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in the aftermath of large-scale displacement

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**ON CATEGORIZING.  
DOING AND UNDOING ‘REFUGEES’  
IN THE AFTERMATH OF LARGE-SCALE DISPLACEMENT**

Andrea Behrends (*Free University Berlin*)

**Abstract**

After more than a decade of intervention the UN Refugee Agency is preparing its exit from the Chad-Sudan borderlands. Currently, about 200.000 people live in twelve camps remaining on the Chadian side of the border as they do not feel it safe enough to return to their Sudanese home villages and towns. This paper takes the ‘integration’ measures adopted by this organization, in concert with the Chadian state, as a starting point to study the relations of people inside and outside the camp. Based on recent studies that focus on the “contingency of social belonging” (Hirschauer 2014), the author highlights the interplay of knowledge and practice to ‘un/do’ differences in the interrelated use and translation of human categorizations as processes that influence lives in uncertain circumstances. Two examples of undoing the category of ‘refugee’ are in the foreground: attempts to mix the refugee camp dwellers with the surrounding villagers, and a process of biometric registration to change the camp dwellers’ status from ‘refugees’ to ‘refugee citizens.’ Although both procedures follow stringent rules, they likewise represent the contingency of everyday practice, on the part of both institutions and their addressees.

As I returned to the Chad-Sudan borderlands in 2016 near the end of an extended research project<sup>1</sup>, I witnessed combined attempts by the Chadian state and UN organizations to recreate a sense of normality after years of violent wars and displacement. This normalization took the form of various measures to integrate into the surrounding villages and towns about 200.000 refugee camp dwellers who did not consider the situation in Sudan safe enough to return, even thirteen years after fleeing their homes as part of large-scale displacement during the Darfur War.

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In the local Arabic dialect, the people of the borderlands referred to this conflict as *harb* (war) or *machákil* (problem). The turning point that had escalated events and created the greatest uncertainties in the border region had been a rebel attack in Sudanese Darfur in 2003. When the rebels demanded to be included in the national power- and wealth-sharing negotiations that were then taking place in Khartoum<sup>2</sup> the Sudanese government retaliated brutally, unleashing local militias to fight against them and attack civilians. Shortly after, hundreds of thousands of people took refuge in Chad. Some remained in villages along the border, but the majority subsequently moved into one of twelve refugee camps that UNHCR provided next to previously existing villages. Today, these form small cities, each holding from 20.000 to 40.000 people. According to local estimates the conflict continues on the Sudanese side of the border this war, but the situation in Chad has stabilized. After the largest presence of aid agencies in the history of the Chadian borderlands, all but the largest international agencies left after 2010, with only the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Program, and the International Childrens' Emergency Fund (UNICEF) remaining. These continue to manage the twelve refugee camps by subcontracting the services to a (now greatly reduced) number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). My research covers a longer period extending before, during and after the Darfur War, from the perspective of the Chadian side of the border, but this paper focuses on the phase from 2014 until 2017, when the UNHCR started to plan its exit.

The focus of this paper will be on how the practice of categorizing and of “un/doing difference” (Hirschauer 2014, 2017), manifests in the agencies' concerted efforts to do away with the category of ‘refugee’ after having reinforced it for over a decade. This enables us to understand the moments, sometimes elusive and often overlooked, at which certain institutionalized differences become less important, and where new relationalities come into being. To find these moments, I take the *significance and flexibility of human categories* as my starting point. How do people pragmatically redefine categories? And how can anthropologists apprehend and theorize these moments of doing and undoing difference? Hirschauer suggests looking for moments in which guiding distinctions are backgrounded,

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<sup>2</sup> In 2005 the Government of Sudan and the Southern Sudanese Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This agreement had been internationally orchestrated and included arrangements for a transitional government in which the north and south would share wealth and power. It also included the option for South Sudan to vote for or against secession; it exercised this in 2011, leading to the separation of the two countries. Disappointingly for other marginalized regions, the power- and wealth-sharing only included the south of the country. The national power-sharing agreement therefore had various disrupting implications in Darfur (Hadi 2014).

first by looking at how categories relate to and reinforce each other in order to find out which of the many possible categories people use in a given setting; and, second, by looking at these categories' temporality, at what moments certain categories are updated? In other words, when during encounters are differences backgrounded or foregrounded?

This approach goes beyond looking at refugee camps in isolation, enabling us to see the dynamics of camps, aid and other institutions from a wider angle that takes in those who live both within and outside of the camps. When researching refugees, the guiding distinction seems to be how people experience to be categorized. Research about the effectiveness of the refugee category and the subjectivities that result from it has a long tradition in social research. It has often been noted that categories actively shift and shape subjectivities (Bowker and Star 1999, Breckenridge 2014, Desrosières 1998, Hacking 1995, 1999, Lakoff 1987, Li 2007, Rottenburg et al. 2015, Star 1999, Veters 2014). In the process of categorizing and registering people, ascribed identities wittingly or unwittingly create "political subjectivities" (Krause and Schramm 2011) that restrict individuals' and groups' action in relation to how people become visible to authorities (see also M'charek et al. 2013). Categorizing can have the effect of changing a sense of belonging, limiting the range of possible actions and access to services, or for that matter the experience of reality. But it also opens up new senses of self and makes room for creative adaptations, particularly in situations of displacement (Hammar 2014).

Feldman (2012) addresses "the challenge of categories" in relation to changing identifications and categories of 'Palestine Refugees' in the interaction between a UN aid regime – in this case, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the experiences of Palestinians who had been deprived of their homes after the 1948 founding of the State of Israel. The key term of Feldman's work is *definition*, which, she says, delineates the process by which the so-called "Palestine Refugees" actively adapt the terms of assistance to their needs and worries.

While Feldman focuses on the contention related to these processes, Zetter (1991, 2007) studies re-housing programs in Cyprus's refugee crisis, pointing to the fact that people labeled as refugees do not take part in labeling – or defining – processes. He therefore gives particular attention to their vulnerability to the category's implications and the "dynamic identity processes" that result from it. According to him, labeling someone a refugee gives rise to a "process of stereotyping which involves disaggregation, standardization, and the formulation of clear cut categories", leading to "delinkage" and replacing "an individual

identity ... by a stereotyped identity” (1991: 44). Similarly, Tallio (2004) uses policy-driven categories to signal clear-cut boundaries in refugee policies and compare them with the current situation of those formerly labeled ‘refugees,’ as they “glide into” the category of ‘returnees’.<sup>3</sup> Both Zetter and Tallio highlight the methods and consequences of structuring access to governmental protection or aid procedures connected to the internationally-accepted status of ‘refugees.’ These methods reflect the limitations of categorizations to include more subtle nuances of the ascribed statuses.

In the following analysis, I will use the example of the Chad-Sudan borderlands to look at approaches that, like Feldman’s (2012) and Vetter’s (2017) studies, incorporate contingency to allow diverse interpretations of the categorization of ‘refugees’ outside its institutional frame. I will include the actors’ long-term perspectives and their multi-directional pathways of multiple membership. By basing linking my findings to these studies, I also suggest adopting a more interactive and process-oriented perspective on the process of tinkering with the category of ‘refugee’.

