

**Exploring the Metaphorical Notion of Being Rooted in Places:
“The Nationals”, “The Cosmopolitans”, and... The Sycamore**

Exam Question #1

SUM4020: Political Conflict and Violence in Developing Countries

November 1, 2004

Scott Randall



Vincent Van Gogh "Roots and Tree Trunks", 1890

The notion of people “being rooted to a place” is an interesting botanical metaphor that is used when explaining a person or groups deep linkage to a particular physical place. The “rooted” metaphor has dominated the thinking and policy decisions that are applied to a refugee that is away from their “homeland”. Anthropologists, and other scientists/policy makers involved in refugee issues, have used this idea as a strong case to solely bind the exiled refugee to their homeland country they fled, and as proof to encourage the policy of repatriation. Liisa Malkki argues that the plight of the refugee is not so one-dimensional, and that a refugee’s roots may be more pliable and dynamic than they are currently attributed. The goal of this paper is to explore the notion of being rooted to a place as it is applied to refugee studies and issues, drawing on an empirical example of the Hutu refugees and their separation into two distinct divisions labeled “the Nationals” and “the Cosmopolitans”. The botanical metaphor will not only be further dissected, but will evolve as a deeper comparison between a refugee and a tree, the Sycamore.

Rooted in Place Metaphor

The use of botanical metaphors to describe human life is an old practice, and is prevalent in nearly all cultures and religions. “The Norse cosmic World Ash, Ygdrasil, has its roots in the underworld while its branches support the adobe of the Gods” (Emnick, 2004). Using botanical, or arborescent, metaphors is a beautiful way to explain human life in natural terms, preserving our connection to the earth and its natural world. Malkki explains this as “...the naturalizing of the links between people and place is routinely conceived in specifically botanical metaphors. That is, people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness...they are specifically arborescent in form” (Malkki, 1992:27). The concept of these perceived roots forming ones identity is critical to understand when studying ones uprootedness.

Not only has the rooted metaphor been used to describe human life, but it has also been used to express the needs of humans. If a human has roots to a place, and this develops their identity, then these roots are a basic human need. Weil most eloquently defends this idea, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul...A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasure of the past and certain particular expectations for the future” (Weil, 1952:43). Weil is primarily a philosopher, and anthropologists may have taken her interpretation of the rooted principle too literally.

Rooted in Place to Matter Out of Place

Anthropologists have adapted the rooted idea to join and cement a person (refugee) to a *particular* place, their homeland. (Weil believed humans have a need for roots, but not necessarily to one particular physical place). Anthropologists have worked by the hypothesis that if roots are a basic human need, then when those roots are severed, the refugee is “matter out of place” until they are reconnected to those original roots at the original place. “...the terminology we use to describe the social, political and economic behaviour of returnees obfuscates our understanding...It reflects the assumption that refugees represent ‘matter out of place’ and thus that returnees should be put back into that place” (Hammond, 1999:228). This is the misunderstanding of the rooted principle that Malkki sees in refugee studies and policy.

Anthropologist subscribed to this “matter out of place” idea because many studies showed that an uprooted refugee could no longer conform to a society, and would become problematic until the roots were reconnected to the original place. Malkki explains that a “refugees’ loss of bodily connection to their national homelands came to be treated as a loss of moral bearings. Rootless, they were no long trustworthy as ‘honest citizens’” (Malkki, 1992:32). Psychology also contributed to this idea by presenting “evidence of the breakdown of families and the erosion of ‘normative social behaviour’, of mental illness, of ‘psychological stress’, and of ‘clinical levels of depression and anxiety’” (Malkki, 1992:33). This set the stage, and defined that a refugees roots are most appropriately set in the place from which they came (homeland). Malkki describes that this definition trapped refugees to their native land, “...anthropologists have tended to tie people to places through ascriptions of native status: ‘natives are not only persons who are from certain places, and belong to those places, but they are also those who are somehow incarcerated, or confined, in those places’” (Malkki, 1992:29). Although tying and attempting to reunite the refugee to their native land is a genuine principle, it overlooks some basic principles and facts that are occurring with the refugee and their plight simultaneously.

