 2014, Australia fulfilled its quota of Bhutanese refugees. For the Bhutanese in Australia, there were still family members in the camps. These included wives who were left behind when polygamous families had to divorce and the children who stayed with their mothers. There was the possibility they could be reunited through a family reunification visa that was available to all refugees in Australia. This visa was viewed by Bhutanese as being allocated based on which groups of refugees were considered most deserving and best behaved. Reuniting families was considered a privilege reserved for good refugees.

Though the Bhutanese built a very effective narrative regarding their political skills, they did not rely on this skill set to sway the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to reunite their families. There were no political marches to demand resettlement rights, or hunger strikes undertaken to increase the visa quota of Bhutanese. These political protest techniques were relatively common in the camps. Rather, in Australia, the Bhutanese emphasised their good behaviour, their community values, and the vulnerability of those they wanted to bring to Australia. Demanding changes to the resettlement system challenged the very attributes (helpless, passive, and malleable) that marked them as deserving. While democratic values were promoted as a crucial Australian attribute, it was the value of human suffering that they engaged with to further their cause. The humanitarian gesture thus had a role in ‘helping to reproduce the geopolitical order because it reduce[d] pressures that might have demanded its transformation’ (Barnett 2005, p. 733). As some of the ‘most vulnerable’ fall through the cracks of resettlement, the possibility of demanding resettlement rights became even more remote.
Conclusion

In Australia, the Bhutanese found few means to directly agitate for political, economic, or social transformation. There has been some tinkering in the margins but few demands. In turn, the broader paradoxes within humanitarian ideals become evident. Australia’s desire to help the helpless has the consequence of precluding them from political participation. While refugees remain a crucial political topic, they remain largely absent from participating in these political discussions. This absence is normalised by stripping them of their capacity to be political actors—depoliticising them into helpless and vulnerable, traumatised and incapable humanitarian-subjects. This compassionate understanding serves to contain and regulate the Bhutanese, effectively relegating them to the social fringe. This demonstrates:

the importance for Western societies of opening their democratic space as little as possible, while preserving the possibility, as a last resort, of granting consideration to those who succeed in entering our world, but on the basis of humanitarianism rather than as a right (Fassin 2012, p. 253).

The democratic ideals that the refugees place at the centre of understanding their exile are claimed to be incompatible with the reality in Bhutan. But they are compatible with the ideals of Australia. However, engagement in the political discussion, particularly regarding who should be allowed to enter Australia, remains a slim possibility.

In Australia’s contemporary climate of strict borders and compassionate exceptionalism, the Bhutanese are deemed deserving of humanitarian admission. The experiences of the Bhutanese require a critical reflection ‘on who benefits from assertion of good, bad, and ideal refugees, and whose interests are advanced’ through these distinctions (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010, p. 64). As Agamben (1998, p. 133) argues, humanitarian aspirations ‘maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight.’ The acceptance of refugees and the support they receive, has transformed into the fulfilment of an ethical (rather than legal or even political) obligation. Their helplessness and perceived dependence is a powerful symbol of the moral righteousness of the nation that accepts them. It has also become the means to exclude not only other people seeking refuge but regulate those few who are admitted. The particular experience of the Bhutanese relates to a larger conversation between politics and power. While egalitarian ideals in Australia aspire towards equality, the Bhutanese refugees’ status as recipients of compassion demands humility—appropriating them as slightly unequal to those with the power to give.
The Bhutanese must perpetually construct themselves in multiple guises to find acceptance—they are exceptionally responsive to the behaviours expected of them. Despite their efforts, it has still proved difficult to transcend the roles into which they find themselves cast. Physically present in Australia, their ability to participate is mitigated by the very values that claim to be helping them. The language of compassion and the hunt for vulnerable victims create an appealing mask of righteousness. This mask obscures a dark side: a propensity towards control and regulation rather than freedom and emancipation. The Bhutanese may be a very specific group but their experiences illuminate the complex relationships between nations and humanitarianism.
Chapter 10

Conclusion: Humanitarian Gestures

In September 2015, images of a Syrian toddler’s corpse, washed ashore in Turkey following his family’s failed attempt to reach Europe, evoked both sympathy and outrage around the globe. The photograph sparked a public outcry that became a powerful call for action. The Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, who consistently held firm that the aggregate number of refugees resettled in Australia must not be increased, announced the acceptance of an additional 12 000 Syrian refugees:

This is a generous response to the current emergency … the response best reflects Australia’s proud history as a country with a generous heart. The focus will be those people women, children, and families who have sought temporary shelter … I do want to stress, women, children and families—the most vulnerable of all … it is important that we don’t bring anyone from this troubled region who might ultimately be a problem for the Australian community (Abbott 2015).

Abbott repeated further that Syrian asylum seekers who try to reach Australia independently would not be welcome. The position makes clear the paradoxes with the contemporary humanitarian paradigm: a select few ‘will be recognised through humanitarian reason rather than the right to asylum’ (Fassin 2012, p. 157). Compassion and moral outrage seemed to bring about a political response that promised to help the most vulnerable of refugees. The ‘generous gesture’ appeared to be a sound victory for laudable humanitarian ideals. Yet this victory had an unsettling foundation: actions premised on righteous action obscured the fact that refugees have a human and legal right to seek asylum. By replacing rights with compassion, humanitarian discourse provided an additional space for the sovereign performance of statecraft by creating additional contingencies on the basis of which one is deserving of admission.

By November 2015, compassion and moral outrage formed a decidedly different response. A series of attacks in Paris left over 100 people dead. A suspected attacker was found with a forged Syrian passport. Solidarity quickly gave way to suspicion. Syrian refugees no longer appeared to be part of a ‘global community’ entitled to support but rather a ‘different humanity’ providing a conduit through which terrorists could move with impunity. Further complicating this division was that the majority of attackers were French or Belgium nationals, descendants of earlier generations of
immigrants. This raised broader concerns that this ‘different humanity’ could never ‘be transformed into nationals of the country’ (Arendt 1951, p. 301). The threat from outside appeared to have found a way inside. The earlier generous gesture to resettle refugees seemed increasingly precarious as the moral concern for citizens trumped the need to alleviate the suffering of refugees. These responses highlighted the tensions between emancipation and domination, community and diversity examined in this thesis. These responses seem to be fundamentally at odds, yet they articulate the duality and contradictions within the contemporary global order.