### **The refugee category in Chad – introducing Brahim and methodology**

When the UNHCR opened up the refugee camps, the category of ‘refugee’ gained great currency, temporarily changing the complex ways in which people expressed their membership in groups. It was reinforced by the arrival of humanitarian aid and the establishment of the camps, but was intended to become insignificant again once aid started to be phased out. Most certainly, it interrelates with other ways of categorizing, as the lines of relating and differentiating in the borderlands are manifold. People’s occupations may differ: most are farmers or herders, but some are traders or work migrants. Most speak a local Arabic dialect, but they also speak other languages according to their ethnic affiliations. Difference can manifest according to education level, land ownership or access to state authorities; or according to denomination of Islam like Sufism or Wahhabism (Seesemann 2005). These categorizations interrelate. But they are foregrounded and backgrounded in different interactive situations.

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<sup>3</sup> Tallio describes, for instance, the worries of Angolans living in camps in the DRC about the red plastic armbands that indicated that they would soon be leaving the camp. While this technical procedure was supposed to make the situation more orderly for the camp’s organizers, it had the disturbing side effect of sparking other camp dwellers’ desires to appropriate the belongings of those leaving the camp.

The situation relevant for this paper relates to the agencies' aim of exiting the aid situation in Eastern Chad, which had invited unprecedented levels of military, humanitarian and development interventions, overseen by both the Chadian state and international organizations operating in this area. 'Undoing' the refugee status of people who had spent thirteen years in the camps marked a poignant moment in a long trajectory that had first involved the creation of 'refugees'. It also meant that the category underwent a number of transformations. While the aid agency had long worked at establishing the regulations needed to maintain the refugee category on a legal and practical basis, those so categorized had simultaneously adopted, adapted, reformulated or abandoned it over the years. Interestingly, toward the end of their operation, the aid agency invoked these appropriations to justify cutting their budget and 'integrating' the camp dwellers into the Chadian territory, as 'return' to Sudan was still not considered a 'safe' option. The interrelation of these processes is at the heart of this paper.

I was therefore excited to hear my long-term assistant and research partner Brahim's explanation of the UNHCR-led integration process. He had been a subcontracted aid worker for the UNHCR, and I draw here on his experiences, both in relation to his formal work with the aid agencies and to his informal position as a middle-man and a translator between the local villagers and the refugee camp dwellers. From 2014 to 2016 he had participated in two of the refugee agency's main related approaches to undo the refugee category: first by 'grouping' the people inside and outside the camps as an 'integration' measure and, second, in a large-scale biometricisation process to facilitate providing 'refugees' with a new category, 'refugee citizens in Chad.'

Brahim's involvement into both processes will be my guiding material for this analysis. Since 2000, my research has repeatedly taken me to Chad. In several journeys I followed up on the lives and the techniques for coping with uncertainty and war used by some of the region's inhabitants, inside and outside refugee camps. This also included conversations with and about local power holders, aid workers, military, rebels, and government employees on various levels, both men and women. In this paper, Brahim, along with some UNHCR employees and their documents, will be the foremost source of information.

### Preparing the ‘undoing’ of the refugee category I: ‘Grouping’ refugees and hosts

By 2016, the large camps in the borderlands to Sudan could no longer be maintained. Due to new refugee situations emerging throughout the wider region – war and turbulence in the Central African Republic, South Sudan and the Congo – and reduced funds and staff, the UN Refugee Agency and its affiliated organizations were preparing to leave the site. In order to be able to shut down the camps, they offered the remaining ‘refugees’ support in finding paths to ‘self-sufficiency’. Brahim travelled from the borderlands to see me when I visited N’Djamena in 2016. When I asked him about the current situation of the UNHCR camps, he first explained to me that populations were to be categorized along a new cast of terms. From now on ‘refugees’ would have to be ‘grouped’ (*regroupés*) along with the ‘host population’. Unable to return to Sudan as long as the current governmental regime was still in place, the Sudanese camp dwellers were now officially expected to do what many had long since done on their own: at least partly settle in villages alongside the region’s Chadian inhabitants.

Brahim explained that the grouping process was “a bit complicated. To integrate the refugees into the villages, we form cooperatives. But first we have to group them. We categorize the people into the very poor, the poor, the average and the rich.” The complexity of the process lay, as I understood it, in combining the refugees assigned to each category with people of the same categories in the villages surrounding the refugee camps. This implied abolishing a vital category, that of ‘refugee’, that had helped many of them to survive the past (many would say the ongoing) crisis. The second process – biometric registration and issuing a new passport, the *carte d’identité de réfugié au Tchad* – mainly fascinated him because of its large-scale logistics, which he and his team were setting up and supervising, and which he described to me in detail.

The aim of the UNHCR’s recent integration program, ‘Seeds for solutions’ (UNHCR 2015), was to provide the camp dwellers with the material basis to become self-sufficient: seeds, hoes, and knives for aspiring farmers and microcredits for aspiring traders. For a number of years, Brahim has worked for this program, which is under the aegis of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), an NGO partner of the UNHCR active in four of the borderland’s camps since 2007.

I here return to Brahim’s explanation of ‘grouping’ people according to their socio-economic status of being “very poor, poor, average or rich,” which made me wonder what basis he used to determine which category a person belonged to. He translated his cultural

knowledge of the region to the situation thus: “We talk to the people and we observe. The ‘very poor’ don’t even have a mat to sit on. They eat only once a day, sometimes they have not prepared a meal for three days. They are often elderly or have disabilities. The ones in the ‘average’ category are neither rich nor poor, they are in the middle. So we group the ‘very poor’, the ‘poor’ and the ‘average’, we leave the ‘rich’ alone. We want each group to be in the next category in the following year.” He adds: “If you put them all together, they will each stand apart from the others. You can easily detect them, with their clothes. The rich will chat, talk in loud voices, you can easily see this category. They do not mix, even before we categorize them” (conversation with Brahim, 24.3.2016, N’Djamena).

This brief statement addresses different positions that allow a nuanced reading and interpretation of the situation of the camp dwellers. As a translator and mediator between different collective actors, Brahim is in the classical position variously denoted as *courtiers en développement* (Bierschenk 2000), “development brokers” (Lewis and Mosse 2006), or as “mapping the middle” between international policy intentions and their localized implementations (Merry 2006). Brahim grew up in the borderlands, but in contrast to many others, his family has not been negatively affected by the war. A hundred years ago, his family members worked as advisors, translators, service personnel, traders, and bureaucrats in the colonial service, a role not dissimilar to Brahim’s work for international agencies today. Even today, they lead privileged lives, attending better schools and finding better-paid jobs than the villagers in the surrounding villages. His family owns property in the center of Adré, they live in well-constructed houses, as compared to the wooden huts in the surrounding villages, and many work either for international organizations, in the governmental administration or at internationally managed clinics and development agencies. Brahim’s perspective on the people who have been much more negatively affected by the war is thus that of a very well-integrated and informed outsider.

In implementing UNHCR’s new strategy, Brahim employs the categories of ‘refugees’ and ‘autochthonous people’ as institutionalized and defined by the agency that employs him. This categorization of camp dwellers and people living outside the camp correspond to a version of reality propagated by the international organization managing the camp. Rottenburg’s (2002, 2009) take on metacodes and differing versions of reality that he refers to as cultural codes can inform this analysis. He shows that in order to stabilize an operation in a setting that brings together very different versions of ‘reality’, a set of arrangements that surpasses these different versions of reality has to be negotiated and agreed upon. This



*metacode* bridges a number of what Rottenburg calls *cultural codes*, representing the respective backgrounds of those interacting. His example is that of a development project to regularize access to clean water.

