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Refugees and Ironies

GAMBELA, Ethiopia

January 2000

By Marc Michaelson

Imagine yourself in the middle of a refugee camp. Look around and open your senses. What do you see? What do the people look like and what kind of shelters do they live in? Take a deep breath and suck in the scents. Tune into the sounds. How does the place *feel* — the atmosphere, the mood?

Before traveling to three refugee camps in Western Ethiopia, I did a similar exercise. I closed my eyes. What did I expect to see, hear, smell, feel?

I pictured malnourished people languishing in makeshift shanties of rickety sticks and blue UNHCR tarpaulins. Clouds of smoke (or perhaps mist) hovered over the camp, blocking out the sun and creating a dim, suffocating eeriness and claustrophobia. I smelled bland porridge, urine, staleness. From several directions I could hear children crying — not the usual drone of kids all around this country, but a throatier, more persistent and pained howling. The environment was polluted, dirty, pitiable; the atmosphere reeked of hopelessness.

In Fugnido, Bonga and Sherkole refugee camps, these dire preconceptions were shattered.¹ What I found was no utopia, but no living hell either. The physical living conditions in these camps were quite decent, nothing as I'd imagined.

Irony #1: Services and Infrastructure — Refugee Access, Local Neglect

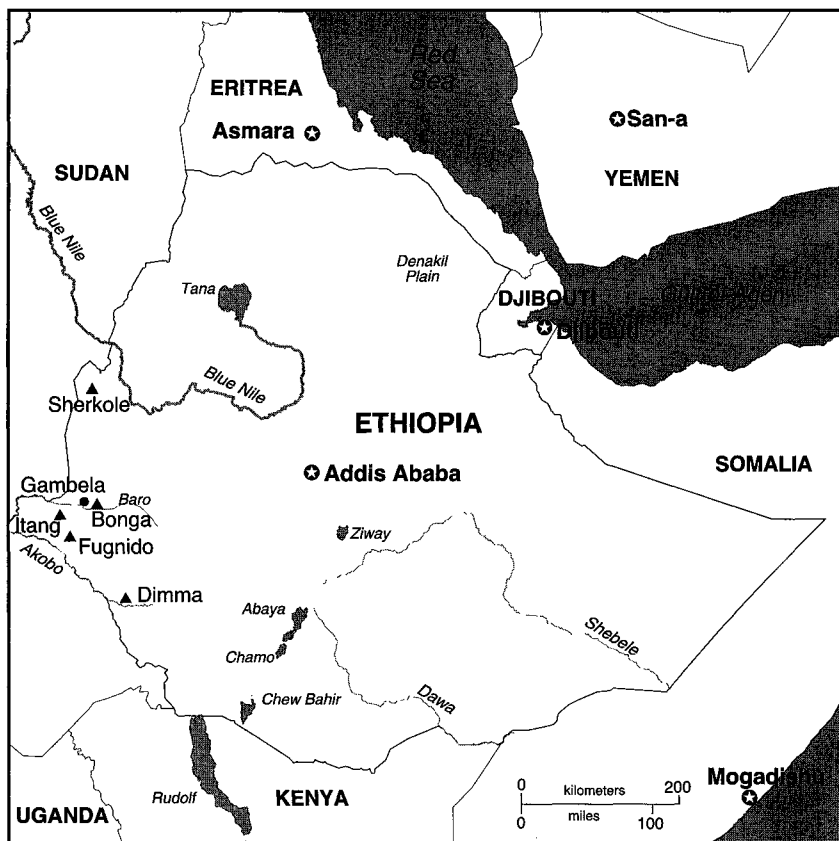
The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) is the international agency mandated to look after refugees. In collaboration with the Ethiopian Government's ARRA (Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs), UNHCR provides funding to ensure that refugees have access to basic necessities (food, water, shelter) and social services (health, education, social workers).

UN agencies are widely criticized for being inefficient, cumbersome bureaucracies that have little concrete results to show for their extensive efforts and bloated budgets. I've observed several UN agencies in studied inaction; UNHCR is different. The agency is doing a very decent job of caring for southern Sudanese refugees in these three camps. In fact, the camp infrastructures far exceed those available to locals in neighboring villages.

* * *

Gambela District is fertile — a potential breadbasket of Ethiopia. The soil is rich and water resources are plentiful, if not excessive (seasonal flooding is common). But Gambela sits on the distant peripheries of the Ethiopian polity and

¹ Western Ethiopia is home to four refugee camps, the three I visited and Dimma. These camps house southern Sudanese refugees—30,669 in Fugnido, 13,570 in Bonga, 16,819 in Sherkole and 9,226 in Dimma (a total of just over 70,000). (UNHCR Statistics as of 1 January 2000).



tance or government programs. They are forgotten, left to fend for themselves.