The beautiful rooted botanical metaphor evolved to the “matter out of place: idea, diverging from its own creation, nature. “Matter out of place” is more like a mathematical theory that lost is derivation from nature, and can not be fully accepted as fact when applied to the practical natural world. The “matter out of place” idea can be challenged by simply looking back to nature, at the Sycamore tree.

The Sycamore

Comparing the refugee to an entire tree and its life structure can be a fun and creative way to expand on the botanical metaphor. This comparison will further examine refugee's characteristics in relation to nature, and attempt to interpret their actions. Although the whole tree will be discussed, it is not forgotten that the roots are still the most valuable and supportive part of the tree, "All of us know that our plants have roots. But we just don't think about them. It's hard to image things we can not see, touch or feel...We busily take care of the plant above ground but we seldom think about the roots" (Longstroth, 1997:1). The following comparisons should prove that roots are necessary to survival, but severing those roots and growing new roots in a new place are dependent discrete factors:

1. Type:

- a. Tree: Some tree species are frail and vulnerable, while some are robust and malleable. The American Sycamore tree is one of the most wonderful trees in the world because it is so tolerant. The Sycamore is one of the few tree species that can be cut down, or knocked over, and still survive. (Ball, 2000:1)
- b. Refugee: Some people are aggressive, strong, and optimistic while others are weak, defenseless, and pessimistic; this factor relates to the refugee's personality and outlook,
- c. Conclusion: The stronger type will better adapt and survive to new difficult conditions set forth. The weak will perish or attempt to retreat to old conditions.

2. Age:

- a. Tree: A very young Sycamore sapling can easily survive being uprooted and swept to a new place; the roots have not developed too deep into the soil. A young to middle aged Sycamore tree may be able to survive a violent uprooting, and movement to a new place; this same Sycamore can definitely survive being transplanted to a new place, normally most of the roots can be contained. An old Sycamore has very small chances of surviving an uprooting or transplantation, a majority of the root structure will be damaged, killing the tree. (Ball, 2000:1-2)
- b. Refugee: Babies and young children can handle being uprooted, and look towards the future, because the past was so minute. It is as people grow old that they become more conservative and reliant on history and the past.
- c. Conclusion: Young are more adaptive to new situations, and can handle the trauma of being uprooted. The older one is, the less they can adapt in a new situation, here survivability becomes an issue.

3. Community Conditions:
 - a. Tree: If the Sycamore grows in, or is transplanted to a crowded, shaded forest, there is a chance that even the Sycamore can be out-competed by the larger surrounding native species at first. The Sycamore's new home needs to be somewhat accommodating to the tree at first, once the Sycamore is established, it will easily out-compete other tree species that challenge its survival.
 - b. Refugee: If the refugee is introduced to a hostile or unaccepting community, the less likely the refugee is able to integrate. This can also vary depending on the refugee's interpretation of the surrounding community's attitude towards them.
 - c. Conclusion: The composition of the new community determines the survivability of a new member.
4. Environmental Treatment:
 - a. Tree: Despite the Sycamores great strength, if the tree is planted, or transplanted to extremely poor or polluted soil, the tree could suffer and perish. The tree is also susceptible to severe drought, or lack of sunlight.
 - b. Refugee: A refugee's status and treatment can be set by local and global politics. The refugee's health, mental, and emotional condition can rely on the friendliness of the policies towards the refugee. This can also include the availability of rations and health care, if these provisions are inadequate, the refugee can suffer and possibly die.
 - c. Conclusion: Environmental treatment and food determines suffering, and can affect survivability.

An uprooted or transplanted Sycamore's native homeland has no influence in its future survivability in its new place. The Sycamores survivability in a new place depends on its physical characteristics, its age, and external conditions of the new place. If a Sycamore is not surviving in the new place, most often it will not help the tree to replant it back in its homeland. Most refugees face and survive these same variables. So why is the first and most common refugee policy choice the *matter out of place* idea (repatriation)? Recognizing that refugees have roots, possess a need for roots, and are able to regrow these roots in a new place in some conditions...why do refugee studies and policy solely link an uprooted refuge and there identity to their native homeland? As discussed here, repatriation is a viable solution for many refugees (depending on their type, age, and environmental conditions), but studying

and formulating policy around the refugees ability to assimilate and land new roots should be processed congruently.