This thesis is fundamentally about Bhutanese who fled Bhutan, resided in camps in Nepal and finally settled in the vastly different location of Australia. The refugee camps in Nepal, with their virtually non-existent infrastructure and narrow winding pathways between huts, are in stark contrast to the almost superfluous infrastructure of Adelaide where wide, tree-lined streets are the norm. Nepal has been rocked by political revolutions compounding the already systemic poverty of many in the country while Australia has enjoyed nearly unprecedented peace and prosperity. Across these diverse settings, the Bhutanese strive to situate themselves in a humanitarian framework that has been increasingly fashioned into a system of governance. This thesis interrogates the humanitarian experience through the eyes of the beneficiaries. In doing so, it heeds the call to employ an anthropological approach to examine how humanitarian ideals manifest both globally and nationally (Fassin 2012, Bornstein & Redfield 2011). While Fassin (2012) explored the way ‘humanitarian reason’ governs both domestically and internationally through the analysis of diverse and varied situations, this thesis has taken a slightly different approach. It analyses humanitarian governances as experienced by refugees in two seemingly different spheres of refugee camp and final resettlement, and does this by examining the daily life of humanitarian subjects.

This research has addressed three gaps in the literature. First, it heeds the call by Hutt (2003, p. 14) to ‘raise the level of debate’ regarding Bhutanese subject matter. It achieves this by critically examining the experiences of a Bhutanese ethnic minority group in exile. Secondly it charts the pre- and post-resettlement experience, a focus that Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2011) have identified as requiring further analysis. Beyond these two practical gaps, this thesis thirdly contributes to our understanding of life under humanitarian governance. It argues that as a system of governance, humanitarianism transforms refugees into distinct humanitarian subjects. It is through this process that international and domestic governments not only gain credibility but
absolve themselves of the inequality deeply embedded in the national system. Always supplicants in a global reconstruction, refugees have become manageable yet in a way that continues to restrict their freedom.

**Humanitarianism as Governance**

Across the world, the processes of building new nations, solidifying old boundaries, or creating a democratic order are pushing people out. These refugees are devoid of the potent symbolism that defined earlier Cold War era refugees as capable, political actors defying Communist ideologies. Instead, they become embedded ideologically in a newly possible, universal understanding of a globally connected humanity. Rather than political actors in exile, refugees have become a ‘miserable sea of humanity’ (Malkki 1996) in need of care, protection, and—crucially—guidance. A humanitarian response, premised on compassion and the alleviating of suffering (Feldman 2012), has become the central means of helping the suffering masses. As this thesis suggests, refugees articulate both the grand aspirations and the desperate shortcomings of a new, humanitarian system of global relationships.

The international community responds to humanitarian emergencies in a very specific way. These responses are:

> nestled in discourses of compassion, responsibility, and care, which, in turn, are attached to claims that the ‘international community’ has obligations to its weakest members. This international humanitarian order has all of the elements of governance (Barnett 2012, p. 486).

‘Refugee’ has become a social category of exception that affords people recognition in a broader humanitarian hierarchy but only as the perennially ‘weakest members’. This hierarchy is strictly regulated by excluding some causes while simultaneously doing as follows:

> producing public representation of the human beings being defended (e.g. showing them as victims rather than combatants and by displaying their condition in terms of suffering rather than the geopolitical situation) (Fassin 2007, p. 501).

This process of tailoring causes and representatives of these causes is intrinsically linked to governance. The ‘miserable sea of humanity’ must be formed into acceptable humanitarian subjects. Refugees become transformed into victims who need compassion rather than people who have internationally recognised rights.
Despite aspirations of global equality, national borders are still the crucial means of organising our world. Camps become surrogates for nations, containing people outside the natural boundaries of the nation (Malkki 1996). A key ‘lesson’ refugees learned in the camps was the significance of national boundaries as a means of organising social interactions. However, this system of organisation frequently finds itself at odds with the ideal of radical equality—the equivalence of all human life. Thus, the nation and its populace find a ‘constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside’ (Agamben 1998, p. 131). The act of setting a threshold and redefining it accentuates that it is the sovereign ‘who decides on the exception’ (Schmitt 1985, p. 5). Humanitarian agents have authority to differentiate between worthy citizens and exceptions, stressing their role in a system of global governance.

Humanitarian governance flourishes by focusing on suffering, and ‘helping’ provides a moral authority that is difficult to dispute. When the exception becomes the most desperate, vulnerable, and traumatised, this process becomes powerfully cathartic for the hosting nation and the nations who financially support the camps. It is here that humanitarianism finds its greatest strength, ‘it fugaciously and illusorily bridges the contradictions of our world, and makes the intolerableness of its injustices somewhat bearable’ (Fassin 2012, p. xii). Malkki (1995b) has argued that the nation has been naturalised as a means of ordering the world. This thesis expands this argument, arguing that humanitarian configurations further naturalise the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1995b) through the containment of people. In turn, this underscores the role humanitarian ideals have in the contemporary global order of things.

In the context of refugees, a system of governance has emerged that is analogous to Ferguson’s (1990) critiques of development in Lesotho: a vision of what needs to be done is created and then projected onto a situation. The resulting ‘solution’ to the problem is increasingly removed from conversations regarding broader economic, geopolitical, or social arrangements (Ferguson 1990). How refugees became and remain refugees no longer seems to matter. The solution is increasingly focused on reforming or redeveloping refugees, rather than demanding broader political action or a re-configuration of global relationships. In short, the politics behind refugee generation and containment is curiously absent. Instead of focusing on broader political solutions, the domestic institutions of refugees are evaluated and found to be in need of fixing. As an ideology and a system of governance, humanitarianism provides a means for
analysing the tension between helping the weak and controlling the many. Humanitarian governance is focused on two key processes: transforming the refugee and absolving the nation.

**Humanitarian Governance as Transformation**

Refugees are helped in very specific ways that go beyond government by containment. While refugee camps have been critiqued as spaces that warehouse people (Smith 2004), the bustle of activity to improve refugees has transformed camps into ‘workshops’. The new society, birthed in camps, is composed of good refugees. Good refugees willingly accept criticism and remould themselves to hold the ‘right’ values. These transformative endeavours underscore how ‘legitimate refugee life is often defined in the seemingly contradictory nexus of apolitical victim and the improving subject’ (Feldman 2014, p. 245). As Malkki (1995a), Feldman (2014) and Gabiam (2012) observe, camps play a central role in creating, moulding, and transforming the lives of refugees. This is not a quirk of multiple and diverse refugee camps but illustrative of a broader system of governance. Humanitarianism is both an ideology and a path for action. This morphing, globally ordering humanitarianism has moved beyond the bare roots of saving lives towards improving the human condition through moral transformation.

