

Environmental Citizenship of Bhutanese-Nepalis and Somali Bantu New Americans

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Abstract: Refugees, relatively a small proportion of the US population are admitted through unique, complex pathway. All refugees enter the country as legal permanent residents. Their adaptations to the American context are significant. This is a part of the research to explore how two refugee communities - ethnic Bantus from Somalia and ethnic Nepalis from Bhutan established their environmental citizenship. After transcending difficult circumstances for about a generation in appalling conditions, these two cohorts could begin a life of dignity and liberty. This poster draws on the pictures they made as they developed their environmental citizenship despite injustices during their journeys. This study used Photovoice as one of the methods to portray their environmental citizenship mostly through their pictures.

Key words: Environmental citizenship, Photovoice, environment justice, challenges, resettled refugees.

Context: As victims of ethnic violence, people seeking asylum apply to migrate to safer countries. Starting in the 1990s, the two groups sought asylum in countries including Kenya and Nepal, and the US. Following protracted processes, the US accepted the Somali Bantus and the Bhutanese for resettlement from 2003 and 2008 respectively. Both cohorts have begun to build their environmental citizenship.



★★★★ Somali Bantus wait transfer from Dadaab to Kakuma camp for processing their resettlement.



★ Bhutanese make their first move from the camp towards the US.

Research Method: One of the methods for the study is Photovoice and images have provided the environmental backdrop. Historical photos added to ethnographic narratives of environmental changes and community movement (Ruby 2005). Study participants showed photos of refugee life and resettlement challenges as issues of environmental justice. Images talk and provide clearer visibility (Wang 1999).

From Environmental (In)justice to Justice

FLIGHT FROM OPPRESSION AND GENOCIDE TO SEEK LIBERTY AND INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE (1989-1993)



Somali Bantu Village in Juba

Somali Bantus and Bhutanese Nepalis lived peacefully in southern parts of their countries. They were forced into exile from their homesteads and spent more than 12 years in refugee camps in squalid conditions with basic minimum for survival in temporary shelters. They were exposed to vagaries of weather and climate.