Exploring the empirical human example of the Hutu refugees of Tanzania in the 1970's can give insight into this matter. Malkki notes that the refugees in the area were divided between two distinct settings. One group settled in the organized refugee camp "the Nationals", and the other in the Kigoma Township urban vicinity "the Cosmopolitans".

"The Nationals"

The Hutu refugee's that lived in the organized refugee camp were preoccupied with their history, in which they often referred to their homeland, and were generally pessimistic about the future in their new land. In the camp the "refugees saw themselves as a nation in exile...refugee status was valued and protected as a sign of the ultimate temporariness of exile and of the refusal to become naturalized, to put down roots in a place to which one did not belong" (Malkki, 1992:35). The "Nationals" possessed a state of confused identity that stemmed from a lack of independence and lost connection to their perceived roots. "Self-reliance must be understood as an act of emancipation from all harmful forms of extraversion and dependence. For each people or local community, it is a question of preserving or reclaiming their liberty and, ultimately, their identity" (Verhelst, 1990:61). This set of refugees was trapped in the "matter in place" stereotype from the start.

A Sri Lanken refugee living in a refugee camp expressed the same pessimistic feelings of the Hutu refugees living in a camp, "All these happened almost overnight,' said a woman, 'that left all of us totally unprepared to deal with them. Looking back, it is a continuing struggle by everyone to adapt to a way of life that was thrust upon us, and that has made many of our customs and traditions impractical. What was natural to us before has now become somewhat unreal'" (Shanmugaratnam et al., 2003:56). This confused and unnatural feeling stems from the lack of solid roots in the camp.

The "Nationals" refugee camp can be seen (with a return comparison to the Sycamore) as a fake ecosystem barely sustaining their life, where their only wish is to return to a real ecosystem, and their only memory or experience of a real ecosystem is their native homeland (see Figure 1). The "Nationals" are not able to assimilate into the town, and as stated, the camp is not adequate to accept roots; the "Nationals" must desire and attempt to repatriate their homeland, or death can be the next alternative.

With this set of refugees, repatriation is the most viable alternative. This is the group that refugee studies and policy address, not recognizing that there is a second group, a second alternative that can be just as successful. The second alternative, assimilation (as seen with the “Cosmopolitans” below), abandons the traditional “matter in place” and rooted to homeland principles.

“The Cosmopolitans”

The Hutu refugees that resided in the town setting were better assimilated into the new land, and borrowed parts of their identity from their new place. They were generally more optimistic and future thinking, than wrapped up on the past and history. “Exile was not a moral trajectory, and homeland was not a moral destination, but simply a place. Indeed, it often seemed inappropriate to think of the town refugees as being in exile at all” (Malkki, 1992:36). The “Cosmopolitans” definition of home and exile was less emotional, and more progressive towards the idea of a new beginning.

Returning to their native homeland was not a major consideration; they had fully severed those roots, and were open to place their new roots in their new land. “Many among them were unsure about whether they would ever return to Burundi, even if political changes were to permit it in the future. But more important, they had created lives that were located in the present circumstances of Kigoma, not in the past in Burundi” (Malkki, 1992:36). Shifting of their identity and roots was more malleable, they were easily able to put the past behind them.

The “Cosmopolitans” town migration can be seen (again, with a return comparison to the Sycamore) as a natural functioning ecosystem able to sustain life with normal stressors and competition (see Figure 2). In this scenario, if the “Cosmopolitan” can not adapt to the town setting, death can be the most realistic preceding alternative (as a return to homeland, or shift to refugee camp is very unlikely). So there is a strong survivability instinct to adapt and integrate into the town. Again, this adaptability depends on the stated principles of type, age, and environmental conditions.

With this set of refugees, repatriation is not the best option, although refugee studies and policy can assume that it is, and also assume repatriation is what this group desires. This group has severed their homeland roots, adjusted their identity, and are not longer associated (or territorialized) to their native land.