Activities in the camps seek to transform and rebuild people who are aspiring towards emancipation. Camps become a spot for potential development and improvement—an oasis where international values can bloom. Exploitative gender relations are transformed, children are made aware of their rights, and equality permeates the idealised refugee communities. These lofty goals are undertaken with the conviction that they will change refugees’ lives for the better. Limited funds and the threat of compassion fatigue provide a strong incentive for refugees to conform to these improving efforts. Some of these efforts may herald transformations, but they all have unintended consequences. Barnett (2011) observes that in a humanitarian framework, power is frequently exercised over those it hopes to emancipate. Thus, as humanitarianism strives to help liberate, it also regulates. This thesis illustrates that the pathway to liberation is framed in virtuous terms and the parameters of that virtuous path are created by the organisations that govern. Crucially, the focus on transforming refugees does not challenge the state system and may, in fact, create a more stable,
legitimate state system (Barnett 2005, p. 733). Camps become a means not of generating equals but of crafting amendable subjects. The transformations of humanitarian subjects bring about the promised emancipation but it is ultimately a limited kind of freedom.

Becoming morally acceptable requires refugees to transform but once transformed their status is still precarious. Funding camps or accepting people for resettlement is presented by nations as a generous gesture, giving the impression to recipients that such gestures are easily revokable. Once resettled, refugees find their status still conditional and contingent on the good graces of their hosts. Though legally accepted, economic and social marginality persists. In this context, refugees must conform to the clear parameters of acceptable refugee behaviours. These frameworks provide little freedom to directly critique experiences, become active participants in resettlement, or pose broader questions regarding global arrangements. Rewarding select behaviours while problematising others functions to silence competing values, thus maintaining the status quo.

The status refugees acquire is precarious and requires continual image management as refugees try to maintain their relatively privileged status. This illustrates Arendt’s (1951) argument that if people become reduced to an externally defined category, such as the suffering refugee, they lose not only their freedom but risk becoming a ‘specimen’ rather than a political or social actor. The experiences of the Bhutanese illustrate the complex strands of power that intertwine to limit the scope of people who ‘deserve compassion’.

This is not to suggest that humanitarian action is completely oppressive or that all refugees are oppressed. Refugees are not passive in these situations. Rather, they actively work within the framework available to them. They do this by questioning the resources provided and by presenting a specific image of community, or through constructing a finely honed refugee narrative. Feldman (2012, p. 164) observed a similar process in the Palestinian context, arguing that though humanitarian action can fetter people’s ability to act, it can simultaneously provide a framework for people to make claims that are not solely humanitarian. Despite these actions that ‘tinker’ in the margins, most demands move down the humanitarian hierarchy. The desire to reform or transform refugees illuminates that humanitarian governance provides few mechanisms to balance the power imbalance between governed and governor.
Humanitarian Governance as Absolution

Camps are an integral part of a system of international governance built on the sovereignty of nation states. They embody the dual model of humanitarian governance: well-sealed boundaries between the poor countries that house refugees and the wealthy countries that fund the camps. Yet keeping millions in camps indefinitely is morally unacceptable—a constant reminder of global inequality. Faced with protracted exiles and little chance of resettling, effective management and development programs become a path towards absolution: placating the troubled conscience of an ‘international community’.

The numerous efforts undertaken to improve the camps and create vitreous, humanitarian subjects all normalise the camps. A well-run camp, helping refugees improve themselves in line with international values, inadvertently makes the spaces morally acceptable. These efforts, funded by a largely unseen international community, suggest that refugees are included, however marginally, in the broader global system. Not only is the suffering of refugees being alleviated through the provision of material goods, their morality is being improved through the introduction of international norms and values. In turn, this helps legitimise refugees’ containment, further institutionalising refugee camps. These programs stabilise the national system, making the camps morally palatable to wealthy countries reluctant to consider resettlement. As the raw suffering and horror subsides, the thread linking the global community with the camps becomes tenuous. Yet this tenuous link is still significant, providing a ‘salutary power for us because by saving lives, it saves something of our idea of ourselves … it also relieves the burden of this unequal world order’ (Fassin 2012, p. 252). Humanitarian gestures not only help and transform people in need, they provide absolution for the societies in the position to make such gestures.

Wealthier countries that strictly regulate their borders provide the financial and ideological support for the camp systems. Australia, as with many wealthy countries, strives to be compassionate while still being tough on border security. In Australia, the focus on accepting the most vulnerable is used to exclude the many while also regulating the few who are allowed entry. These competing notions create a moral tension between hostility and hospitality that refugees must negotiate, once they are resettled. This constraining framework, based on ‘helping vulnerable refugees’, can become an effective way to justify broader forms of exclusion. Regulation is achieved
and normalised when it is framed as an attempt to support the refugees who are most deserving: refugees provide the moral absolution the wealthy countries desperately desire.

Humanitarian ideals quickly confront a situation in which not everyone can be helped. A hierarchy emerges, ranking those considered deserving against those who fall outside the accepted parameters. Refugees, even after resettlement, find themselves perpetual humanitarian subjects rather than capable, potential citizens. This is a constraining, liminal role with little space for manoeuvring. Refugees are still beholden to those with the power to offer sanctuary. Increasingly, the role of the elite refugees who are granted the opportunity to resettle is to resolve the moral dilemma that the daily reminders of global inequalities present.

Fassin (2012, p. 10) implores anthropologists to produce critically engaged ethnographies examining the impact of the humanitarian value system on the everyday experience of its subjects. He calls for the ‘study of the production, circulation and appropriation of norms, values, sensibilities, and emotions in contemporary societies…concerns we could easily take for granted, sometimes even viewing as moral progress’. Bornstein and Redfield (2011, p. 25) similarly observe that ‘there are relatively few in-depth ethnographic and historical accounts of humanitarian organizations, cosmologies, and encounters’. In response to these concerns, this thesis examines the cosmologies and encounters the Bhutanese have with humanitarian sentiments. In doing so, it provides a historically situated and critically engaged account that illustrates the relationship humanitarianism has with larger configurations of politics and power. It traces the movement of moral sentiments, across the obviously humanitarian camps and the less obviously humanitarian spaces afforded to refugees in Australia.