With regard to the categorization promulgated by the refugee agency, Brahim uses the organization's formalized metacode to categorize the people from 'very poor' to 'rich' (UNHCR 2015). While the agency's official categories are based on financial resources, Brahim rather categorizes according to the people's standard of living as a proxy for financial resources. By doing that, he applies – as he is presumably expected to do in order to fully succeed – an alternative set of categories, which corresponds to his own specific cultural code as a person who has first-hand experience from having grown up in the borderlands. He can also invoke metacodes that are independent of the international organizations, referring to, for instance, kinship categories, ethnic affiliations, or various denominations of Islam. Here, I refer to Brahim combining his knowledge of the region with his knowledge of the UNHCR's categories. By observing people as they go about their day, how they eat, sleep or sit within their homes, their property, their health and the like, he maps them, within the UNHCR's system of categorizing, onto a local and/or individual categorization based on his own experiences in the borderlands, closer to what he knows from home. In his explanation, he switches between his local knowledge and the metacode, explaining that 'even before' any formal categorization – mainly the UNHCR's system of categorizing – distinguished people, they would group themselves according to their own understanding of who belongs into which category. His understanding of such basic differences allows Brahim to translate between codes and thus define people along alternate lines, mixing his locally grounded and multi-layered experience with the clearly defined and delineated categorization offered by the agency.

But this is not the end of 'undoing' the refugee category, at least from an aid agency's institutional point of view. In order to integrate the camp dwellers into the local settings, old categories are remixed to create new ones. Brahim explains: "We then mix refugees and locals into a cooperative, called a *groupement*. Here again, we always put them together according to one of the four categories. For instance, there are the autochthonous who live close to the camps; we also group them. We do it the same way as with the refugees who already have moved from the camps to the villages. We tell them 'You will now stay together and work together like brothers'". This new form of categorizing is part of UNHCR's approach to integrate the camps' inhabitants locally. The refugee agency purposely leaves

assessing which of the former ‘refugees’ belongs to which of the new categories to local employees like Brahim. “The UNHCR wants us to categorize the people, but they will not do a follow-up of how we do it. We only give them our reports. Sometimes they will visit sites, for instance the fields on which the associations farm together or they will come to the markets to visit the traders’ associations” (conversation with Brahim 24.3.2016, N’Djamena).

Without the interference of the refugee agency, Brahim and his colleagues apply criteria that form a part of their local knowledge. Without having to apply detailed standardized procedures, he and his colleagues not only fill in the content of the new categorization but create processes to execute the new policy of ‘integration’. In addition to knowing much more about the people who live in the camps, their relatives, their networks, and their activities outside the camps, they also know how to recognize who owns more and who owns less, who requires more intensive care and who can support herself or himself with just a small supplement of money or materials. These are nuanced factors, that foreigners might not immediately recognize or include in their calculations, or which they might interpret differently, especially since the organization’s international staff members never stay in the area for more than a few weeks or months.

Brahim tells me about the further proceedings: “Upon entering a house and speaking a few words with its inhabitants, I know which group to place the person in. Once the people are sorted into groups, each group then has to elect a leader. They have to decide which activity they want to pursue. And they receive the money, material, or seeds to start trading or farming once they have filled out a questionnaire.”

After a couple of months, Brahim and his colleagues return to the sites to follow up. The idea is to define the elements that enable them to undertake the new estimate of categorizing the people. “We want to see if they achieved what they were aiming for,” he explains, “and if they have received some benefit, if their children are going to school or if they can buy some new clothes. This is how we recognize that they have moved into the next category. We want everyone to switch category. Sometimes it happens quickly and sometimes it takes a long time.”

“Do you tell them to which category they belong?”, I wonder. “No!” he underlines, “we never tell them. To the very poor, we would simply say ‘You are suffering a lot’ or to the average ‘You are a bit better off.’” At this particular point, his use of different codes becomes most evident: by translating the metacode’s categories into the way locals would express such differences, Brahim transforms his knowledge and switches from one code to the other.

Slowly this process may change the boundaries of the category of ‘refugee’ and, eventually, undo it.

Or will it? The point of interest is that this policy-driven attempt at undoing occurs after a long period of interrelated processes. While it looks like – and has often been interpreted as – the refugee agency turning people into subjects, using categories as instruments of power can also be interpreted as a *regime of practice* that is open to contingencies and code switching, one that recognizes that the force to act, or agency, originates from very different points, leading to processes of mutually observing and adjusting activities. With the UN agency’s approach of grouping people, the refugee agency might eventually be able to withdraw with the justification of having succeeded in their mission: they would have turned emergency aid into development assistance, dissolved the camps and turned refugees into citizens who would then no longer need aid. For most of the local population, however, the former camp dwellers will remain *réfugiés* for a much longer time. Independent of institutional labels, the borderlanders tend to keep to the categorization created in the context of aid, even if they equip them with new meaning.

“You have told me about the people from the refugee camps who bought houses and land in Abéché. Why do you keep on calling them *réfugiés*, even if they have settled down here and became rich?”, I asked Mahamat, a young contractor who, like his father, Khassim, works for the aid agencies. He said: “Because we got to know them as refugees.” “Who started calling them refugees?” He assumes “that must have been when they opened up the camps, and, I remember, the first time I had to buy cement in Adré and there was none to be had, I was told to go to the refugees, they have cement. From then on, I was in contact with a trader, who used to be a refugee. And I still call him *le réfugié*” (fieldnotes of conversation with Mahamat, 22.3.16, N’Djamena).

In an e-mail conversation, when asked about the “integration process of the camp dwellers”, Brahim added the most recent development of the process: “As for the refugees in the villages, they are not officially integrated, but they left to do agriculture and integrated themselves into the villages. They are also still refugees who return each month to the camps to receive their rations. And if you tell them, ‘you are already integrated’, they refuse the word ‘intégré’. Therefore, for your information, they are not integrated. But they move with their donkeys to do commerce, agriculture, rain-fed and gardening. They have been biometrically registered; they formally exist for the UNHCR as refugees. The biometric

verification is not only to follow their integration process, but to follow all of the refugees' movements" (email exchange with Brahim on 19 August 2016).

