NEGOTIATING REFUGEE STATUS: THE CO-PRODUCTION OF LABELLING AND IDENTITY AMONG MBORORO PASTORALISTS IN CAMEROON

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of refugee labelling and identity co-production among Mbororo populations in Eastern Cameroon. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and the conceptual framework of refugee labelling, it highlights how people engage with, contest, and reframe the refugee label, transforming it into a political and economic resource. By exploring practices of resistance, appropriation, and strategic negotiation, the article shows how the refugee status is not only imposed but also co-produced by those it seeks to define. In doing so, it emphasises the bottom-up politicisation of asylum governance, illustrating how forced migrants and host populations actively participate in reshaping their status and the systems that manage their displacement. This contribution offers a nuanced understanding of refugee labelling, highlighting the importance of lived experiences in shaping forced migration policies.

Key words: labelling, refugee, Mbororo, Cameroon, Central African Republic, UNHCR

Main text introduction

The refugee label, while central to the international aid regime, is far from a neutral or static designation. It is shaped by bureaucratic processes, legal frameworks, and political agendas but is also interpreted, negotiated, and resisted by those it seeks to define. In his seminal work, Zetter (1991) conceptualised labelling as a politicised process rooted in stereotypes, which disempowers those who are labelled while masquerading as a neutral administrative exercise. He argued that labelling both identifies and defines identity: it is externally imposed yet can also be amended, resisted, or appropriated (Zetter, 2007). Highlighting that 'refugee' is a socially constructed label with complex legal, ethical, and political connotations, his work has since influenced extensive research on how bureaucratic power constructs and deconstructs refugee identities. Scholars such as Akoka (2018) and Scalettaris (2007) have shown that refugee labels reflect the historical and institutional contexts in which they are produced, often shaped by political interests.

Much of the existing literature focuses on how these labels are used to restrict access to services, humanitarian aid, and stable immigration status (Erdal and Oeppen, 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010; Janmyr and Mourad, 2018; Stevens, 2013). Labels frequently serve as mechanisms of exclusion and control, reducing refugees to passive recipients of aid or security concerns rather than recognising them as agents of their own mobility (Ludwig, 2016; Moulin and Nyers, 2007; Nyers, 2006; Soguk, 1999). Although some scholars highlight the occasional emancipatory potential of labelling (Yelfaanibe and Zetter, 2018), most argue that it homogenises forced migration experiences, failing to account for the political, social, and cultural contexts driving displacement (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Dhillon and Ulmer, 2024; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2010; Malkki, 1995; Scherschel, 2011; Shacknove, 2010; Sözer, 2021). Moreover, studies caution that labelling practices, by their 'productive and prescriptive capacities' (Cole, 2018, pp. 2–3), risk reinforcing categories that serve the policy interests of the Global North rather than reflecting refugees' lived realities (Bakewell, 2008; Chimni, 2009).

However, refugee status is not necessarily seen as a negative or stigmatising identity. Actively seeking refugee status – a process many displaced individuals must undergo to access formal assistance – requires a subjective negotiation of both their lived experiences and the identity they present to institutional actors (Häkli *et al.*, 2017; Lacroix, 2004; Malkki, 1992, p. 35). Additionally, while much of the literature examines the top-down effects of refugee labelling, fewer studies have explored how refugees themselves resist, reinterpret, or strategically engage with these labels (Hampton and Türkyilmaz, 2023). Less attention has been paid to the bottom-up dynamics of labelling – how refugees actively appropriate, subvert, or reject their categorisation (Vigil and Baillie Abidi, 2018). Some ethnographic studies highlight how refugees engage in politicisation, identity-switching, and appropriation of the refugee label, reshaping its meaning and utility (El-Bialy and Mulay, 2020; Fresia, 2008; Hampton and Türkyilmaz, 2023; Ludwig, 2016; Waite *et al*., 2015; Worrell, 2024).

This article builds on these foundations but shifts the focus further – from what refugees *say* about the label to what they *do* with it. Approaching refugee identity as performative, it highlights how displaced persons actively craft and enact identities in response to institutional expectations and socio-political contexts (Dempsey, 2022; Häkli *et al.*, 2017). This performative dimension is crucial for understanding how refugees assert political subjectivity,

negotiating their status to access resources, assert autonomy, or resist institutional constraints (Kallio *et al.*, 2019). Rather than being passive recipients of a status, displaced populations strategically mobilise their identities, positioning themselves both within and against institutional categories to claim rights, resources, or autonomy. This study also contributes new empirical insights into the labelling thesis by focusing on displaced pastoralist groups, while refugee governance has historically been structured around sedentary assumptions, privileging immobility as a precondition for protection (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Scholars have highlighted how state-driven asylum systems are designed to put aside non-citizens and contain displaced populations within camps or urban peripheries (Agier, 2011; Makaremi and Kobelinsky, 2009), including in Cameroon (Benoit, 2015; Minfegue and Sourna Loumtouang, 2023; N'Nde, 2018). Consequently, they struggle to accommodate highly mobile groups such as transhumant pastoralists (Boutrais, 1999; Horst, 2006; Sigona, 2003). The case of the Mbororo populations in Eastern Cameroon reveals these tensions: their livelihood strategies, centred on cattle herding and cross-border mobility, stand in direct contrast to the rigid territorial and bureaucratic frameworks underpinning asylum governance, which are designed to contain and immobilise displaced populations.