This thesis does not argue that humanitarianism is fundamentally wrong, nor does it suggest that humanitarian efforts, either in the camps or through social welfare in Australia, should stop. Humanitarian efforts and sentiments can, indeed, provide crucial, life-saving benefits. However, humanitarian ideology and action, while claiming to have the well-being of the most vulnerable at its core, can lead to complicity. Focusing on relieving immediate suffering can have the effect of leaving larger questions regarding global inequalities and broader injustices unasked. Ticktin (2011, p. 223), referring to asylum seekers in France, argues for a transformed perception of refugees and asylum
seekers that is not based on finding the exceptional but recognising the ‘current unequal access to the means of existence’.

This thesis has further highlighted the need to robustly analyse humanitarianism as a central ideology and field of governance in our world. This thesis is not alone in flagging this need and a growing number of researchers are scrutinising this emerging field of inquiry (Barnett 2013; Bornstein 2012; Fassin 2012; Feldman 2012; 2014; Gabiam 2012; Harrell-Bond 1986; Malkki 1996; 2015; Ticktin 2006 to name a few). This thesis does not endeavour to give a definitive answer regarding the local or global impact of humanitarian ideologies. It does contribute to the wider—and growing—efforts towards understanding the contemporary humanitarian turn through a small, focused study of the Bhutanese refugees. Their experience of life under humanitarian governance tells us much about our contemporary morals and values.

**Conclusion**

Humanitarian action can, and does, provide important benefits to the societies it serves. It is an ideology and a path of action that increasingly focus on governing by transforming the groups it strives to help. Given its power and potential, a robust interrogation of both its intended and unintended consequences is necessary. As Feldman and Ticktin (2010, p. 25) argue ‘we may not be able to do without it … but we have to remain uneasy with its deployment.’ Careful scrutiny must be directed at the lived experiences of those who are the beneficiaries of these benevolent gestures. Humanitarian situations will undoubtedly continue to arise throughout the 21st century. Focusing on a select few deemed morally legitimate ‘can work to preclude responses to and by the suffering’ (Ticktin 2006, p. 222). We do not need to abolish humanitarian ideals or stop aspiring to stem suffering and inequality. Rather, because ‘humanitarian governance is not just a small corner of international order – it is a growing and increasingly prominent dominion’ (Barnett 2012 p. 487) we must remain mindful of the limits such an approach can impose.

In concluding I return to the situation in Europe. By November 2015 over 870 000 people entered Europe—the vast majority seeking asylum from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (IOM 2015). After the attacks on Paris, refugees morphed into a group no longer eligible for compassion with the same startling speed that months earlier had elevated
them into the sphere of ‘deserving’. The suspected actions of a few people ‘proved’ that these refugees are fundamentally different from members of a global community. The earlier humanitarian response became a kind of mirage, an ‘illusion of equality of human beings in the face of misfortune’ (Fassin 2005, p 397). Governors in the United States (Healy & Bosman 2015) moved rapidly to free themselves from any obligation to resettle refugees and countries in Europe began to tighten their borders (Erlanger 2015). As refugees become a threat to the safety of citizens, their potential admission into Europe and the United States may become barred in good conscience. This shifting landscape reveals the dangers of searching for the most deserving, the most vulnerable, and the morally legitimate recipients of compassion. A scope narrowed by even the most humane values (compassion, vulnerability) still necessarily precludes many who deserve recognition and redress. These decisions have very real consequences regarding who is allowed access to a safer world and who is barred from entry.

The humanitarian response has become the central way to deal with an unequal world. The well-meaning discourse of humanitarianism is the accepted means to absolve the conscience of the global powers as they face ever increasing evidence of the injustices that nation building causes and national boundaries sustain. Those rejected by the nation become pawns in international relations and domestic politics. These pawns, far from existing in a world apart, hold a central role in legitimising and maintaining that system. Humanitarian ideology finds its greatest strength in its ability to defend an exclusive world in the name of compassion.
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Appendix A

Methodology

A common saying among the Bhutanese refugees was, ‘the elephant has two sets of teeth. The set they use to chew and the set they show the world’. While an elephant’s tusks are impressive and play crucial social roles, the hidden teeth are what ultimately sustain the animal. This statement was used to illustrate the tension between how people present themselves and their underlying intentions or actions: the public performance that is maintained through private mechanisms. It suggests a duality that cuts to the heart of this thesis: compassion and repression, solidarity and discord. The tension between different moral values results in a series of performances – the creation of a public figure who is acceptable within a humanitarian framework.

Between Australia and Nepal, it became clear a Bhutanese refugee community did not simply exist in either site but was created, moulded, critiqued, and reformed by a myriad of actors who held high aspirations for the Bhutanese. The humanitarian agencies running the camps, the service providers and government staff in Australia, and the Bhutanese themselves attempted to further their respective understanding of what is best for the group. These multiple expectations of the Bhutanese, in turn, necessitated various constructions and performances. Yet, ethnographic research is concerned with not only reporting on performances but to understanding our world, underscoring that a ‘surface observation often requires backstage explorations… illuminating processes and understandings not immediately available to the observer or the observed’ (Wherry 2015, p. 7). To begin to grasp the larger, global processes that create and re-create refugees, a complex methodology is essential. This appendix examines the ethnographic skillset necessary to conduct fieldwork in humanitarian settings.

Multiple Places

‘Go to Nepal, then you will understand’ was the refrain from participants when I began my fieldwork Adelaide. Over eighteen months, this research moved from Adelaide
South Australia, to the refugee camps in eastern Nepal before circling back to my first site. This circle brought into sharp focus the fact that, though geographically distant, the group was exceptionally interconnected. Performing research both in the camps and with the resettled Bhutanese refugees was a strategy designed to ‘follow the people’, an approach championed by Marcus (1995). A multi-sited approach facilitates the contextualization of experiences and understandings across the multitude of spaces societies inhabit (Marcus 1995). It is a specific strategy for designing ethnographic research involving ‘strategies of quite literally following connections, associations, putative relationships’ and putting those links at the core of the ethnographic inquiry (Marcus 1995, p. 97). This approach proves particularly fruitful for studying the experience of migrants (Leonard 2009) and refugees (Colson 2007). While a multi-sited orientation is not necessarily more holistic than a single site, it helps to orientate the research very quickly towards the diverse scale of structures that impact on everyday life. While focusing on these very specific, local behaviors this approach also demands the recognition of broader social, cultural and political locations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Refugee camps, far from existing apart from the world, are firmly embedded in a globally linked humanitarian system of governance.