Empirical Dog Example

There have been studies of domestic dogs in New York City that have run away from their owner, or most likely have been abandoned, and have become wild in the borough sections of the city (Mott, 2003). These dogs can be seen as canine refugees that have been uprooted from their native homeland (the 37th floor of a high-rise on 5th avenue and 14th street). Besides their native instincts of eating and procreating, one of their main instincts is to build roots by marking and guarding their new territory. The dogs and dog packs regard this territory, and their roots in this territory, as necessary for survival. Humans attempt to reunite the lost dogs with their owner, if this is not possible or feasible, we kill the dogs. The dog's instinct to make to roots and assimilate into the new place is the best way to insure survivability. Humans are not too different in their basic needs and instincts, our actions mimic these wild animals, which demonstrate the need for solid roots for *all* animals to survive (but these roots can be replanted in a new environment).

Importance of Optimism and Youth

As stated with “the Cosmopolitans”, these refugees maintained their optimism, and this outlook most likely aided in their establishment of new roots for themselves and their family in the new place. Many refugees in Sri Lanka showed an increased optimism towards their children, “...displaced people’s children become a focal point in more future-oriented displaced people’s lives and livelihoods. Their response to forced migration is to dedicate their physical, emotional and cultural energy to their children, even more so than in the past” (Shanmugaratnam et al., 2003:42). Optimism towards youth begins the building of new roots in the new place, for the youth and the parents.

Optimism towards the future is also a critical mindset to encompass for assimilating and embracing the new land. In the case of optimistic Sudanese refugees, “...they had started their lives over so many times that for them the concept of ‘going back’ to a life they had once known was so unpractical as to be unthinkable. One man told me: ‘We see our life as two lives. The life before 1977 [...when they fled to Sudan] and the life after. The life before was better because we were in our homes. But this is a new life and we must try to make it as complete as possible” (Hammond, 1999:240). These refugees have fully accepted the notion of assimilation, and that this acceptance is necessary for their survivability.

It was discussed earlier that children and young adults are more acceptant of change and establishing new roots than older adults. This was seen in Sudan where “The younger and middle-aged adults (aged 15-39)...were content to stay in Ada Bai

and establish their families there. For them, highland Tigray was significant because it was their ancestral home. It was not, however, a place to which they wanted or needed to return...[they] found it easier to shift their notions of home to the new place to which they had repatriated than their parents did" (Hammond, 1999:237).

Transplanted vs. Uprooted

The notion of transplantation should not be confused with this paper's discussion of being uprooted. The notion of transplantation involves live viable roots that are picked up "in an orderly manner from the 'mother country', the originative culture-bed, and set about their 'acclimatization' in the 'foreign environment' or on 'foreign soil' – again, in an orderly manner" (Malkki, 1992:31). Uprootedness is a much more disorganized process in which "broken and dangling roots predominate – roots that threaten to wither, along with the ordinary loyalties of citizenship in a homeland" (Malkki, 1992:32). With transplantation, one has the luxury of choosing their main root; with uprootedness, the refugee has the disadvantage of losing their main root, and the grim possibility of not regrowing a new one.