Individuals or communities who adopt categories, as in the above case, can pragmatically change their contents and this new content can eventually feed back into the metacode. Hacking has described this process as a "looping effect" (1995). He speaks of something quite like the switching between meta- and cultural codes, as Rottenburg has defined them, when he refers to change as originating from two possible directions: "from above, from a community of experts who create a 'reality' that some people make their own" (1999: 168), or from an individual choice, rendering the category independent of other use and thereby "creating a reality every expert must face" (ibid). He allows for a change in what Rottenburg has called the metacode, an opening to reformulate its basic assumptions. The process of 'making up people' by labeling them under specific categories – and the resistance of those thus labeled – is one of his prime concerns. In Hacking's example he compares how people categorized as 'homosexuals' became 'autonomous of the label', making it their own.<sup>4</sup> Hacking focuses on experience, and particularly on self-conception and autonomy of people to study the effects of categorizations. Desrosières's (1993, 1998) research about how the French census has effects on "the very people who have been enumerated" and, consequently, impacts "the structure of society for the next decade" (Desrosières 1993 in Hacking 1995: 370) confirms Hacking's thesis that administrative processes have the effect of 'making up' people. But going further than that, Hacking shows how each new classification induces changes in the category, leading to a change in the contents of categorizations. His point is about the way the categorized "claim rights to their own knowledge" about their "kind" once it had been introduced – a point he characterizes as a "wholly new type of looping effect" (1995: 382). Hacking's version of autonomy can be applied to Mahamat's still referring to his cement trader as *le réfugié*, but bearing in mind that the cement trader himself might have a different interpretation of the term *réfugié* altogether.

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<sup>4</sup> "The past-directed fact is that the labeling did not occur in a social vacuum, in which those identified as homosexual people passively accepted the format. There was a complex social life that is only now revealing itself in the annals of academic social history. ... At the risk of giving offense, I suggest that the quickest way to see the contrast between making up homosexuals and making up multiple personalities is to try to imagine split-personality bars. Splits, insofar as they are declared, are under care, and the syndrome, the form of behaviour, is orchestrated by a team of experts. Whatever the medico-forensic experts tried to do with their categories, the homosexual person became autonomous of the labeling, but the split is not" (Hacking 1999: 168).

The UNHCR's policy approach followed what the camp dwellers had done in practice over the years on their own terms. This also confirms Hacking's assumption: that changes in categorizations do not exclusively originate from an established and institutional source, but are greatly influenced by those 'inhabiting' the categories. Following his reasoning, people could move between the different systems of categorizing depending on their knowledge of aid systems and policy options, as well as about local farming seasons, the availability of land, trading networks or trans-border business relations. In the end, the agency – certainly also in its own interests of leaving the site – adopted the camp dwellers' interpretation of the 'refugee' label, accepting that, even while living and being provided inside the camp, people would have to move out step by step, to integrate into the surrounding communities. In this way, the notion acquired a new meaning and opened up the possibility of eventually undoing the category.<sup>5</sup> The second technical register, the process of biometric registration, can add to this point.

### **Preparing the undoing of the refugee category II: From 'refugees' to 'refugee citizens'**

The second process of undoing the refugee category involved the Chadian state. It was geared towards the redefinition of the camp dwellers' citizenship status, establishing their legal status in Chad. This was to be achieved through biometric registration. Switching the category would allow the former refugees to freely move inside the country, while temporarily remaining eligible for aid. Their status as 'refugee citizens' would be a trial integration. To receive the *carte d'identité de réfugié*, not only fingerprint and iris scans would be recorded, but information about family data, place of origin, etc. would also be registered. With this information, the refugee agency could update the number of aid recipients, tracking its fluctuations and calculating the demand for further operations. The Chadian state thus hoped to acquire a higher measure of control over the – still suspect – newcomers from Sudan.

This process was elaborate. Brahim had again brought along digital photographs to our meeting in N'Djamena in March 2016, this time around about six hundred of them. As we went through them on my computer, I saw images of large structures, obviously not built to last. They took, rather, the form of hangars, huge wooden halls wrapped in UNHCR canvas,

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<sup>5</sup> Keeping a 'ration card' while looking for other options to make a living is not specific to the camp dwellers' situation in Chad. One might also argue that the ration card increases dependency and lessens the people's agency, once they have been categorized as eligible for aid. In the case presented here, I argue that it expands their options, but this might have to be thoroughly analyzed for different cases. I thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for this important note.

the logo visible everywhere. There were images of people waiting in front of them, people entering smaller structures, and, inside the structures, people sitting at tables, desks, people behind computers, people drinking water, people in conversation around tables. As Brahim started to explain each image, he told me how he and his team were involved in the building of the physical infrastructure to carry out and ensure the operation of biometric registration in four of the twelve refugee camps.

In each of the twelve camps, eighteen huge and interconnected hangars had to be built, which contained the equipment and enabled a highly controlled process. Passing through the hangars resembled a one-way *parcours*, and the newly categorized ‘refugee citizens’ could finally leave the premises only after many hours. What looked like a highly bureaucratic measure, however, also turned out to be a case of mutual accommodation. I found that the aid agencies had actually followed the long-term practice of the camp dwellers, who had been leaving the camp’s premises to contact the surrounding villagers to look for land. Their ‘refugee’ food rations had been a welcome medium of exchange in their interactions. In its bureaucratic form, the UNHCR thus also acted pragmatically to reduce the difference between the people inside and outside the camp. The main aim of this initiative was to ensure the two communities’ integration, independent of their former labels as ‘refugees’ and ‘host population’ and to slowly merge them.

In his book on the South African ‘biometric state’, Breckenridge (2014) gives the current definition of biometric identification as “the automated recognition of individuals based on precisely measured features of the body” or, more simply, “the identification of people by machines” (2014: 12), while showing that this was not the original definition of the term. Breckenridge claims that one of the political appeals of biometrics, a technology introduced by the British Empire in colonial India, is that the technology can “sweep away the slow, messy, and unreliable paper-based systems of government” (2014: 16). In the case of Chad, the biometric registration of ‘refugees’ by the UN agency goes hand in hand with the government’s introduction of biometric passports, biometric registration when entering the country at the airport, and, starting with the 2016 presidential elections, biometric voter registration; however, the fact that counting the votes still took over two weeks might demonstrate that efficiency had not been the main incentive behind the measure (Debos 2017). Thus, in contrast to other measures of the UNHCR, in which the Chadian government does

not interfere<sup>6</sup>, this process happens in close cooperation with national agencies and on the basis of their common interest in controlling movement and the nationality of the people. In contrast to the grouping process of ‘refugees’ and ‘hosts’ referred to above, the more closely supervised and regulated process of biometric registration of refugees in the Chad-Sudan borderlands involves sophisticated technical infrastructure.

Brahim, who had witnessed and taken part in the process from beginning to end, explains that it required very intensive preparation. In four of the twelve refugee camps, he and his team built a complex of hangars through which all the “refugees” were required to pass. The objective was the same everywhere: to make accurate estimates about the actual number of refugees and fluctuations in their number and whereabouts, as well as projecting location-specific costs and food ration requirements. But although the biometric registration was supposed to be carried out in a strictly standardized form, each location differed in regard to the set up of the camp, its inhabitants, their special requirements and endowments: in short, the overall situation. This aspect is important, as applying standardizing infrastructures also can be seen as a process of translating models of intervention (Behrends et al. 2014). The translation – explaining to people how the biometric registration would work and implementing it – involved observing their reactions and refining the process during the next implementation of the model, which meant that the procedures were carried out differently each time. Brahim considered each new implementation an improvement over the previous ones. In the end, a process that was intended to be unilinear and bureaucratic, was instead densely interwoven with local desires, resistances or improvements.