★ Bhutanese-Nepali homestead



Dadaab refugee camp Kenya



★ Mai River Bank Refugee camp in Nepal



★★★ New American Beauty Parlor

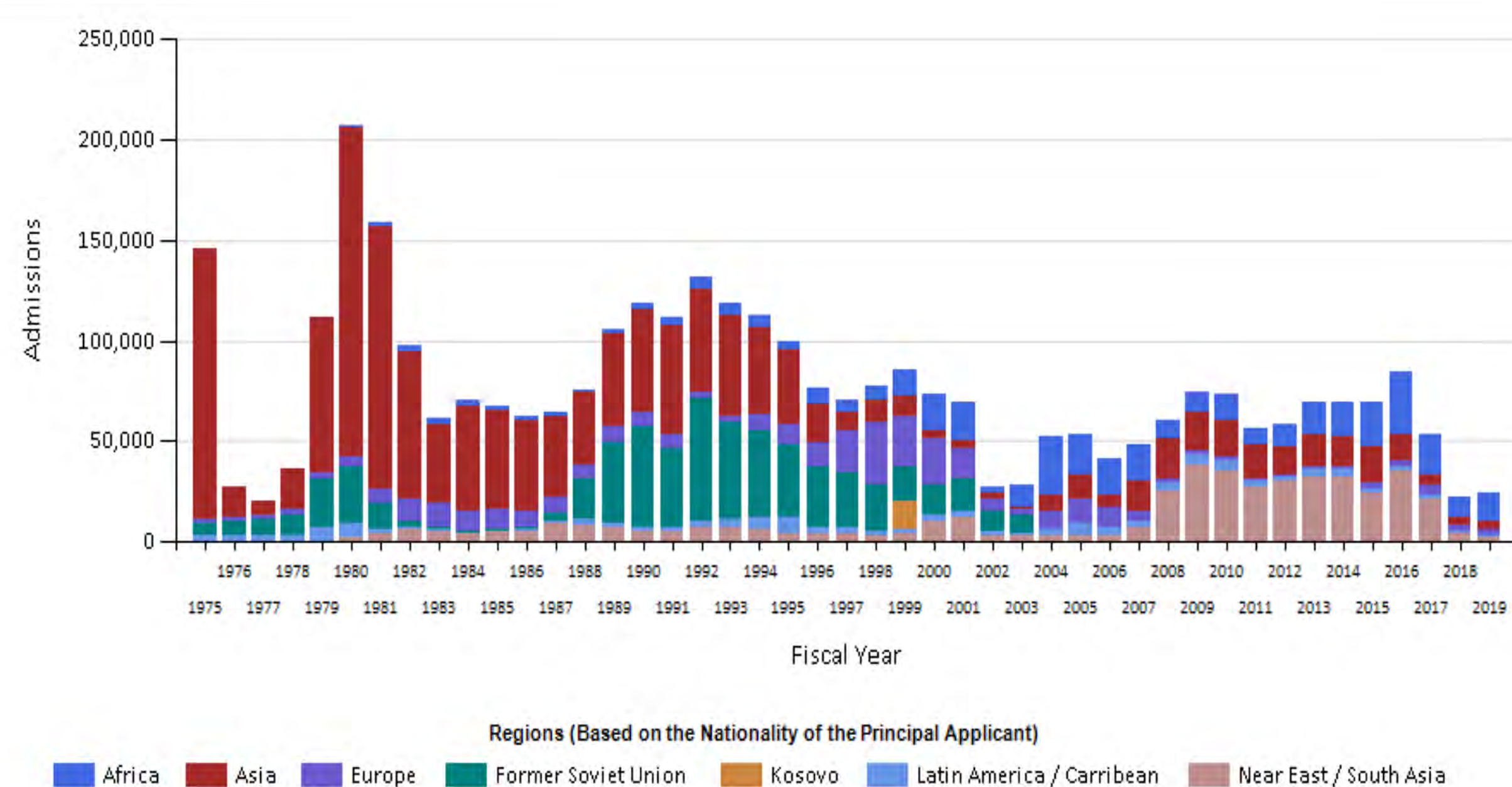


★★★ Naturalization Ceremony



★★★ Celebrating their former status

US Refugee Policy: US has been admitting refugees/asylees from war and persecution; the largest intake was of Europeans displaced by WW2. Those fleeing communist regimes in Europe and Asia followed. US passed its Refugee Act 1980 for a systematic admission by identifying, vetting and resettling those fleeing war, ethnic and religious conflicts, and from US involvements. Most recent arrivals are victims of civil and ethnic violence. The following figure gives refugee admissions from 1975 to 2018 (RPC 2019)



Environmental Citizenship and Resettled Refugees

The resettlement processes shaped by agencies seek to provide a sound start in this new home country. However, as these New Americans cultivate their environmental citizenship, it is clear that they encounter several challenges in the process of adaptation. Many environmental factors help build strength and capacity for the resettled communities.

Positive Factors

Rural to Urban Migration

The shift from rural villages to first world urban context is dramatic initially and somewhat shocking. The technological and cultural eco-systems provide basic amenities for comfort. Over time most people come to value and adapt to the new urban system.



Anchoring Roots to the Land

Most people from agricultural background look forward to sink roots on the soil. They take active role in community gardens and transforming vacant lots into productive spaces. They learn to use the technology with their ecological skills to rejuvenate their food ecology that helps them heal the trauma of losing their homesteads.



Educational Capital and New Skills

Most new arrivals need new skills or should retrain themselves. Typically, they begin by learning English. Classes are conducted formally in a multi-cultural context. Some develop skills for industrial jobs. Another main focus is computer skills for workplace readiness that helps them domestically as well.