Conclusion: Survivability and the Recognition of Adaptable Roots

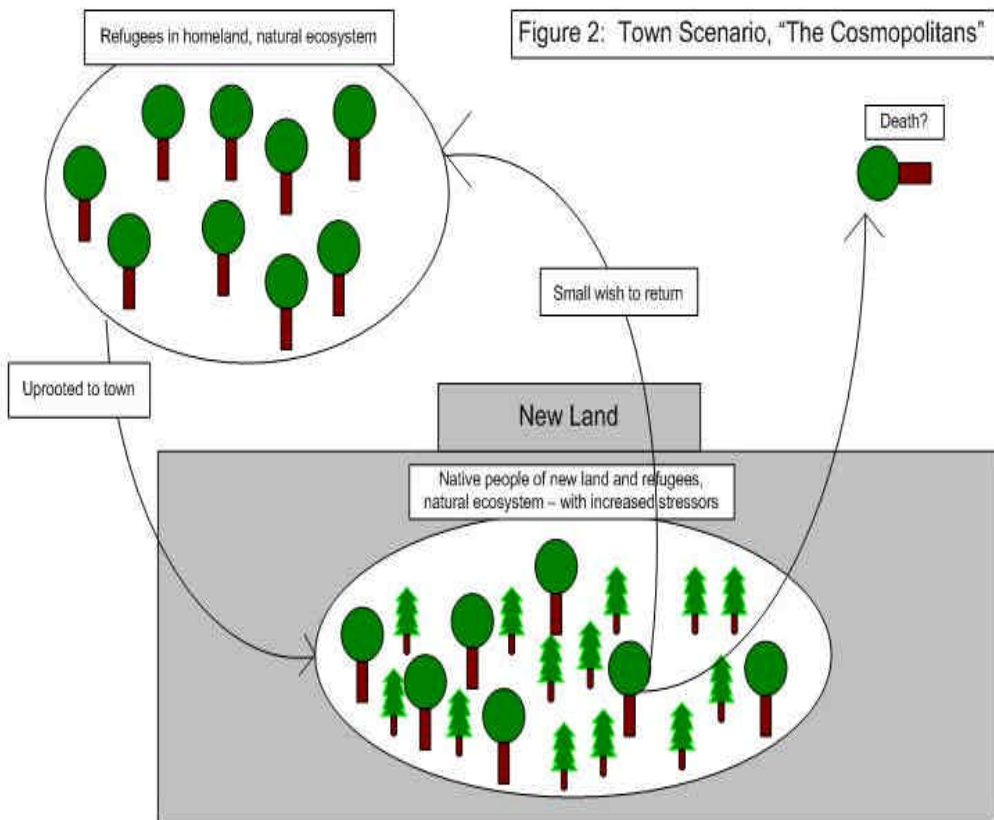
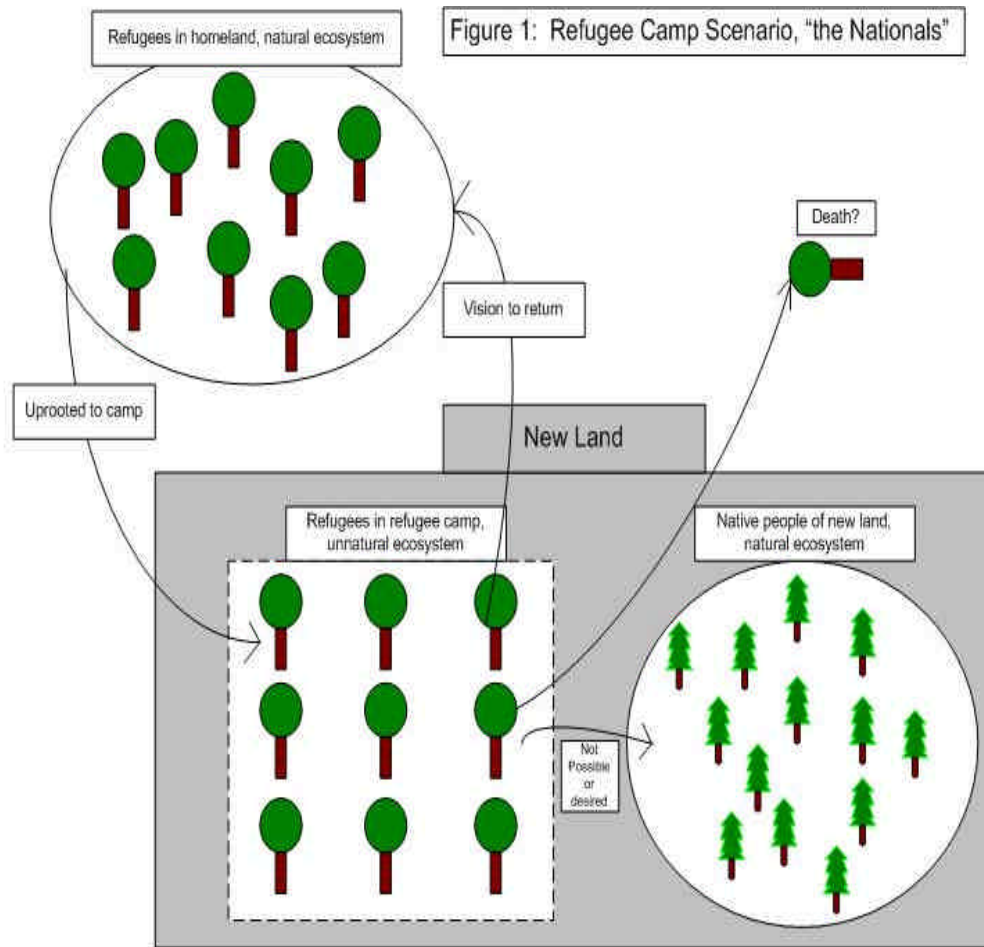
Rooted in places dominates studies and policy, because to be rooted is embedded in human instinct...for the individual's survival. But where one is able to put those roots is determined by how adaptable the refugee is to make new roots, this depends on personality, age, community, and environmental conditions. If not, the refugee will attempt to resort to their native homeland roots. If the refugee can not meet the conditions for building new roots in the new place, and returning to the homeland roots is not feasible, then the refugee has little other options, and can die. Thus being adaptable and meeting the right conditions is a natural animal advantage to maintaining and securing one's survival. Refugee studies and policy recognize the need for roots, but do not fully comprehend the adaptable nature of the roots.