The idea behind the measure, as Brahim’s explanations made evident, was to establish a control mechanism to eliminate actual or possible ‘ghost entries’ in the ‘refugee’ files, so that those who had long since left the camp no longer continued to officially receive food rations, as well as to track possible double registrations in different camps. In practice, Brahim was aware that some of the ‘refugees’ – whom he continued to call ‘refugees’ – had become fairly rich by now. They planned a future inside Chad and did not anticipate a fast return to Sudan. Some had even bought land in Abéché with the intention to build houses. Others had long since relocated to villages where they had heard of land available for them to use. For these, physically leaving the camps, where they continued to maintain their status,

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast to UNICEF, which is run like a ministry under Chadian government, UNHCR operations maintain a higher independence from national governmental decision-making processes (private communication by a Chadian UNICEF employee in March 2016).

had not been tantamount to leaving behind a ‘refugee’ existence. In order to update lists of registered refugees, Brahim sometimes had to track people to the villages to verify their status. As a result, some were then taken off the refugee list and registered instead as integrated (*intégré*). But often the camp dwellers-turned-villagers, although supposedly integrated in neighboring villages, vehemently refused to be called *intégré*, as Brahim recounted. Instead, they insisted they were still *réfugiés*, giving this category their own definition. According to Hacking’s definition, they made the category ‘their own’ by creating alternative meanings, or by avoiding other categories, which they felt to be potentially restrictive in gaining access to the services and provisions it entailed. (It also must be added that the ‘integration’ process’s rate depended heavily on the availability of land in the camps’ vicinities, and that the quality of this land was highly variable, with ‘good land’ being scarce).

“To be biometrically verified”, as Brahim started to vividly describe the registration process, “you have to pass through something like a *parcours*. You have to pass each of the hangars, one after the other.” To me, the finely-tuned set up of this *parcours* symbolizes the involved institutions’ desire to create a situation of repeatability, predictability and order, preventing any manipulation, reinterpretation, or tinkering by aid workers. But tinkering and manipulation (or at least attempts at it) did happen throughout. Some were slight. For instance, recognizing that the people working in the hangars for days would become hungry and thirsty, some people were asked to sell food around the premises. In later instantiations of the biometric process, this led to the inclusion of small locally organized restaurants into the *parcours*. Other attempts were more substantial. By undercutting the bureaucratic demand for exact traceability of people to the UNHCR camps, some camp dwellers tried to get friends or relatives from outside the camps registered although they were not, by bureaucratic measures, eligible.

As the actual registration process led to a change of a person’s citizenship registration, it had to be co-organized with a government agency, the Chadian National Commission for the Reintegration of Refugees and Repatriates (CNARR). And while some found the huge space of interconnected hangars to be threatening, Brahim associated the image of the large halls with a space of luxury: the various constructions were interwoven like the mazes of yards and rooms found in the houses of rich people, almost inaccessible from the outside, but with new spaces around every corner inside the enclosure. “If you look at the hangars from the inside, you could compare them to a large house, a villa. There are a number of hangars, they are all facing each other, there isn’t much space between them. There are points to drink



water within them, and latrines. In Bredjine, we have also included a restaurant, for the technicians only, and an area to take a break, get fresh air and to pray. The refugees have profited from this addition, as they have brought merchandise for sale, like tea, coffee, cakes and our local porridge (*la buille* in French or *al-madide* in Arabic).”

He then started to explain the function of each hangar, starting with the first two, where they collected two kinds of previous identity cards and checked their validity. As he explained, “to prevent fraud, those are security hangars.” I understood ‘security’ to have the sense of preemptively excluding those people who were not eligible to undergo the process and eventually emerge not only registered but with a new set of rights with regard to free movement inside Chad, including the right to settle permanently and eventually become a full citizen. Once a legitimate claim was preliminarily established, each person’s name was entered into a list. Therefore, the next hangar, the third, was very large and had a large waiting area. About thirty families could be accommodated there at any given time, before being called to one of the round white plastic tables with white plastic chairs and an air of clean modernity, but also temporariness, since the large number of chairs could easily be transported elsewhere. “Assistants guide the people to the computers, take their cards and lead them to the next free table,” where the number of family members present was compared to the list on the family card. If someone listed on the card was absent, they would ask: “Where is this *monsieur* here?” If he had travelled after obtaining a *carte de libération* (release card), he would remain on the family card. If he had not, he was removed.

As Brahim explained, “The young people usually want the *carte nationale de réfugié au Tchad* [national refugee in Chad card], in order to be able to travel anywhere. That’s what they want, mainly. And sometimes the refugees bring their Sudanese relatives to newly register them on their card, but that is refused.” The young people’s primary desire, to be registered to be able to freely move, matched that of the agencies that carried out the registration process, while their second aim, getting further family members onto their cards, was opposed to it. Still, it was interesting to me that both the agencies and the people going through registration anticipated attempts to add further family members to the cards, although, of course, from opposite perspectives.

In the fourth hangar, the people were photographed and all the images of each family were put on a single page. At the fifth hangar faulty cards were corrected. A child who was not registered would be registered here, while other people passed through to the next hangar. But there was one special feature in the fifth hangar: “In this hangar only, there is a *porte*

*special* [special door]. If all papers have been checked and you are not a refugee, you must exit here.” Thus, only those who had already qualified as ‘refugees’ according to the previous registration system could proceed. For the others, the process ended here.

The sixth hangar was to register those who were old, sick pregnant or too weak to appear in person – the *vulnérables*, as Brahim called them. He explained. “Here you can indicate that you need someone to register you at your house. We call it *recensement physique* [physical census], you have to see the person to register him or her.” Again, this was to ensure that there was no possible way to register someone who did not appear in person, even at the cost of having to seek them out in their houses.

The seventh hangar was for ‘interviews’ about such questions as place of birth, the problems the registrants had encountered in Sudan that led them to move to Chad. “About ten questions. To verify if you’re really Sudanese and not Chadian. But some Chadians still remain among them”, Brahim added, “those who know the situation in Sudan very well. Even the people of the NGOs do not know the difference.” “If you questioned them, you would know?” I asked Brahim. “Yes, I would recognize them”, he asserted.<sup>7</sup> By ‘recognizing’ he does not, in fact, mean he can see the difference between a Chadian and a Sudanese citizen or that language would give away this difference. It is details: different kinds of attire, shoes, small items. Maybe he would know someone’s family history through their name or – more likely – he simply knows nearly all of the people in the camps. I often found it surprising how well the borderland people remembered names, individual histories and relationships, perhaps a feature of sorting and categorizing people where there are few national institutions that do this.

In the eighth hangar, only the *chefs de famille* (heads of the families) are interviewed, again to “verify the truth of the ones and the others.” I understood that hierarchies and internal power relations within families were considered to be of great importance, and talking to the heads of families separate from the rest implied respecting this cultural feature: if the *chef de famille*, whether a man or a woman, said it, it was considered official. No one could later

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<sup>7</sup> To verify the consistency of refugee stories, UNHCR personnel with special legal training ask questions about events, which have been documented elsewhere in detail. They know, for instance, the exact time of a specific attack, which villages were concerned, the amount of destruction etc. If the person claiming refugee status says he or she has witnessed this event or has taken flight because of a particular event, and their testimony does not correspond to the documented facts, the status of ‘refugee’ might be withdrawn. In N’Djamena I have witnessed such interviews and observed how much of the result depends on the goodwill of the interviewer or the personal rapport between interviewer and claimant established during the conversation. The interviews have, however, never been conducted by people familiar with the local situation like Brahim, but always by outsiders who only read about the events in question.

claim that it was a *jeune*, a young person, who said something about the family that was not authorized internally and could thus be a reason for counter-claims later. The agency knew about this and acted accordingly.