Multi-sited ethnography has been criticized for potentially not providing enough depth due to potentially short time periods, ‘this type of research implies moving around and ‘following’ horizontally, there is little time for staying put and following vertically’ (Falzon 2009, p. 7). In the Bhutanese context, the time spent with one group ‘transferred’ to the next site. Before leaving for Nepal, I spent an afternoon with some of the Bhutanese writing postcards bearing images of Adelaide and taking photographs that I was tasked with delivering. Once in the camps, I would track down a family member and give them the photo or message. Immediately the recipient would use their cell phone to call the sender, laughing that the photo or postcard had arrived. It made for a warm reception while also shattering any assumptions that the Bhutanese refugee camps are isolated, existing a world apart. There was a rapid exchange of information and ongoing connections that the camps had in relation to the wider world. Bearing photographs and postcards from friends and family resettled in Australia helped establish a certain rapport that may have taken longer to develop otherwise. Though a multi-sited approach was my original design, it was during its execution that its suitability as an approach became evident. It facilitated my research in unanticipated ways, providing different results than a single-sited study. It illustrates not only the
different geographic spaces the Bhutanese experienced but the way some ideas, norms and values become contingent on the setting. For the Bhutanese, it proved practically effective because their experiences have been multi-sited. Everyone resettled in Australia has spent time in Nepal—though not all necessarily lived in the camps. In a sense, the multiple sites articulated that I was working with the same population while it simultaneously revealed I was not working with one, coherent community.

Regulating a Community

In Australia it was not necessary to employ a research assistant due to the relative ease of access and the group’s high level of English language skills. In Nepal I utilised a research assistant, selected for me by my Adelaide participants, on nearly a daily basis. He was not only an invaluable ‘fixer’—setting appointments and making introductions but also proved to be a thoughtful sounding board for interpretations. The walk between Beldangi I and Beldangi II cuts through jungle and takes approximately 10-15 minutes; we often used this time to discuss interviews, observations, and impressions. He was both a facilitator and participant; translating both the language and the social norms when necessary. His pre-selection made my transition into the camps considerably easier. I had exceptional, eager participants from the Brahmin caste. They would speak at length regarding the significance of rituals, foods, and Bhutan. Given the line of high-caste men seemingly waiting to conduct research with me, this high-arranged reception could have easily lulled me into complicity. They were convenient and available. However, due to my work in Adelaide with lower castes, I recognised this helpfulness presented its own set of difficulties. As a high caste (Vishnu Brahmin) male, my assistant brought distinct complexities to the research process due to his position at the apex of the Hindu social hierarchy.

My research assistant actively tried to direct my research towards high-ranking male participants, as the negotiation we had over consent forms illustrates. In Australia I initially asked people to sign consent forms21 and was met, unsurprisingly, with resistance.

Within refugee groups, whether settled in Australia or resident in camps or urban refuge situations, there are widely varying degrees of literacy, whether in English or in other

21 This research was approved by the Australian National University’s Human Ethics Review Board. I was approved to use both a written consent form and a verbal consent script.
languages... Among a population for whom signing official forms may not always have been an easy decision in ordinary life, in the context of being a refugee there are many reasonable concerns about doing so (Hugman, Bartolomei, & Pittaway 2011, p. 666).

Faced with concerns and resistance, I switched to an oral consent method. In Nepal, I informed my research assistant that I wanted to again use oral consent. He informed me of his previous work with a researcher who employed written consent and that written consent was the preferred approach in the camps. In response to his recommendation, initially participants were asked to sign a consent form. This proved to be problematic; illiterate participants felt ashamed of their inability to sign their names and asking them to sign with an ‘X’ or other mark was humiliating for everyone involved. Additionally, many participants worried that their responses could be traced back to them, though I assured them all our interactions would be confidential.

As mentioned previously, my research assistant was selected for me by the Bhutanese in Adelaide. The high-caste males, when I first began work in Adelaide, actively sought to regulate the public face of the Bhutanese. In the camps, this desire was similarly acute. The high caste males tended to be literate, bilingual, and hoped to maintain a degree of control over the direction of research. Championing a written consent form was a strategy to contour and effectively regulate my research through seemingly technical means. Brahmin males, more than any other groups, held the skills necessary to sign a consent form. While the strategies to channel my research were evident while in Australia, they became particularly acute in Nepal. The group had a clear vision for my work. In turn, this clear vision demonstrated their well-honed understanding of the system of humanitarian values they moved within. They understood the need to convey particular sentiments, take on certain roles, and reflect specific values. My task, in their minds was to further their cause, eliciting sympathy which could be converted into political might. The social role participants ascribed to the researcher is crucial to understanding the resulting interactions (see Berreman 1962, Kondo 1986). Far from being treated with suspicion, participants overwhelmingly considered me as a potential mouthpiece for the community. Some participants had strong political sentiments and understood engaging with a researcher as a valuable opportunity to make their opinion or agenda heard.

It quickly became evident that powerful members had a very specific agenda and attempted to regulate the group. Interviews would be strategically moulded in hopes of
furthering political motivations and so particular stories or voices took precedence. Within the group, there were complex power relations that regulated not only the people outsiders could access but that also attempted to control the information available to them. While working around these gatekeepers and regulators necessitated considerable effort, they inadvertently delineated several significant themes such as the constructed nature of community and the demands that humanitarian forms of governance make on their subjects.

The UNHCR, perhaps due to its reputation, proved to be the most formidable gatekeeper. After weeks of discussion and negotiation hoping to gain official access, this did not appear possible. Unfortunately, to secure their permission all publications arising from fieldwork in Nepal would be subject to approval by their offices. This was, quite understandably, done in an attempt to protect the refugees. It was decided that this degree of potential censorship was not feasible and could hinder the academic transparency of my work. As such, I worked covertly in the camps. While I was initially concerned that this might discourage people from speaking to me, more often than not it had the opposite effect. The lack of official permission, despite the group’s desire to work with me, frequently opened the gates on a deluge of issues associated with the management of the camp and the resettlement process. This was slightly different than Bornstein (2013, p. 99) observed in India:

> it was difficult for me to obtain information about humanitarian aid from those who may have been critical of it but at the same time depended on it and did not want to jeopardize its continuation.