The Mbororos, a sub-group of Fulani pastoralists practising transhumant cattle herding, have historically migrated across the Cameroon-Central African Republic (CAR) border (Boutrais, 1999a, 1999b; Romier, 1999). Their movement, once classified as nomadic cross-border mobility, was redefined as forced displacement in the mid-2000s following escalating violence and ransom kidnappings in the CAR (Lefort-Rieu and Minfegue, 2021; Seignobos, 2008). Recognised as *prima facie* refugees[1] since 2006 – like all Central Africans entering Cameroon – the Mbororos now represent 71% of Central African refugees registered by UNHCR in 2023[2]. However, their relationship to the refugee label is far from straightforward. While some embrace it as a pathway to resources, others reject or subvert it, citing cultural, social, or economic considerations that challenge the assumptions embedded within the category.

This article makes two key contributions. First, it brings new empirical insights to the labelling thesis by examining how displaced pastoralist groups engage with the refugee category in a context of transborder mobility, socio-economic constraints, and cultural values. Unlike studies centred on urban or camp-based contexts, this article demonstrates how pastoralist livelihoods influence engagements with the refugee label, highlighting its fluidity and the agency of those it seeks to define. Second, it contributes to the broader study of the bottom-up politicisation of asylum governance by showing how displaced and host populations actively shape the frameworks designed to regulate their mobility and status. This study moves beyond dominant narratives of state- and agency-driven refugee governance by centring the lived practices of Mbororo populations. It illustrates how they negotiate the refugee label not as passive recipients but as actors who strategically engage with, contest, or adapt it in response to shifting political and economic conditions. In doing so, it critically examines the refugee labelling paradigm from the perspective of those with lived experience, addressing the relative paucity of empirical research in this area. These processes reveal the refugee label as a fluid and co-produced

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[1] Unlike the individual refugee status determination process outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, the *prima facie* approach grants recognition to entire groups fleeing generalised violence or conflict without requiring individual assessment (see Glasman, 2017).

[2] UNHCR Cameroon, *Statistics – September 2023*: https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/103925

identity, which can serve as both a constraint and a resource for displaced and host populations alike. Additionally, while this study reveals how Mbororo populations negotiate and contest the refugee label, it also highlights how these engagements are shaped by the discretionary and at times strategic application of refugee definitions by UNHCR and state actors. Understanding refugee agency thus requires examining both institutional mechanisms and the ways displaced populations navigate them.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the materials and methods, detailing the ethnographic approach and research design underpinning this study. The following section empirically examines how the refugee label is applied, contested, and appropriated among Mbororo populations in Eastern Cameroon, focusing on the intersection of transborder mobility, pastoralist livelihoods, and humanitarian governance. The final section discusses the broader implications of these findings, highlighting the bottom-up politicisation of asylum governance and how displaced and host populations actively shape the frameworks designed to regulate their mobility and status.

Materials and Methods

To examine how Mbororo populations engage with the refugee label in practice, this study employs a qualitative methodology based on long-term ethnographic research. The following section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and ethical considerations.

This article is based on a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995), combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal discussions conducted over two periods of fieldwork in Cameroon (2017-2018 and 2020-2021), especially in the Eastern region. The research was conducted while I was employed by an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), first as a field project officer and later as a programme coordinator[3]. This dual role as both practitioner and an ethnographer provided access to the networks of actors and the formal and informal dynamics shaping asylum governance in the region. While this position presented certain ethical and practical challenges, it also offered unique insights into the interplay between institutional frameworks and the lived experiences of displaced populations.