In the ninth hangar, photographs were again taken, this time of the entire family and of each of its members. The head of the family was then asked to provide full personal information – name, first name, date of birth, place of birth, card number, block number, number of family members, family registration number – and a family tree was produced. As I started to get confused about the different cards and the different forms of documentation, Brahim summarized them. Everybody had three cards. The *carte de ration* indicated the family size and block number and had to be shown when food was distributed, while the *carte de famille*, the family card, named each person in the family. Everybody held those two cards, and without them, a person would not qualify for the end product of the process, the *carte nationale de réfugié au Tchad*. This indicated a new and restricted form of Chadian citizenship and was given only to those who made it to the end of all the hangars.

“How many hangars are left?” I asked, impressed by the meticulousness of the process and of Brahim’s knowledge of it. “We have now passed half of them”, Brahim laughed. “But in the tenth hangar, people are questioned as in the ninth, because there are so many people. Again, there are eight computers in the hangar, maybe more.” I then realized that some hangars covered internal procedures, and the people only passed through or around them. In the eleventh, for instance, the technical staff photocopied all documents and compared the information on them, “to see if the current documents correspond to former ones. If, for instance, someone has torn apart a document, you can see if all the documents are complete.” The twelfth hangar represented another site of control of the registration process itself: it was to check if anyone had skipped over any of the previous steps. Only if and when all the steps had been taken as prescribed, the cards were punched with a small hole to indicate the milestones reached. If anything was missing, people were sent back to repeat the missing steps.

The thirteenth hangar was another huge waiting area, for hangar number fourteen, where the technical work of the biometric registration was carried out. Here, fingerprints and iris scans were taken to prepare the *carte nationale de réfugié*. A new file was prepared here, which would be printed out in the sixteenth hangar. “What happens in number fifteen?” I wondered. “That one is for the generators that produce the electricity needed to run the computers”, Brahim said, smiling, obviously proud of the infrastructure he had created with

his colleagues. “The refugees simply pass through.” The sixteenth hangar was where documents were archived. Here, only the technicians entered. “All the materials are here, inside this hangar, but the refugees are kept out.”

They received their file in the next hangar, number seventeen, the *hangar de distribution de dossier*, together with their new identity cards. The eighteenth hangar was a connecting corridor, from the seventeenth hangar to the outside.

The whole process took about two hours per person, not counting the queue before people entered. He added: “They process a thousand people per day”, a number that impressed me. However, the process was certainly intended to end very soon, to minimize costs and avoid further debate before going ahead with the integration program. With a thousand people per day, 200,000 ‘refugees’ could be registered in less than a year, not counting the need to construct, disassemble and reassemble the hangars in each of the twelve camps. After having passed through eighteen hangars, the former refugees exited the process as Chadian nationals of temporary residency status, with the right to travel and to settle wherever they choose as well as the right to keep receiving aid if it was needed.

This registration process was set up as to avoid interference or manipulation, even if the process differed from one site to another. Brahim recalled that in the camp of Bredjine, for instance, there were no trees to provide shade, so three more hangars were built as waiting areas for those entering the first hangar. “But the people did not use them”, Brahim laughed, “as they feared they would miss their turn. They preferred to wait in the sun.” The long queues of people waiting in the sun at Farchana, which was the first site of the process, had motivated this move. “There we had only twelve hangars, and they were very small, so in Treguine and Hadjer Hadid the plan was changed. The hangars are larger and different, each model is different from the former one.” I interpreted his laughing as astonishment: while building more hangars certainly involved costs and time to cater for the people’s well-being, their interest obviously was not in making the process more pleasant, but in getting it done as fast as possible. Standing at the end of the line or sitting in the hangar to wait might result in missing a new twist in the procedure, something that could be a disadvantage if supplies ran out or if procedures that had benefited the firstcomers changed to disadvantage for those who started later. Of course, the opposite might also be the case, but the people’s reaction showed their eagerness to make it through the new aid policy.

While the whole process facilitated external control, it also included some elements where the knowledge of the international agency and the people living in and outside of the camps converged. Registering people in family groups separately from single individuals, or interviewing the family heads separately from single family members displayed knowledge about social structures that the agencies had gained over years of assistance and following the people's practice inside the camps. In the end, the new and limited version of Chadian citizenship they received may legally enable the people to do what they had done unofficially long before: leave the camp in order to find land and paid jobs. Here the notion of categorization as a process to determine political belonging was most apparent. It enabled certain modes of governance within what might be called a 'refugee regime', based on Foucault's ideas of turning people into subjects through biopolitics – politics that involve the body. But the fact that such a regime *needed* to be put into place also indicates an assumption that those people's agency required ever closer control since some attempted to gain cards without officially qualifying as eligible, tinkering with the closely controlled registration process. The *porte speciale* in hangar five through which people who did not qualify for the new citizenship left; the photocopying and verifying of current and formerly registered documents in hangar eleven; the confirmation that all steps had been taken according to plan before punching the documents with a specifically-shaped hole in hangar twelve; the thorough interviewing in hangar nine and ten, despite which people still passed as 'Sudanese' although Brahim discerned that they were Chadians – all these aspects point to the efforts taken to trace possible eligibility for the 'refugee in Chad' status. But the category, which the international agency and the national government introduced as an instrument of *power*, now straddles the edge of becoming a process that displays the refugees' limited possibilities of *practice* in dealing with this category.

In a recent conversation in February 2017, Brahim explained to me that the *carte nationale de réfugié au Tchad* had unintended consequences: intended as a means to freely travel inside Chad, it turned out to be a disadvantage if people temporarily travelled back to Sudan. "They were taxed by the people at the border", Brahim explained, "as they no longer could claim to be Sudanese." Therefore, the Chadian National Commission for the Admission and Reintegration of Refugees and Returnees (CNARR) started to give out so-called 'soft conduit' passes, as the English term was also used by people who spoke in French and Arabic, allowing the new citizens limited movement without indicating that they were former refugees. But the limited movement was useless, so some of the more enterprising former

camp dwellers managed to get Chadian birth certificates, and with that received full Chadian identity cards. “I have seen people from Farchana and other camps in N’Djamena or Sarh doing business”, Brahim acknowledges, “but it is mainly the ‘big men’ who were able to get the Chadian birth certificates.” By 2017, it was barely possible to get a Chadian passport, whether one was a former refugee or a natural-born Chadian citizen. Passports had become a rare commodity, closely controlled by the presidency – a factor some thought was connected to the US travel ban on Chadian citizens instituted by the Trump administration in 2017.

In conclusion, both attempts to undo the refugee category, the *regroupement* and the biometric process, entangled communities of actors – those inside the camps, those running the camps and those who lived outside the camps. In the transformation of categories, Brahim and his colleagues’ position was that of cultural translators. In his account to me, I found that he not only knew about the aims of the above processes, but also had the discretionary power to create new categories or to imbue external ones with a meaning, which reflected his experiences. He translated categories and thereby invited various possibilities. He decided to remain silent in the face of (some) irregularities (when he did not consider it to be his task to report), and applied the categorization most meaningful to him, when he determined whether a person was ‘very poor’, ‘poor’ etc.