Because I lacked affiliation with a specific institution, and was working without UNHCR consent, participants were surprisingly candid. They divulged information and criticisms that they were reluctant to share with service providers—fearing criticism would jeopardise access to resources. The covert (relative to UNHCR approved research) nature of my research endeared me to many participants. Most asserted the reason I was not granted permission was because I wanted to ask questions about resettlement. Speculation was rampant that if I had asked to do research on a subject other than the resettlement process, such as education or health care in the camps, I would have been given unfettered access. I reiterated that the UNHCR simply wanted to protect people living in the camps but my participants remained unconvinced. The majority of participants were well aware that their resettlement was considered a
‘model’ case and suspected any evidence to the contrary would be actively suppressed. The regulation of research in the camps provided an opening for the Bhutanese to discuss and reflect critically on their role in relation to the governing institution. It highlighted their perception of a pressing need to maintain appearances. This critical appraisal of their relationship with the UNHCR alerted me to the high degree of reflexive understanding this group had regarding their position as refugees.

Early on, service providers flagged issues that would have been ‘masked’ for several months. The caste system was one such matter. Service providers inadvertently aided in revealing the ways that the Bhutanese managed their identities, which iteratively became the focus of this research. Initially, I was reluctant to analyse the caste system – worried it would throw a poor light on the Bhutanese. However, failure to analyse it would have meant prioritising moral evaluations that regarded the caste system as a problem over the importance the system held for the group. It would have contributed to the too frequent approach to refugees that assumes a lack of political institutions: that displacement has stripped refugees of everything that makes them complex, complete humans (Malkki 1992). Further, it was tempting to:

fall into deep sympathy with the people we are studying, so that while the rest of the society views them as unfit in one or another respect for the deference ordinarily accorded a fellow citizen, we believe that they are at least as good as anyone else, more sinned against than sinning. Because of this, we do not give a balanced picture (Becker 1967, p. 240).

It became evident that studying moral systems demanded the utmost attention because nations, international organisations, and local service providers subjected the Bhutanese to such a degree of evaluation. Similarly, the Bhutanese had their own strong systems of moral governance. In order to understand the Bhutanese, the larger environment that regulated, governed, excluded and integrated them required analysis.

**Tools of the Trade**

In light of these tensions, methodologies had to be consistently reevaluated, buttressed, and interrogated. This research is grounded in traditional ethnographic field methods, thus participant observation was both a methodological and theoretical consideration. I participated in religious ceremonies, social events, and the ebbs of daily life—washing clothes, preparing food, tending gardens. I learned to preserve vegetables, make *momos,*
and to butcher a goat in the correct way. I acted as the ‘official’ photographer for a participant’s wedding and the honoured guest at another. I helped make healing deities for rituals and spent many days ‘hanging round’ – fretting over bees that froze in a cold snap in Nepal and vegetables that wilted in the hot Adelaide sun. I suffered through laughing yoga (exercises that include long periods of voluntary laughter) both in Nepal and in Australia. I accompanied high castes on their covert visits to restaurants selling ‘impure’ food and joined them on walks to neighboring villages to purchase cigarettes. At times, it was less participation and more observation: sitting away from the group and charting how people physically position themselves in relation to one another.

Because participant observation is the foundation of ethnographic research, it effectively supports and complements other types of data collection (Agar 1996; DeWalt & DeWalt 2011). Thus, I used a multitude of tools to reinforce this foundation. These included, but were not limited to, semi-structured interviews built around themes, snowball sampling, focus groups, and surveys.

Interviews supplemented observations and informal conversations. These were conducted with individuals, groups, and families in a face-to-face setting. In Nepal I conducted 98 pre-scheduled interviews. Because participant observation can easily morph into interviews, I elected only to count interviews that were pre-arranged. Thus interviews on buses, trains, and cars, on street corners or shopping centres are not included in that number. In Australia, the overall number was fewer (approximately 40) due to the smaller population, though the longer time period resulted in many more repeat interviewees and greater number of impromptu conversations. I did not audio-record the sessions but took notes which were transcribed the same evening. Non-verbal aspects of the interview were recorded in the same fashion (the look of the space, decorations, what food/drink was available et cetera). I recorded the age and gender of interviewees but did not record names: I was alert to the need of confidentiality (Jacobsen & Landau 2003).

Most interviews took place in people’s homes. For these interviews I would bring a gift, generally chocolates, but I did not pay participants. Interviews were also conducted at social or service provider centres, both in Australia and Nepal. Some interviewees were reticent, thus a semi-structured interview seemed to be most effective. Others merely
needed an open-ended question to talk for hours. Interviews generally lasted two hours, though some stretched over multiple days. I ended interviews with an open ended question (Spradley 1979; Leech 2002); ‘Is there anything you would like to add?’ The response was always the same, ‘I want to convey my thanks to the UNHCR (or Australia). Though the Bhutanese strove to present themselves as equals to the international organisations who managed the camps and the broader population of Australia, they found themselves in a paradoxical relationship. While it was reiterated that all humans are equal, their status as recipients of compassion demanded humility – positioning them as slightly unequal to those with the power to give (Fassin 2012).

Focus groups arose organically among participants and were not pre-selected. I would often plan on speaking to a specific person only to arrive and find two, three or four other people who also wanted to talk. These groups made for heady discussions as ideas and interpretations were debated amongst participants. The groups often also brought social norms into sharp focus. During a family interview, I asked the youngest daughter what she thought about the refugee camps she had grown up in. ‘The camps, they are just horrible. They are…’ Her father interrupted, ‘The older people have knowledge the younger people can’t explain, our real problems, the census, and our government’s policy.’ This interaction articulated the inter-generational tensions that many participants felt resettlement accentuated. It also illustrated that certain stories were considered more valid than others, alerting me to the necessity of implementing a complex methodology to not only grasp how these power dynamics are maintained but why.

Snowball sampling proved to be a crucial technique throughout my research. Nearly everyone I interviewed introduced me to or recommended I speak to one or two more people. I was able to interact with a diverse cross-section of the community as my initial two contacts represented in a certain capacity the two main divides within the community, between the high and the low castes. However, this sampling technique was problematic in terms of being representative (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981). Some participants had a well-developed political agenda; their recommended interviewees reflected the wants of more powerful members of the group.