Research methods combined participant observation, formal interviews, and informal discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives of UN agencies, NGOs, the Cameroonian state, local authorities, and both displaced and host populations. Participant observation was carried out during coordination meetings, site visits to aid projects, and bilateral consultations between aid agencies and state actors. This enabled me to observe the processes underpinning refugee registration, aid delivery, and inter-agency collaboration. Formal interviews (n=39) were conducted in French or in English with local and international aid actors (NGO staff, UN agencies) in their office (in Yaoundé, the capital city, or in the Eastern region), and with local authorities (mayors, customary leaders) and refugee representatives in the field sites. Interviews typically lasted between 50 minutes and 3 hours and followed an

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[3] My status as a researcher was acknowledged by my leadership and colleagues and was explained to all my informants. Any opinions and views expressed in this text are my own and do not represent the views or attitudes of the organization, mission, or project with which I was associated.

open-ended guide covering themes such as registration procedures, refugee status eligibility, and aid interventions. However, conducting formal ethnographic interviews with displaced persons and host community members in these contexts posed specific challenges. Due to linguistic barriers (Gbaya and Fulfulde) and the association of interviews with aid surveys, alternative strategies were used, such as extended interactions in non-humanitarian settings. These informal exchanges, complemented by prolonged presence in the field beyond work-related duties as a practioner, facilitated deeper trust-building and insight into how refugee status was negotiated, contested, or leveraged in everyday interactions.

My dual positioning as both ethnographer and practitioner offered significant methodological advantages. It allowed me to gain the trust of both aid actors and displaced populations, facilitating access to perspectives that might otherwise have remained hidden. For example, informal exchanges with aid recipients highlighted their interpretations of and responses to refugee labelling processes, while my integration into aid networks provided direct exposure to the decision-making practices of international stakeholders. These perspectives strengthened the analysis by bridging the macro-level frameworks of asylum governance with the micro-level strategies of displaced populations.

At the same time, this dual role a both an ethnographer and an INGO employee raised critical ethical questions and particular attention was paid to ethics and research integrity. All interviewees were provided with a verbal explanation of the research objectives, confidentiality protocols, and their right to withdraw at any stage. In most cases, verbal consent was deemed more appropriate than written consent, given concerns about the association of documentation with formal aid procedures. However, I remained fully aware of power dynamics and the potential tension between my responsibilities as a practitioner and my commitment to rigorous ethnographic inquiry. Like other scholar-practitioners (Brabant, 2013; Fresia and Lavigne-Delville, 2018; Mosse, 2011, 2005; Schattner-Ornan, 2024), I navigated these tensions by maintaining transparency about my dual role and adhering to strict confidentiality protocols. This ensured that the research prioritised the autonomy and safety of participants while remaining attuned to the ethical complexities of researching within the aid sector.

By combining long-term immersion in refugee-hosting areas with participant observation and interviews across multiple stakeholder levels, this methodological approach provides a multi-scalar analysis of refugee labelling processes, highlighting both institutional frameworks and the lived experiences of displaced populations. The following section presents the empirical findings of this study, examining how Mbororo populations in Eastern Cameroon engage with the refugee label. It begins by exploring the contestations surrounding the category, illustrating how state and humanitarian actors, as well as refugees themselves, negotiate its application. The analysis then moves to the strategies employed by Mbororo individuals to navigate, appropriate, or reject refugee status, before considering how these engagements contribute to broader debates on the fluidity and co-production of asylum governance.

Results

The dynamics of refugee labelling in Eastern Cameroon unfold in complex and often unexpected ways. The following ethnographic account illustrates these tensions, capturing how

different actors engage with and contest the category in practice. In September 2020, with colleagues from the INGO that employed me, we met with the sub-prefect of Kette district (Kadey, Eastern Cameroon) to discuss the assistance activities our organisation was implementing in the border town of Gbiti. As we presented these activities, the sub-prefect, visibly irritated, responded:

> [Central Africans] go to the gold mines or agricultural fields on the other side [of the border] and return in the evening. They've only settled on this side [of Cameroon] to benefit from humanitarian aid and facilities. For me, they are immigrants – not refugees. Take the example of Cameroonians who do the same, crossing to the CAR for gold mining: we don't call them 'refugees'![4]

The sub-prefect's remarks reflect the tensions and contestations surrounding the refugee label in Eastern Cameroon. By categorising Central Africans as 'immigrants' rather than refugees, he challenges their eligibility for international aid, echoing broader frustrations among local officials over the perceived prioritisation of displaced populations at the expense of host communities. His comments underscore how the refugee label is not only a legal or aid category, but also shaped by competing interests over resource allocation and political recognition.

Previous research has demonstrated the contested nature of the refugee category in Eastern Cameroon (Lefort-Rieu and Minfegue, 2021). While the label is pivotal for mobilising international funding and institutional responses to crises, locally, its application reshapes social and political landscapes. In communities targeted by aid interventions, public spaces are increasingly divided into 'refugees' and 'host populations' (Kapandé Ndengue, 2015, p. 11; Minfegue, 2020, pp. 330–343), despite the historical prevalence of 'shared cross-border identities' (Vitalis Pemunta and Brice Aristide, 2013). These labels influence everything from primary school enrolment to everyday discourse, creating new social hierarchies and competing jurisdictions (Lefort, 2020).

