

Review

Ben Rawlence (2016) *City of Thorns: nine lives in the world's largest refugee camp*.
New York: Picador.

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If I were to be writing my book on African cities now, I would certainly be tempted to use the material in this volume for another major example. This is an attempt at an overview of the Kenyan 'city' of Dadaab between 2010 and 2015. For much of this time, Dadaab, unknown to most outsiders, was the second biggest concentration of population in Kenya. Some half a million people were found here at peak, the end of 2011. It is certainly debatable whether or not it can be called a city but it certainly belongs to a study of contemporary urbanisation. The globe has more than a few smaller versions of Dadaab too.

Its location has no economic rationale at all although economic activity in Dadaab steadily rises in importance. Its only significance is its close proximity 70 miles to the Somali border. Once the Americans decided that the Islamic Courts Union movement which seemed to be about to unify Somalia, could not be trusted and began, generally using surrogates, notably Kenya and Ethiopia, to intervene, the die was cast. Somalia erupted in a massive new bout of divisive warfare and Somalis fled across the border to Kenya, where a fairly impoverished and marginal ethnic Somali community formed the majority of the population in neighbouring countryside. This part of Kenya is just short of qualifying to be a desert and water can only be found underground. Thorns grow here plentifully and hyenas are relatively common. The city of thorns emerged here precisely because it is far away from Nairobi and the green fields of central Kenya. Kenyan authorities, enlisted in America's war to stamp out militant Islam, insisted on this giant camp remaining temporary and as distant as could be.

Somalis must earn less than any employed Kenyan. For the Kenyan government, the worst thing would be to allow large numbers of foreign Somali to settle permanently in the country. In this study, we also see the arbitrary, shifting governance of Western NGOs who make this kind of place operative. Health, education, food transfers, depend on them, although not always in simple ways. Their relationship to the Somalis is carefully traced and the author is very aware of the scale and sensibility of a generation of young Westerners who have made this kind of work their lives, of how they think and party and talk.

In one sense, Dadaab lacks entirely the accoutrements of a city. The Kenyans make it their business that it remains an immensely overcrowded, flimsy built environment of tents and temporary shelter. However, Ben Rawlence discovers for us complex social layers, cash transactions, relative wealth and poverty. Massive amounts of trade, licit and illicit, take place. More Somali in Dadaab are women than men and there are a great many children. The luckiest get out and somehow are selected to settle in a Western country. Others have grown up and lived here for two decades. There are social pecking orders and a mosque built by Turks called Istanbul.

Dadaab's story is given the human touch by following the lives of Somali individuals who find refuge there from the violent conflict in their home country. Initially many have nothing and also have to meet drought and famine in the face. Miserable as conditions are, you cannot escape a feeling of admiration for the resilience of Dadaab residents, how hard some of them work for very small amounts of money, and their efforts to make a life for themselves in this very difficult environment. Muna, brought to the camp long ago as a baby, and Monday, one of a small number of South Sudanese in the camp, form a couple in Dadaab. Monday is not a Muslim. How others react to this romance, which becomes harder to sustain with time, reminds you that refugees too have their prejudices and fixed ideas. Luckily they are eventually able to make a new home in Australia. How you get some education, how you get food, how you make a telephone call, all this is noted by Rawlence. There are various little businesses and a few manage to become affluent, buying their way into comfortable homes in Nairobi. 'Social mobility is possible, even in Dadaab' (299). Marriages are made; children are born and grow up.

As the book reaches an end, the population of Dadaab decreases. Many return to Somalia. This is not because life there has become quite safe

although the evidence is strong that the West will not allow an Islamic 'terrorist' group to have its way. Many Somali have gotten used to bombs and guns as the new normal. There are Islamic Courts supporters, generally hidden, within Dadaab; Dadaab is not free of 'terrorism'. Rawlence describes for us the horrific massacres by Somali militants in the Westgate Mall, Nairobi; here too in the metropolis of East Africa, safety is breached. Things get confused: there are Muslim guerrillas in the refugee camp and Somalis braving violence on the streets of Mogadishu having returned back home. Especially under drought conditions, Kenyan-born ethnic Somali have come to Dadaab furtively in appreciable numbers as an improvement to their normal lives outside. Dadaab is unlikely ever to disappear entirely despite the often-expressed intentions in speeches by Kenyan authorities. This book is an exercise in urbanisation; few refugees will ever return to the African bush. At the same time, it is a companion volume to the stories of those crossing the Mediterranean every summer escaping African poverty. The reader feels sorry indeed for the victims of violence and those who inhabit the tents in Dadaab but, as one young Somali woman says, 'refugee life has opened up new worlds to us' (208).

Englishman Ben Rawlence of Human Rights Watch makes the story come alive without giving the reader any upbeat or easy comfort. I have heard him speak at an academic conference and was impressed with his paper and presentation on a previous subject in another country which is why I selected this book to buy. He belongs to the growing numbers of writers on Africa, sometimes influential, who straddle the line between the NGO world, academics and consultancy.