When I arrived in Nepal, an introduction via my contacts in Australia resulted in a detailed list of people whom I was ‘supposed’ to speak with while in the camps. This was incredibly helpful but I quickly realised that the list was problematic. The selection
of a research population by ‘community leaders’ has been critiqued for failing to recognise inter-group power struggles (MacKenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway 2007). The list I was provided was far from representative. Very few women were on the list and, though perhaps a few low-caste men, no low-caste women. As I worked through the list, I pushed my research assistant to introduce me to lower caste families and had to continually assure him that I wanted to speak to women. This is not to say there were not exceptionally vocal and politically active women in the community. Indeed, in Australia, much of the most insightful information came from a high-caste participant who had married a low-caste man. She was perhaps accustomed to confronting social norms and consistently provided a frank account of her experiences. However, the assumption I consistently came up against was that senior males would be the ‘natural’ choice as participants. This was an assumption held by both men and women regardless of age or caste with very few exceptions. When I visited people’s homes, women were expected to serve tea while men answered my questions. I was viewed as someone who moved in the public, political realm of men while women presumably circulated in the private, domestic arena.

In Australia and in Nepal, this was largely overcome by my unexpected pregnancy. Women, who previously were reticent or deferred my questions to men, began speaking to me. At first, they provided pregnancy advice regarding the specific fruits and vegetables I should consume or avoid. In the camps I was quite ill and women extended considerable kindness due to my condition. They shared folk remedies and allowed me into their homes to rest while recovering from nausea. Soon, they revealed considerable details about their lives that often began with their experiences of motherhood. In Australia, the women similarly doted over me preparing soups to reduce indigestion or small gifts of fruit to help the growth of my baby. They eventually threw a baby shower to celebrate the birth of my daughter. Thus, this unexpected life event provided a ‘bridge to humanity’: a means of creating a personal relationship with women (Grindal & Salmone 2006).

In the camps, religious differences also presented methodological difficulties. At times, my research assistant was often openly hostile to some Christian participants. This was a group who clearly demonstrated the intercommunity dynamics relating to the caste system, thus their participation was vital. I noticed during interviews where I required his assistance in translating, he was reluctant to translate directly and rather tried to paraphrase the conversation. This was frustrating and though I asked him several times
to speak to the participants respectfully and translate directly, he brushed these requests aside. To surmount these obstacles, I sought out Christian members directly and conducted interviews independently from my research assistant. If possible, even if my research assistant had arranged an interview on my behalf, I would ask to conduct the interview independently. I also sought alternative venues to meet potential participants. The market adjacent to Beldangi II provided a venue to meet refugees and to observe their interactions with local stall owners. I conducted market and transportation surveys looking at who performed public tasks and at what times of day. This allowed me to interact with people independently, though many people knew through the social grapevine of a ‘link’ to my research assistant. These methodological difficulties served to illuminate intricacies of the group dynamic. While exile favoured high-caste Brahmin males due to their language abilities and experience as community leaders, exile also threatened their position at the apex of the social hierarchy. The animosity by the research assistant was indicative of a larger discomfort in face of changing power relations.

While participant observation was the primary technique, this research was enhanced by several other qualitative techniques and was further supplemented with quantitative aspects. Pulling together these diverse, yet complementary methodological tools, I hoped to increase the academic rigour of emerging interpretations. Mixing approaches can yield different viewpoints (Flick 2004, Denzin 2012). Ultimately, by combining qualitative and quantitative tools this research hoped to:

obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality, richer more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts and a means of verifying many of these elements. The multiple lines of sight is frequently called triangulation (Berg 2004, pp. 4).

Though snowball sampling was effective at generating a sizable number of participants, with this group it proved to have a clear bias. It created a clear image of what the Bhutanese leaders wanted to promote but left those excluded from power curiously absent. To ensure data was relatively representative of the broader group, in addition to seeking participants independently of my research assistant, I developed a survey. Heeding the advice of Bryman (1988), who argues surveys should be developed in consultation, this survey emerged after five months of fieldwork, in consultation with my research assistant. My research assistant and I spent approximately two weeks conducting the initial 25 surveys, asking for feedback from participants, and honing the final questions. We elected to survey one percent of the Beldangi II camp population of
15,000 and sought to have those 150 surveys be demographically representative of the camp population. The sample group was based on age, gender, and caste or ethnicity. For example, there were approximately 1,600 Gurung\(^{22}\) in the Belandgi camps, thus we would survey 16 – eight males and eight females. This would be further broken down by age. Of course, there were limits to surveying only one percent of the population and a larger sample size would have been ideal. For the camp based surveys I employed two female research assistants, one of high caste (Brahmin) and one of a middle caste (Rai). This was a deliberate effort to see if my main research assistant influenced (perhaps inadvertently) research results. There was not a substantial difference in the responses collected across the three research assistants. However, this did not discount that results could be influenced by the different research assistants.

Participant observation underpins this ethnography, thus the quantitative device was largely a tool to access a diverse cross section of the group. The survey’s most important function was as means of introduction to people deemed by those trying to direct my research as inappropriate or people who failed to emerge through snowball sampling. Some were pleased to be involved in research, introducing new perspectives or buttressing seemingly widespread sentiments. Others were reluctant and uncertain of the value of their contribution. I developed an instant rapport with some, resulting in many return visits and invitations to family functions. For others, the survey was the beginning and the end of our interactions. Those who did not express an interest in participating were not pressured to do so. These people may have introduced new themes and alternative viewpoints; perhaps future research would be able to access these insights.

I used the camp based survey primarily as a means rather than an end. Yet the surveys ultimately provided a robust body of demographic statistics demarked by age, gender, ethnicity, and caste. In particular, the data were useful in exploring historic educational trends in relation to caste and gender. For example, the theme of the refugees being highly educated while living in Bhutan was incredibly widespread. In conversations, it became evident that few older women participated in schooling in Bhutan. Surveys

\(^{22}\) Caste and ethnicity are often directly related in the group. Participants who have converted either to Christianity, Buddhism or an animist religion are still well aware of their caste. It is important to note that in the eyes of the high caste Nepali-speaking Bhutanese the caste that a person is born into can never change, regardless of educational attainment or enjoying high economic status, there are not mechanisms in place to ‘move up’ the social ladder. The term caste and surname are often used interchangeably by participants.
revealed that virtually no castes aside from the Brahmin males attended any kind of schooling in Bhutan. This finding began to illustrate how a particular story or experience had come to dominate within the larger group. While my focus was not to discern the facts behind the group’s myths, I was interested in exploring why they developed and how they were regulated. The survey data further illustrated the centrality of Brahmin males in public representations of the ‘Bhutanese refugee community’.