Understanding how Mbororo populations actively participate in shaping and redefining the refugee label requires moving beyond formal legal definitions and institutional registration processes (Tiadjeu, 2020). Joel Glasman's (2019) ethnographic account of a 2014 UNHCR-led registration day in Eastern Cameroon – an operation where UN officials deploy to refugee-hosting areas to conduct registration procedures – vividly illustrates the material and performative dimensions of this process. Glasman describes how the creation of the refugee category on the ground 'requires cables, Jeeps, generators; everything smells more like gasoline than like silicon. It is often a banal, low-tech process: to interview refugees, one ropes off queues, takes notes with pencil and paper, distributes tokens by hand' (Glasman, 2019a, p. 199). This process is 'at once cognitive (it produces numerical information) and performative: it actually creates refugees' (*ibid*, p. 195). Crucially, it leaves room for negotiation, experimentation, and hesitation by the actors involved. Building upon Dempsey's (2022) insights into refugee performativity, these registration operations can be understood as institutional stages where displaced persons strategically perform identities that align with aid

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[4] Observation, 03/09/2020.

expectations to secure benefits or recognition, while simultaneously reshaping the very definition of 'refugee' through their performances.

It is precisely this margin of manoeuvre – this space where the refugee category is contested, reinterpreted, and reshaped – that this section investigates. The following discussion examines how the refugee status is strategically mobilised, resisted, and adapted by individuals and communities navigating the complex realities of displacement.

Rejecting the refugee status

In Eastern Cameroon, the term 'refugee' is used both as an institutional category by aid actors and authorities and as a common descriptor in everyday discourse to refer to individuals from the Central African Republic (CAR) who were forced to flee violence and abuses. This status grants certain advantages, including free services such as education, healthcare, and food distributions, as well as legal protection, and freedom of movement across checkpoints. However, despite UNHCR's position that 'registration is a beneficial activity for all (the UN, the refugees, the host government, the donors, etc.)' (Glasman, 2019a, p. 194), some eligible individuals choose not to register as refugees. Their reasons range from logistical constraints (e.g. lack of time or energy) to distrust regarding the use of their personal data. Others reject the label due to differing perceptions of their mobility, which they do not see as forced migration in the sense defined by international structures. As a local INGO employee explained:

> The CAR was a country where foreigners lived, including many Cameroonians. I personally have family members whom I consider Central Africans because they were born, raised, and lived there for over twenty years. […] When the war [2013–2014] broke out, they returned to Cameroon. But to them, they were simply coming home; they didn't need UNHCR or anything else. So, there's that category too: you can't tell them they are refugees.[5]

The migration experiences of populations between Cameroon and the CAR are part of long-standing dynamics integral to the region's political and economic landscape (Lefort-Rieu and Minfegue, 2021). These include recurrent movements of Gbaya populations (Ngoh, 1996) and seasonal transhumance of Mbororo herders (Romier, 1999). Such mobility is often intertwined with family and marital ties, similar to those observed among Mauritania's Haalpulaaren refugees in Senegal. Fresia (2009) highlighted how such contexts allow individuals to navigate between 'local citizenship', which relies on familial networks for support, protection, and hospitality, and 'formal citizenship', which, based on national belonging, associates new arrivals with foreign persons eligible for refugee status and the assistance provided by international organisations (Fresia, 2009, p. 19; my translation).

Another significant factor influencing the rejection of refugee status among Mbororo populations from the CAR is the ownership of cattle. Cattle ownership not only complicates proximity to aid distribution points due to the need for grazing land, but it also highlights how the assistance provided to refugees is rarely suited to pastoralist lifestyles. Refugee aid is primarily designed for sedentary individuals and heavily promotes non-pastoral agriculture.

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[5] Interview, 13/10/2023.

Throughout the various livelihood aid projects I observed during my two years in Cameroon, none included support for large ruminant livestock; all focused on subsistence or market farming, poultry farming, or, in some cases, the distribution of goats. This approach can be explained by efforts to mitigate the escalating conflict between agricultural and pastoral activities (Lefort-Rieu, 2022), and to avoid exacerbating the risk of crop devastation due to growing cattle herds. Additionally, it reflects alignment with the state's aim to modernise livestock farming through sedentarisation and intensification[6] - practices that starkly contrast with those of Mbororo transhumant herders.

These limitations within the international displaced persons aid regime help explain why, for transhumant pastoralist populations, forced mobility is not necessarily synonymous with refugee registration. As Boutrais (1999) noted, herders are frequently marginalised in refugee inventories and other administrative frameworks. Often living in remote, bushland areas, they tend to be insufficiently considered in rural development, land planning policies, public investment, or aid interventions[7]. Accustomed to these dynamics, herders generally expect little from external assistance, a mindset that aligns with their preference for autonomy. Even in the face of economic hardship, they leverage their pastoral skills to sustain themselves, for instance, by working as salaried shepherds with the goal of rebuilding their herds.