Such people occupied a mediating position from which they could remove former ‘refugees’ from the list and declare them “integrated” if they found that the former ‘refugees’ now resided in villages – but could also determine they were ‘still in need of food rations’ and leave their names on the list untouched. The processes of crossing various modes of belonging and switching between different codes, and thereby tinkering with, bending, evading, or resisting a refugee regime’s control mechanisms, begs the question of contingency. Instead of a ‘refugee regime’, I therefore speak of ‘regimes of practice’<sup>8</sup>, where practice relates to the respective vision of reality of the acting individual or community, interrelating with other such visions.

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<sup>8</sup> Going beyond the individual or communal practice of interaction, the notion of “regimes of practice” refers to a diversity of backgrounds, of experiences, knowledge and expectations. Thévenot (2001: 38) maintains that “pragmatic engagement” accounts “for not only the movements of an actor but also the way his environment responds to him and the way he takes into account these responses.” He regards pragmatism not as a stable force, but as “the capacity demanded by contemporary societies to shift from one pragmatic orientation to another, depending on arrangements specific to the situation” (Thévenot 2001: 71).

### The means of classification

My interpretation of the processes described above indicates that providing and receiving humanitarian or emergency aid in the Chad-Sudan borderlands has developed in far more complex directions than the one-way street – subjectivizing recipients and empowering donors – as which aid is often characterized. In much of the recent literature, humanitarian agencies are regarded as replacing the state and creating new forms of subjects such as the person infected with HIV/AIDS, the refugee, and the vulnerable person in need of aid and having to fully comply with the powerful aid regime in return.<sup>9</sup> Referring to the ‘hidden truth of sovereign power’, Beckett cites a dictum that only the sovereign can “decide on a state of exception and declare an emergency” (2013: 88). By criticizing aid agencies that become substitute states using this form of power, Beckett argues that critics of humanitarian aid defend the “territorial sovereignty and the nation-state” in an “oddly conservative” way (2013: 90). Along that same line, Sassen (2013) advocates a notion of ‘territory’ that should be distinguished from ‘territoriality’ in order to grant the “category territory a measure of conceptual autonomy from the nation-state” (2013: 21). In so doing, she denies the category its analytical function as a symbol of national territoriality, instead opening up the possibility of understanding “conditions ... in the shadow of national-state territoriality” (2013: 39).

Like Beckett, who deconstructs the image of the aid organizations’ state-like sovereignty by looking at relationality and interactions, Glasman (2017) foregrounds the historical development of UNHCR classifications, which he finds adapt continuously during the agency’s emergency interventions. Focusing on what ‘emerges’ during ‘states of exception / emergency,’ he compares the agency’s development to how James Scott (1998) represents state regimes as aiming to achieve modernity by rendering citizens *legible*. Following Scott’s framing “categories, formats, processes of standardization and rationalization” as ways of rendering a population first legible and finally controllable, Glasman argues that the UNHCR “arranges populations according to its mandate to protect.” It does so by translating “complex, illegible and multiple local claims into standard categories that can be recorded, compared and used” (2017: 4). Thus, comparing the agency to the state instead of viewing its sovereignty as a substitute for the state, Glasman shows how it is

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to Agamben’s (2005) work on states of emergency, several publications on humanitarian intervention have taken up the perspective of creating subjectivities through aid interventions (cf. Bornstein and Redfield 2012, Callaghy et al. 2001, Fassin and Pandolfi 2010, McFalls 2010, Nguyen 2010. For a contrasting view, which is more in line with my argument of mutual adaptation, see Beckett 2013, Glasman 2017, Redfield 2014, and Ticktin 2006).

similarly split up in its various agencies and situated actors. His analysis claims that the UNHCR “acts in a decentralized and fragmentary manner through a range of other actors – states of varying sizes and strength, UN agencies with different mandates, NGOs with diverse interests, refugees committees with varying representation and so on” (2017: 18). Instead of postulating a power asymmetry that proceeds from the creation of aid subjects, Glasman invokes the “highly connected” character of UNHCR interventions, whose origin is “not so much in the means of protection” as “the quasi-monopoly it holds over the *means of classification*” (ibid., my emphasis).

This is not to deny that regimes of aid can lead to forms of oppression, as in de Waal’s (1989) impressive ethnographic analysis of how aid agencies caused famine by providing aid on the Sudanese side of the borderlands in the 1980s. He claims that the agencies operated based on a false image: they failed to recognize that the people who came to UNHCR camps in need of help were not refugees from drought but rather war, and that they could not return home as soon as the rains came – the outcome that de Waal suspects aid agencies had expected. Recent takes on ‘states of emergency.’ however, allow a closer look at how emergent interrelations and connections during such situations contribute to new constellations of power, thus “both reproduce(ing) *and* transform(ing) ... existing structures, practices, and ideas” (Beckett 2013: 98).<sup>10</sup> Taking up the relational perspective, I aim to show in this paper that neither the Chadian government nor the aid agencies held absolute or sovereign power over their territory of intervention. Instead, both transformed through what happened in the “shadows” by looking at a larger set of actors, thereby aiming to reveal the “conditions that are at risk of remaining blurry”, as Sassen (2013: 39) puts it.

### **Un/doing differences**

Through the administrative handling and institutionalizing of how to “sort things out” (Bowker and Star 1999), categorization can appear to be mutually exclusive, institutionally defining membership – who belongs and who does not – while, at the same time, the boundaries of categories “from different worlds meet, adjust, fracture, or merge” (1999: 16). Apart from the equivalences of categories intended to cross time and space while still maintaining their meaning, categorization of difference and belonging is used to account for

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<sup>10</sup> Schiocchet (2014) argues for a closer look at particular instances of resilience of people in camps while acknowledging the importance of Agamben’s definition of the ‘state of exception’, particularly in order to highlight the social inequality of camps as exceptional.



multiple networks of individuals, which contain categories as less institutionalized forms of belonging and difference. According to Simmel's (1992 [1908]) definition, "individual" belonging to society only becomes possible beyond the bounds of social circles, where forms of belonging may also be less clearly defined, historically evolved, or mutually exclusive; and where many additional overlapping forms of processually and situationally marking difference and belonging may be noted. They may also, as Barth (1975 [1967], 1969) points out, assume more rigid forms during conflict, where forms of belonging might degenerate into mechanisms of violent exclusion (see also Schlee 2004). Following Hirschauer (2014), their boundedness can in practice be 'done' and 'undone,' as certain acts of categorizing underlie the double contingency of relationality and temporality mentioned in the beginning of the paper.