The surveys, in addition to providing introductions, became one means of ‘loosely’ verifying that central themes expressed by participants were reflective of wider community sentiments. This triangulation of qualitative and quantitative techniques served as a check on my developing interpretations (Bryman 1988). These primary surveys gathered demographic data and verified the prevalence of specific sentiments. Additional surveys were conducted regarding public transportation usage, the collection of water, and bazaar patronage. These were performed over multiple days at various times throughout the day, recording the number and gender of people performing various tasks. This data could then be set in relation to observed patterns. By approaching these questions with multiple methodological lenses, it revealed discrepancies that one approach may have overlooked. Though people would often sit and chat regarding all types of matters while I performed the surveys, these were largely quantitative. Working with a politically astute, well-organised group required considerable navigation to move beyond the accepted performance and begin to grasp how participants viewed the world.

**The Ethics of Fieldwork**

The role of the researcher in relation to the expectation of power raised ethical concerns during fieldwork. The expectation of power was most pronounced in relation to institutions that were perceived as being ‘Western’. This is not unique to the Bhutanese camps. MacKenzie, McDowell and Pittaway (2007, p. 303) suggest ‘some participants may have unrealistic expectations of the benefits of the research, believing that researchers have the power to influence legal or resettlement processes’. Several participants sought me out hoping I could facilitate or expedite their resettlement process. I was constantly reiterating that I was not associated with either of the main institutions and our interactions had no bearing on the outcome of their resettlement
process. This interaction also illustrated just how powerful the humanitarian actors in
the camp setting were—the fate of thousands literally hinged on the decisions they were
making. Participants had preexisting ideas regarding the role of the researcher that
impacted on my experiences in the field as well as the information collected. My
research was actively facilitated because enough participants had a vested interest. They
saw participation as a means to air grievances, promote a political agenda, attempt to
increase access to resources and, for some, contribute to a form of documentation.

Given the power discrepancy between researcher and participants, voice and
representation were crucial ethnographic considerations. I attempted to integrate the
suggestions of participants regarding methodological approaches and direction of
research on several occasions throughout the research process. A participant in Australia
requested that a survey be created regarding the resettlement process. I produced a
survey to his satisfaction. This survey received little response aside from the participant
that had asked directly for its development and as such, was not used extensively. This,
like the introduction of a written consent form at the prompting of my research assistant,
was an instance where I attempted to shape my field techniques based on the input of
my participants. Though a collaborative approach to research is ideal, I found the tools
suggested by participants were not always effective. However, their desire to be
engaged in the research process was significant. I attempted to utilise this energy
throughout the writing process. I used social media and new media to collaborate with
participants during the early writing stages. This was an invaluable tool for verifying
quotes, relaying ideas and progress, and receiving feedback on developing
interpretations.

I frequently e-mailed, chatted, and used Skype under the presumption that at least some
members of the group should remain engaged throughout the entire research process.
This type of immediate and ongoing feedback, I hoped, would lead to a body of
research that is accountable to the group. As I began to delve deeper into the writing
process, I realised distance from participants was essential. Although it is crucial to
include the voices of participants, they represent only one piece of a complex puzzle
(Lareau 1996). Many of my participants actively sought to navigate my research in a
direction that furthered their personal agendas. Study participants are likely to want
certain issues to be developed, reflecting their views and the way they see themselves in
relation to the world (Berreman 1962). Recognising that participants are active agents in
the manner they present themselves is crucial. Thus, in order to do justice to my participants, I needed to go beyond simply reporting their views.

Repaying a group for ‘hosting’ a researcher for nearly eighteen months is perhaps an insurmountable task. People spent hours of their lives answering my questions, explaining the obvious, and teaching me all manner of things. They fed me, provided me with excessive volumes of chai, brought me into their homes, welcomed me at important family and community occasions and were present at important occasions for me, particularly during my pregnancy. However, reciprocity is imperative for social research to maintain its ethical foundation. I sought to fulfill this obligation from several angles. Initially, I attended the Saturday Ethnic School geared towards primary aged children held in Salisbury. I offered to volunteer my services but, unfortunately, I proved to be a major distraction for the children. They would want to tease and play rather than paying attention to their lessons. I moved into a volunteer role with the City of Salisbury (one of the major service providers the Bhutanese interacted with) and facilitated a craft group for elderly women. Activities included knitting, crocheting, card making, quilting, lace work, jewelry making, and drawing. Though some materials were donated by the City of Salisbury, I supplemented the haberdashery with yarn, needles, hooks, beads, thread, and fabric. Generally the goods purchased were requested by participants, though I also selected goods I thought they would like. Men were encouraged take part but saw crocheting and sewing as firmly within the female domain. Crafts such as painting or card making, men happily undertook.

I also provided support for the main coordinator as needed, assisted in English lessons for adults as well as cleaning the space and washing the numerous teacups. Through these roles, I provided explanations regarding bureaucratic processes, helped with minor translation during training courses, and arranged additional service providers to speak to the group. For example, the issue of wills and probate law was raised by the group. Some misinformation had been moving through the group regarding burial requirements and the validity of wills in Australia. Many were concerned that cremation was not allowed in Australia. I arranged for the Legal Services Commission of South Australia to do a month long series of talks to provide the group with valid information. There were smaller acts of reciprocity as well, such as acting as a referee for informants that were having difficulty procuring housing due to a lack of local contacts.
Conclusion

The publically performed ‘model refugee’ contains and reflects dynamic tensions. By approaching the group with a complex toolkit, a robust body of data regarding their social interactions and social understandings was built. A multi-method, multi-sited ethnography helped draw out relationships, disconnects, and subtleties that any one method (or site) may have not been able to uncover. In doing so, it examined the performance of a ‘Bhutanese refugee community’. This performance was at once distinct and strikingly similar across each setting, articulating larger power struggles over moral codes and ways of understanding the world. Multiple methodological approaches illuminated that humanitarianism is a far-reaching ideology that yields unexpected outcomes. It produced a rich snapshot of the way contemporary values move within and interacts with groups. Moving from Australia, to Nepal and back to Australia highlighted the ways the Bhutanese must perpetually construct themselves in multiple guises to find acceptance. This research, by attempting to put the everyday into its larger context, was able to witness political dynamics playing out between the institutions that give support to the refugees and the refugees’ interpretation of that support.