These dynamics were confirmed during my ethnographic fieldwork in Eastern Cameroon. However, the massive and concentrated arrival of Central African populations in 2014[8] also gave rise to hybrid strategies. Among families who managed to cross the border with their cattle, some heads of households explained that they left their cattle 'in the bush with the boys' (referring to eldest children or hired shepherds) while they, along with their wives and younger children, joined formal or informal refugee sites to register as refugees. The primary motivations included accessing international aid 'to help with expenses', 'because the family is very large and the amount of cattle is not enough [to meet needs],' or to 'make ends meet and send the children to school'[9]. In the Adamawa region, these strategies of family division often involved polygamous households: one wife and her children would join the UNHCR refugee site at Borgop, while the other wife and her children settled in the village of Ngaoui to engage in 'small business' activities, with the older boys remaining 'in the bush with the cattle, perhaps ten kilometres [from the town], at the border [with the CAR]'[10]. While these strategies should not be overstated, as they primarily concern wealthier individuals, they nevertheless illustrate how refugee registration – or non-registration – is aligned with various pastoral strategies, including the 'role of borders as refuges' for herding populations and their cattle (Boutrais, 1999a, p. 186; my translation).

Finally, social class affiliation plays a key role in the rejection of refugee status among some Mbororo individuals (Peretz, 1977). While these dynamics have been studied in contexts such

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[6] See e.g. the Livestock Development Programme (PRODEL) funded by the World Bank: https://www.prodel.cm/

[7] See the consequences, in terms of land grabbing and disruption of transhumance routes, of the Lom-Pangar dam (Seignobos, 2011) or PRODEL and the creation of private ranches in the Adamawa region (Lefort-Rieu, 2022).

[8] At the peak of the influx, the UNHCR counted 3,000 to 5,000 new refugee arrivals per week: https://www.unhcr.org/fr/news/stories/2014/12/5485766fc/850-000-personnes-deplacees-republique-centrafricaine-instable.html

[9] Informal discussions with cattle herders in Timangolo and Gbiti (Eastern region), March and April 2018.

[10] Informal discussions with cattle breeders at the Borgop refugee site (Adamawa region), March 2021.

as Syria (Chang, 2022; Ouellet, 2018; Turner, 2015) and Tanzania (Boeyink and Falisse, 2022), they remain underexplored in Cameroon. As a local INGO employee noted:

> Among the refugees, there are also Mbororo who initially refused to register because they were well-off, had cattle, and were involved in business, etc. For them, registering was synonymous with vulnerability … Overall, it must be recognised that those who refused to join the formal [refugee] sites were the ones with means: they were in business, had large families, had cattle... and they considered that being under the responsibility of UNHCR was... synonymous with vulnerability.[11]

Far from UNHCR's assumption that refugee status benefits all, such resistance reflects alternative understandings of honour and vulnerability. The category of 'refugee,' encapsulated by the notion of vulnerability – central to the humanitarian field in Cameroon (Glasman, 2019b) – often contradicts values associated with social status in Mbororo society. During various discussions, participants emphasised honour and the 'fear of bringing shame'[12], encapsulated in the concept of *pulaaku*, a social and moral code centred on resignation, intelligence, courage, and restraint (Dupire, 1970, p. 189). Practices such as standing in line for food distributions were perceived as dishonourable, as observed in the formal site of Gado-Badzere (Mahamat, 2021, p. 12).

While the previous section explored the reasons some Mbororo initially reject refugee status, it is important to note that this position is not always fixed. The fluidity of refugee status in Cameroon, coupled with the administrative ambiguities surrounding registration, allows some individuals to shift their stance over time. As illustrated in the next section, the ambiguity inherent in the registration process enables Mbororo populations to navigate between identities, adapting their status according to both their immediate needs – such as access to humanitarian aid – and their longer-term goals, such as securing legal documentation or access to better opportunities.

From 'Mbororo' to 'refugee'

While some individuals refuse to register as refugees with UNHCR, these positions are not fixed and can evolve over time, influenced by contextual changes. Far from operating in isolation, international aid practices are closely scrutinised, discussed, and even contested by the inhabitants of the areas where they are implemented. Consequently, some individuals who initially declined to register with the UN agency may later reverse their decision. This shift can be explained by the tangible and immediate benefits that refugee status confers – such as food distributions, non-food items, or scholarships for children and adolescents – as well as by the longer-term prospects it may offer. During initial registration campaigns, UNHCR staff often emphasised that obtaining refugee status could eventually lead to resettlement in a third country. In the context of Eastern Cameroon, where public services are weak, and poverty levels are high[13], access to these resources becomes a coveted asset not only for Central African

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[11] Interview, 13/10/2023.