The adaptability of refugees and their roots is similar to rhizome metaphor presented by Deleuze and Guattari, "Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature...It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:21,25). When applied to refugees, this statement suggests an additional dimension to the rooted metaphor. Maybe the need for roots, and adaptability of these roots, is not so Black vs. White, this idea hovers in the grey area, more horizontal than vertical. This idea when

applied to rootedness is more fluid, where the roots can be multidirectional, and not as important to survival. Bebdige also supports this idea, "...roots themselves are in a state of constant flux and change. The roots don't stay in one place. They change shape. They change colour. And they grow. There is no such thing as a pure point or origin...but that doesn't mean there isn't history" (Malkki, 1992:37).

The downfall of refugee policy and studies is that they view the rootedness as solely towards the native homeland, matter out of place, disregarding the potential opportunities and wishes of the refugee to root in the new place. As argued earlier, and freshly stated above, refugee studies and policies underestimate the adaptability and malleability of people's roots and their corresponding identity of place. Refugees are immediately labeled according to their homeland, and this places a stress on the refugee to reconnect with these native roots. Malkki argues this idea by stating, "Boundaries and borderlands at the center of our analytical frameworks, as opposed to relegating them to invisible peripheries or anomalous danger zones" (Malkki, 1992:25).

Refugee studies and policy will soon fully recognize the "...analytical consequences of such deeply territorializing concepts of identity for those categories of people classified as 'displaced' and 'uprooted'" (Malkki, 1992:25). As demonstrated in this paper, the idea of a person being rooted dominates refugee study and policy. These studies and policies are genuine in their approach of reuniting a refugee to their homeland, but this is overlooking the adaptability of a refugee to a new place. The adaptability is dependent on certain variables, but overall is a natural survival instinct of the human for itself and its future generations.



References Cited

- Ball, Jeff
2000 Celebrating the Sycamore – tree. www.americanforests.org
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari
1987 A Thousand Platues: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: Univerisity of Minnesota Press.
- Emick, Jennifer
2004 The Tree of Life: The Uniter of Worlds. Alternative Religions, <http://altreligion.about.com/library/weekly/aa102902a.htm>
- Hammond, Laura
1999 The End of the Refugee Cycle, Refugee Return and Reconstruction. Berghahn.
- Longstroth, Mark
1997 Roots: The Hidden Half of Growth. www.msue.msu.edu/vanburen/rootgrow.htm
- Malkki, Liisa
1992 National Geographic: The Rooting of People and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees. Society for Cultural Anthropology 7(1):24-44
- Mott, Maryanne
2003 U.S. Facing Feral Dog Crisis. National Geographic News. http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/08/0821_030821_straydogs.html
- Shanmugaratnam, N., et al.
2003 In the Maze of Displacement: Conflict, Migration and Change. Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget AS.
- Vershelst, Thierry
1990 No Life Without Roots: Culture and Development. London: Zed.
- Weil, Simone
1971[1952] The Need for Roots. New York: Harper.