Stefan Hirschauer's work is central to this analysis. Rooted in Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology and in Butler's (1999 [1990]) notions of performativity within the context of gender studies, the focus of Hirschauer's study on processes of human differentiation is increasingly redirected to the contingency of the simultaneity of different forms of belonging. By situationally taking up different forms of belonging and difference making, Hirschauer highlights not only those processes and practices that contribute to the 'doing of differences', but also those that equally intend and bring about their undoing or, at least background them while others are foregrounded<sup>11</sup> Observing this backgrounding requires long-term observations of social processes. His analytical framework of 'doing' and 'undoing' social belonging is intended for comparative research into what he calls "the creation, overlap, and invalidation of cultural distinctions drawn between members of society." Categorization is contingent not merely because it is socially constructed and holds social relevance, but also because it can, in practice, be used, ignored, and made irrelevant. As Hirschauer puts it, "Each instance of 'doing difference' is a meaningful selection from a set of competing categorizations that creates a difference that in turn makes a difference. Un/doing differences designates an ephemeral moment of undecidedness and non-differentiation between the relevance and irrelevance of social differentiations" (Hirschauer 2014: 170). Temporality and relationality are central to this approach, as the question is not so much how differences matter, but, rather, "which difference is (ir)relevant when?" (2014: 173, my translation). The observation of how

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<sup>11</sup> I thank Carola Lentz for this specification on changing acts of categorizing. Lentz is part of the research program on 'un/doing differences' as Hirschauer, and applies the concept on national celebrations of independence in West Africa (see Lentz 2017).

differences become irrelevant marks the change into new forms of differentiating, applying another set of categories, which better situate the situation in time and space. Hirschauer aims at studying “not just the crossing of some previously-defined axes of differentiation (intersectionality) or the individual transgression of specific binaries (hybridity), but a *complex empirical interplay of human differentiations*: a constant movement of multiple categorizations between enforcement and overlap, stabilizing and forgetting” (2014: 181, my translation and emphasis).

Studying categorizing renders visible how categorization emerges from and responds to particular interpretations of situations, and, in that context, how a larger reality comes to be perceived. Who is involved in the categorizing? In different regimes of practice, I refer to ‘collective actors’ as the ensemble of *humans* who attribute their belonging to institutions, communities and places, and those who develop, apply and are influenced by *technologies* that regulate procedures, apply rules and distribute legitimacies in grouping people, using *things* or devices that carry within them a history of organizing. This history is formed of sediments of former governments’ and agencies’ procedures and may acquire new meanings in continuing processes. Studying processes of categorizing in the Chad-Sudan borderlands opens ways to understand how people – in very different manners – organize their survival in situations of war and displacement. It also, as in this paper, opens ways to understand how international agencies like the UNHCR eventually come to follow the local people’s ways of organizing survival during war and displacement. Movements produce new situations and constellations that trigger new ways of defining, arranging and shifting understandings, and thereby new categorizations of the social and of social processes. In a situation of crisis through war and displacement, such as the one I address in this paper, a large number of actors, technologies, procedures and devices come together with very different understandings of reality and how to survive in it.

A closer study of categorizing shows how different actors, procedures and devices interact and how their mutual influences and understandings influence their expectations and their practices for continuing to live and finding ways to build futures. The processes described in this paper display attempts to undo a category – that of the ‘refugee’ – toward the end of a long process of enforcing and stabilizing it. The category’s negotiability becomes visible in how the involved actors interrelate differently and over time. In such situations of war and displacement, categorizations of difference and belonging not only originate in very different contexts, with stronger and weaker forms of institutionalization, but, over time,

overlap and change contingently and situationally, providing new relations for the involved actors, and involving them in the formation of new constellations, such as the ‘grouped’ people Brahim has told me about. By adding more historical depth to the very situational and ethnomethodologically-influenced approach of Stefan Hirschauer, this paper aims to promote long-term studies of changing acts of categorizing, possibly leading to mutual ‘emplacements’ of people (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2015, Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016).

Towards the end of my research, after developing my study along Hirschauer’s (2014) framework for researching what he calls “un/doing differences and the contingency of social belonging”, and along Rottenburg’s goal to study the switching of different codes, I encountered two simultaneous processes referred to in this paper: the attempts of the United Nation’s High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR) to finally undo the differences the agency first created by categorizing people as ‘refugees’ by integrating them into existing village communities, and the interplay and the contingencies of biometric registering in order to convert the same people’s status from ‘refugee’ into a new form of citizenship, registered ‘Chadian refugee nationals.’ Un/doing difference, more generally, thus follows organizational policies *and* interrelated trajectories of people’s movements and actions. What is interesting in all processes is the way categorizing works in collective practice: the way it creates boundaries and ‘undoes’ them, far from any ‘natural’ belonging of people to groups (Hirschauer 2014: 172) – and thus is contingent in the interrelated forms this crossing or overlapping of categorizations can take.

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## Zusammenfassung

Nach mehr als zehn Jahren der Intervention bereitet die UN Flüchtlingsorganisation das Ende ihrer Intervention im Grenzgebiet zwischen Sudan und Tschad vor. In den zwölf Flüchtlingslagern auf der tschadischen Seite der Grenze leben nach wie vor ungefähr 200.000 Menschen. Aus Befürchtungen um ihre Sicherheit kommt für die BewohnerInnen der Flüchtlingslager eine Rückkehr in ihre Heimatdörfer und -städte auf der sudanesischen Seite jedoch weiterhin nicht in Frage. Die aus dieser Situation resultierenden "Integrationsmaßnahmen" der Hilfsorganisation in Zusammenarbeit mit dem tschadischen Staat stellen den Ausgangspunkt der vorliegenden Studie dar. Mit dem Verweis auf Studien zur "Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeit" (Hirschauer 2014) betont die Autorin die Momente, in denen Unterschiede zwischen Menschen im Zusammenspiel zwischen Wissen und Praxis bedeutsam oder auch unbedeutsam "gemacht" werden. Sie zeigt, dass die Ungewissheit dieser Situation durch die sich wandelnde Verwendung von Humankategorien sichtbar wird, die prozesshaft neu interpretiert und übersetzt werden. Als Beispiel werden zwei Ereignisse in den Vordergrund gestellt, in denen die bislang vorherrschende Kategorie des "Flüchtlings" in den Hintergrund treten soll: Zum einen die Bemühungen von Staat und UN Organisation, die Camp-BewohnerInnen mit der Bevölkerung aus der Umgebung der Flüchtlingslager zu "vermischen"; zum anderen die groß angelegte biometrische Registrierung der Camp-BewohnerInnen, die ihnen einen neuen Status als "BürgerInnen/Flüchtlinge" verleiht. Obwohl beide Verfahren strengen Regeln folgen, so stehen doch beide gleichermaßen für die Kontingenz der Alltagspraxis sowohl auf der Seite von Organisationen und Staat als auch auf der Seite der von den Maßnahmen betroffenen Bevölkerung.

## Biographical Note

Andrea Behrends is social anthropologist and currently guest professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Free University of Berlin. She has published on diverse issues in political anthropology in African contexts. At present she is working on the publication of her book manuscript *Displacement, emplacement and aid in the Chad-Sudan borderlands*. In the academic year 2016-17 she was guest professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna.

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Andrea Behrends ist Sozialanthropologin und zur Zeit Gastprofessorin am Institut für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie der Freien Universität Berlin. Sie hat über diverse Themen der politischen Anthropologie in afrikanischen Kontexten geforscht. Im Moment arbeitet sie an der Veröffentlichung ihrer Habilitationsschrift mit dem Titel *Displacement, emplacement and aid in the Chad-Sudan borderlands*. Im akademischen Jahr 2016-17 war sie Gastprofessorin am Institut für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie der Universität Wien.

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