[12] Informal discussions with CAR refugee women in Béthanie, near Kette (April 2018).

[13] Poverty rate (30%) is higher than the national average (23%), especially in rural areas (INS, 2020).

populations but also for Cameroonians – individuals who do not, in principle, meet the eligibility criteria established by aid structures (Glasman, 2019a, p. 195). A former local INGO employee highlights the importance of rumours on these registration processes:

> Whether it's among the Mboro, the non-Muslims, or others... When there's an advantage, Cameroonians come! (laughs) So, you'll even find Cameroonians who have taken advantage of this to get registered. You'll see a Cameroonian with a refugee card; when there are distributions, or scholarships, or anything else, they present... that document.[14]

This highlights the importance of understanding the refugee aid system not only in practical terms but also as a temporal process. Here, despite the negative representations attached to the figure of the refugee, some individuals ultimately seek to acquire this status – or, more precisely, the accompanying document (the 'refugee card' issued by UNHCR) – because of the advantages it provides. The issue is not so much about embracing or rejecting a specific identity but rather about securing access to critical services. Refugee status, in this sense, becomes an additional resource, offering guaranteed access to forms of assistance delivered by external actors. Unsurprisingly, mechanisms for assisting displaced populations are not immune to circumvention strategies devised by those living in areas targeted by international interventions. As has been noted in other contexts, the efforts to obtain this status can be understood as a form of 'legitimate trickery' (Olivier de Sardan, 2011, p. 424; my translation), echoing the concept of *mētis* explored by Detienne and Vernant (1974) in ancient Greece, and later theorised by James Scott (1985, 1990) as one of the 'weapons of the weak'.

Such strategies are made possible by ambiguities within the registration procedures and dominant representations in the international aid sector. Specifically, there is often a conflation between 'Central African' and 'Mboro' identities – that is, between nationality and perceived ethnic belonging. This dynamic is described by a Cameroonian Mboro involved in registration processes in the Eastern regions for over fifteen years:

> In every village where refugees and Cameroonians live, they collaborate with each other. [...] there's a lot of business behind the registration strategy. [...] For example, with the Mboro […]: we don't know who among them is Cameroonian or Central African, but they go to the CAR, they come back, and when UNHCR conducts registrations, they are all included without distinguishing between the 'real' Central Africans. Some people aren't Central Africans: they've been in the village for a long time, but because they're Mboro, they went to the CAR and came back, and it can happen that they get registered – even though they are Cameroonian. Or they take advantage because they want food aid. [...] The village chief or the community knows very well that such-and-such families are Cameroonian, just returning. In some villages, refugees even give part of their food aid to the village chief. [...] As aid workers, we finish work at 4 p.m.; we

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[14] Interview, 13/10/2023.

leave. But when the 'gendarmes' are not around, they arrange among themselves to give 10% of what they receive to certain leaders, and that information stays hidden. [15]

These examples reveal that strategies surrounding the refugee category are not only employed by individuals seeking to obtain this status but also by those classified as 'host populations'. One can extend analyses of refugee aid operations as a 'theatrical performance' (Omata, 2022), which interpret the challenges faced by these interventions as a refusal by beneficiaries to conform to the predefined scripts of international organisations. The registration examples presented here, however, suggest that the dynamic can also be reversed: both refugees and host populations collaborate to follow the pre-established 'script' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014; Rivetti, 2013), extracting mutual benefits once the curtain falls. The refugee registration process in Cameroon is also a performative arena, where identities are enacted strategically to fit institutional categories while preserving personal or communal autonomy (Dempsey, 2022; Häkli *et al.*, 2017). Mbororo individuals do not simply 'play the refugee role' passively; they actively exploit the ambiguity of aid labelling to negotiate benefits and recognition, underscoring the political agency embedded in what might otherwise seem bureaucratic or mundane practices.

Sometimes, performing the refugee label is orchestrated by the aid structures themselves. These organisations often have an interest in rendering the refugee category flexible, particularly when under pressure or facing dissatisfaction from Cameroonian authorities. Reflecting on his decade of work with UNHCR and an INGO overseeing registration procedures, the same Cameroonian Mbororo noted:

> The UNHCR and the NGOs […] think: 'We need to make sure that, in the future, we won't be accused by the Cameroonian authorities of not registering refugees or letting them wander around.' So, they respond to requests from the governor or other authorities by launching a registration programme. But rest assured, when these programmes are triggered by a request from the authorities, UNHCR might arrive in the village with a budget for 100 slots but only register 30 or 40 people. They explain that they conducted surveys, did the screening, etc., but they weren't convinced by the estimate of 100 people eligible for refugee status. Because registering new refugees is a financial burden, so if it's not in their roadmap, they adapt it to suit themselves. [...] On the other hand, near the end of the year, if UNHCR is at 80,000 refugees registered and needs 100,000 to renew its budget or reach a donor threshold, they'll launch a new registration programme. They'll work past 4 p.m., turn on the lights, and be less strict with screening criteria – because they need the numbers. [16]