Negative Factors

Adaptation to Climate: A Necessity

People from subtropical climate have never experienced snow. It takes years to adapt and adjust to the winters. Mobility for work and community visits gets impacted confining the elders to home. Snow and chills cause depression.



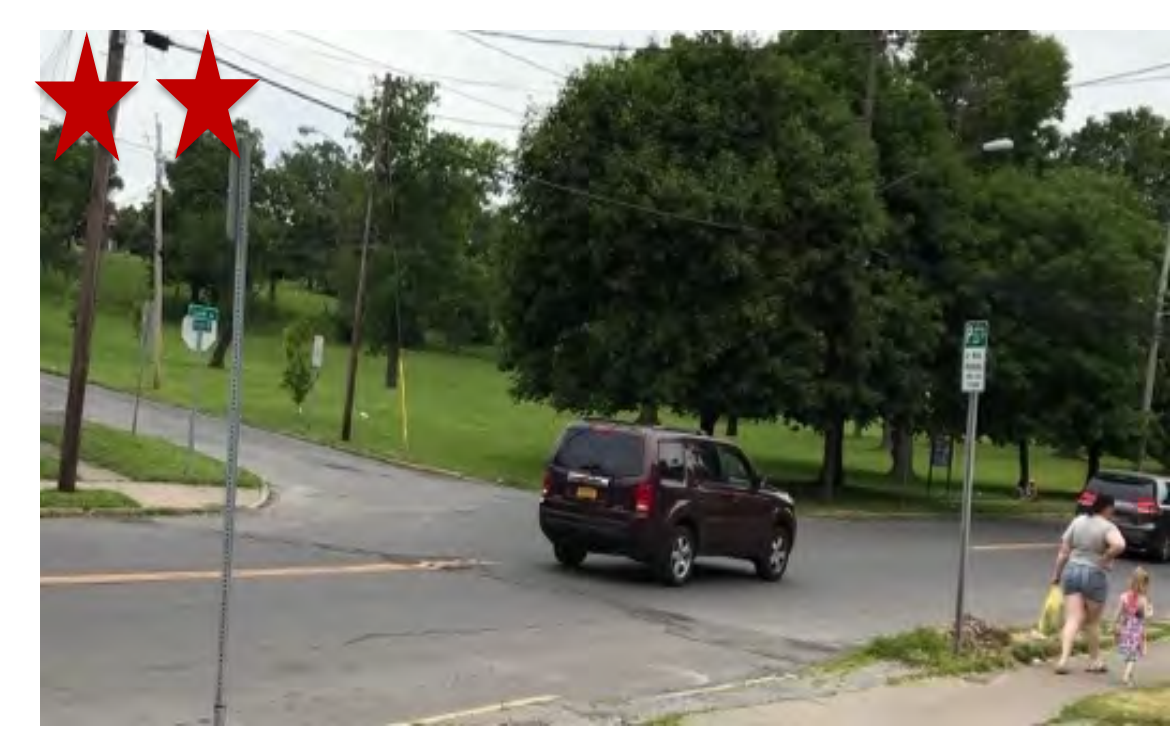
US Refugee Policy and Rhetoric

US policy welcomes refugees and aims at giving them human dignity, liberty and freedom. At times, political rhetoric makes them wary of fringe elements in particular and they want to show their legal presence and participate in silent protests.



Sub-standard Accommodation

Resettlement agencies provide community housing or cheap rentals for new arrivals in Syracuse NY. Such accommodations are old with possible lead risks and have issues of cleanliness, insecurity, loiterers and stalkers. Many lack adequate maintenance. Link roads are dangerous for pedestrians with speeding cars. Often new residents have to take up neighborhood cleaning initiatives.



Conclusions

Despite various positive and negative factors of resettlement, these two cohorts along with other refugee groups are making US their home with participation in democratic processes. They recognize their rights and responsibilities while keeping intact their heritage and learning to live in a larger multi-cultural society.



Sources:

1. Photograph sources of are: ★ Author's collection ★★ Contributed by interview participants ★★★ Downloaded from google.com
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