Errors in identifying formally recognised refugees or overestimations in the numbers granted this status are neither isolated incidents nor unique to Cameroon (Hyndman, 2000, pp. 117–119; Kibreab, 2004; Oka, 2014). Such inconsistencies do not merely reflect bureaucratic dysfunctions; they create spaces for displaced populations to strategically engage with the system, at times reinforcing, bypassing, or resisting the definitions imposed on them. These

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[15] Interview, Timangolo, 26/04/2018.
[16] Interview, Timangolo, 26/04/2018.

excerpts show that the refugee category is not only imposed but also negotiated: the strategies employed by displaced populations both respond to and take advantage of the discretionary mechanisms within UNHCR's governance framework. Together, these dynamics contribute to the co-production of a refugee category whose boundaries and criteria are far more fluid than the rigid definitions suggested by international law.

While the previous section demonstrated how the Mbororo engage with the refugee label strategically, depending on their needs and circumstances, the next step in this process involves a deeper examination of the fluidity and temporal aspects of refugee status. In the context of cross-border mobility, some Mbororo individuals do not view themselves as fixed refugees but as transitional figures whose status may evolve over time. The next section will explore how the refugee label functions not just as a permanent identity but as a temporary resource. The fluidity of this status is further demonstrated through the Mbororo's ability to transition from one form of identification to another – sometimes leveraging the refugee status as an interim measure while pursuing more permanent forms of legitimate identity, such as Cameroonian nationality.

Transitioning through refugee status

In addition to the interplay between local and international representations of refugee status, individuals possess the capacity to claim and relinquish identities, whether these are imposed upon them or actively sought. Representatives from the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA) for the Eastern region highlighted this dynamic during an interview:

> Before the war in the Central African Republic, there were certain Mbororo Cameroonians who lived here but would go to the Central African Republic and return during the rainy season. ... There were also Cameroonians ... who left this area and stayed in the Central African Republic for perhaps twenty, thirty, or twenty-five years. ... When the problems [violence] arose, they returned. ... [But] they are no longer Cameroonians! *(laughs)* Because they didn't have papers, birth certificates; there is no proof that they hold Cameroonian nationality. ... [So] many enrolled among the refugees ... to obtain documents. ... That's why, sometimes, you'll see fluctuating data on refugees, especially near the border: ... there are many Cameroonians who, at one point, disappear from the refugee list once they have managed ... to obtain Cameroonian identity cards. … But as long as you don't have papers, ... the interim solution is this. ... Many did it. You see, people who had been gone for twenty, thirty years ... it was difficult to convince others they were Cameroonians. Only the families knew. ... There's a document issued by the sub-prefecture; it's hard to prove someone is Cameroonian because even there, the services don't recognise them. So ... Cameroonian identity cards were sold for very high sums: 200,000, 300,000 [CFA]! ... At one point, we even stopped issuing identity cards because so many people were taking advantage of it ... [And even Central Africans] obtain Cameroonian nationality ... Someone with 100,000 [CFA] can get a birth certificate and [then] an identity card. They become Cameroonian. When they

are arrested, they are found with the Cameroonian identity card! At that point, nothing proves they are Central African.[17]

As in other contexts, in Cameroon, family ties and corruption at the local administrative level allow refugees to transcend or circumvent the prohibitions and regulations imposed on them. 'If these practices are illegal from the perspective of national and international law, they are legitimate and normal from the perspective of customary laws and local history' (Fresia, 2008, p. 297).

However, the above account also highlights another strategic use of refugee status in a context of intense cross-border mobility and administrative fragility, including failures to establish civil registration (Mbowou, 2019). In such circumstances, the refugee category becomes a temporary resource, an administrative stopgap, or even a form of refuge. Individuals adopt refugee status as an interim measure, using it until they can secure a more permanent solution – namely, another form of documentation such as the Cameroonian identity card. This ability to shift between statuses also explains the fluctuating nature of refugee population figures in Cameroon. If some refugees 'disappear' from official statistics, this is not always due to their return to the CAR or migration elsewhere. Instead, many have transitioned to another, more advantageous status, deemed to provide greater benefits and security than what UNHCR offers.

The previous sections have demonstrated that the refugee label is not simply a passive classification imposed by external actors but a negotiated category actively shaped by those it aims to define. For the Mbororo, refugee status functions as a strategic tool, reinterpreted and mobilised in ways that challenge the notion of refugees as passive victims. This dynamic process underscores the politicisation of asylum governance from below. The final part of this article reflects on how these findings contribute to broader discussions on refugee agency, the fluidity of legal categories, and the co-production of asylum policies. By foregrounding the lived experiences of refugees, this study adds a crucial layer to our understanding of the performative and material dimensions of the refugee label and its implications for migration management.

Discussion

This article has demonstrated that the refugee label, far from being a static bureaucratic category, is a dynamic and contested identity shaped through a process of co-production involving displaced populations, aid actors, and state institutions. By focusing on the lived experiences and practices of Mbororo populations in Eastern Cameroon, it offers a nuanced understanding of how the refugee label is negotiated, appropriated, and resisted by those it seeks to define to address their specific socio-economic and political realities. These findings extend the labelling thesis by foregrounding the active role played by displaced populations in shaping the frameworks that govern their mobility and status, and by providing critical insights into the fluidity and co-production of asylum governance.

A key contribution of this study lies in its ethnographic focus on the Mbororo – a pastoralist community often marginalised in both academic and policy discourses. Unlike prior studies that

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[17] Interview conducted with Calvin Minfegue, Batouri, 27/03/2021.

predominantly examine refugee experiences in urban or camp-based contexts, this article highlights how transhumant pastoralists interact with the refugee label in ways that reflect their socio-economic practices and cultural values. By demonstrating how the label intersects with pastoralist livelihoods, such as cattle herding and transborder mobility, this study expands the scope of refugee research to address populations that challenge sedentary assumptions embedded in aid systems.

Moreover, the analysis sheds light on the bottom-up politicisation of asylum governance. It moves beyond critiques of top-down labelling to illustrate how displaced populations and host communities leverage the ambiguities within bureaucratic systems to influence both their own positions and the structures that govern them. This study further demonstrates that these institutional inconsistencies do not simply reflect bureaucratic dysfunctions but create opportunities for displaced populations to strategically engage with, bypass, or resist the definitions imposed on them. By engaging strategically with refugee registration processes, the Mbororo do not merely conform to institutional frameworks but actively influence and reshape them. This dynamic process complicates static understandings of the refugee label, revealing it as a site of negotiation where agency and power are continually contested. Furthermore, it offers a nuanced understanding of governance as a relational and negotiated practice rather than a top-down process, highlighting the agency of local and displaced populations in co-creating the systems that seek to regulate their lives.

Another critical insight lies in the intersection of social class and refugee identity, revealing how socio-economic status intersects with perceptions of refugeehood. By examining why wealthier Mbororo individuals may reject the refugee label due to its association with vulnerability and dependency, this article complicates prevailing narratives that refugee status is universally perceived as protective or advantageous. Instead, it shows how the slabel operates as both a constraint and a resource, depending on how it is interpreted and mobilised by different actors.

Finally, this study offers a significant empirical contribution on the transitional and strategic dimensions of the refugee status, documenting how ambiguities within the registration process create opportunities for local and displaced populations to manoeuvre between identities. Unlike studies that predominantly view the refugee label as static or solely imposed, this analysis underscore the fluidity of this status. Bridging macro-level critiques of labelling with ground-level perspectives, it highlights how the Mbororo populations engage with the refugee label as a temporary and flexible tool which can be can be adopted, adapted, or abandoned depending on its utility within evolving local and national socio-political landscapes. This study study aligns with the notion of refugee political subjectivity, understood as emerging from the interplay between institutional expectations and refugees' strategic enactments of identity (Kallio *et al.*, 2019). Extending Dempsey's (2022) argument about performativity in asylum processes, this study illustrates that refugee performances do not merely respond to institutional expectations but actively transform the frameworks governing forced displacement. By strategically conforming to, resisting, or subverting refugee categories, Mbororo populations highlight the profound agency embedded within these everyday acts. Such practices underscore the fluid and co-produced nature of refugee governance, shaped not only by external definitions but by the lived realities and tactical choices of displaced persons themselves.

To conclude, by linking these distinct findings to broader theoretical critiques, this article advances our understanding of the refugee label as both performative and material, shaped by the interplay of institutional practices and the agency of local populations and forced migrants. It moves beyond abstract critiques to provide grounded empirical evidence of how labelling functions as a site of negotiation and transformation. In doing so, the analysis challenges static conceptions of refugee identity and offers a compelling case for understanding asylum governance as a co-produced and politicised process. Moreover, by foregrounding the agency of displaced and host populations, this study contributes to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of forced migration, highlighting the need to re-evaluate the categories and frameworks that shape both academic inquiry and aid practice. As asylum governance continues to evolve, this research underscores the importance of centring the voices and practices of those most affected by its policies, ensuring that their lived realities inform and reshape the structures intended to assist them.

Declaration of interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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