Leave the regional capital, and the social-infrastructure gap between Ethiopian peasants and Sudanese refugees becomes even more pronounced. Farmers in rural Gambela Region have little access to health facilities and schools, much less trained social workers to look after the most “vulnerable.”³

Each of the refugee camps has a full health center, staffed by a medical doctor, nurse, qualified pharmacist and laboratory technician. Each camp has several primary schools, and thanks to international non-governmental organizations, many refugees also have access to pre-school, adult literacy and vocational training. All of these resources have been harnessed to make life a little more decent for the 70,000 or so southern Sudanese who have fled that country’s civil war and sought refuge in Ethiopia.

remains an extremely poor, marginalized area of the country. Farmers here use primitive cultivation techniques and the services available in towns are woefully underdeveloped.

Facilities in the camps exceed even those of the regional capital, Gambela town. Take water, for example. The wide, muddy Baro River flows briskly through Gambela, testifying to unrecognized potential. The Baro serves as a focal point of town life — it is used for public bathing, clothes-washing, animal watering and as the town’s primary source of drinking water.²

Baro River water is not potable, but the town’s piped water system hasn’t worked properly for years (some say it never worked), so the Baro is what Gambelans drink. By comparison, Sudanese refugees in Fugnido, Bonga and Sorkole camps have reliable access to clean water pumped from expensive boreholes. Refugee status has guaranteed them basic services and attention from the international community. Local Ethiopians have been neglected — they rarely benefit from international assis-

The camps are certainly no paradise, but the facilities are excellent by rural African standards. Rarely if ever can one find such a concentration of services available to peasants.

In some instances, infrastructures function as “connectors” between refugees and locals. They trade with each other at outdoor markets and celebrate with each other during religious festivals and weddings. In Fugnido, young refugees attend the Ethiopian secondary school in town, and locals use the better-equipped health center in the camp. Through such interaction, refugees and locals have built relationships and become inter-connected.

However, the warped distribution of resources and unusual status of refugees has also created something of a mutual jealousy between them and locals. The locals are working hard, struggling to eke out an existence. Next door they see refugees sitting idly, receiving free monthly food rations and being provided with water, education

² One UNICEF staff member (who was staying in the town’s best hotel at the same time I was there) described the dilemma he faced when he turned on the shower one morning: “I stood confused, looking first at the coffee-colored water and then at my body, trying to decide. If I got into the shower, would I emerge cleaner or dirtier?”

³ UNHCR does attempt to provide some services to neighboring communities to minimize tensions between the groups. The WFP (World Food Program) is likewise exploring joint refugee-local pilot programs (e.g. road construction) so that benefits accrue to both groups. However, the primary target of both agencies (refugees) will naturally continue to receive the vast majority of resources.



Sunset over the Baro River in Gambela

indigenous Nuers from Gambela town, seem to have sussed out the best of both worlds. They live in Ethiopian towns and villages, but allegedly register as refugees to benefit from monthly food rations. Since these ethnic groups live on both sides of the border, they are virtually impossible to distinguish. How can one tell the difference between a Sudanese Nuer and an Ethiopian Nuer? One ARRA official claims a screening process weeds out fraudulent registrants by asking specific questions about the refugees' place of origin and their trip to the border. But Nuers are highly mobile — many travel frequently in Sudan and could easily pass simple litmus tests.

and health facilities. The villagers bear silent witness to all the attention and favorable treatment bestowed on the foreigners living in their midst. They see the Landcruisers and truckloads of grain passing them by and must wonder why they are left out, why no one is helping them.

Likewise, the refugees look at the villagers and see the elusiveness of freedom. They see people who own land, homes, tools and livestock. They see in their Ethiopian neighbors memories of their previous lives — when they had control over their destinies; when they could roam the landscape freely with their cattle and harvest the fruits of their labor. For now, they are shackled within the boundaries of a “camp,” denied the dignity of work and forced to subsist on meager handouts. The refugees feel trapped — they can neither go home to Sudan nor are they permitted to make Ethiopia a new home. They are unwanted guests, existing in a neither-here-nor-there state — with some privileges but few rights.

While I didn't have time to pursue direct evidence of registration fraud, the allegations seem plausible. Fugnido camp feels empty; it is much larger than the number of people living there. On the surface, Fugnido looks like a pristine rural village — attractive local *tukuls* (huts) are well-spaced and well-built. But something feels wrong in Fugnido; it is more a skeleton or shadow of a



Primary school class in Fugnido camp

Some locals, including

village than a living community. Fugnido seems partially abandoned, and this may well be because many of the “registered” refugees don’t actually reside there.

Irony #2: Refugee Feeding Programs — Institutionalizing Disincentives

There is a generally accepted approach to third-world development. Don’t create dependency; don’t reward idleness; empower people by giving them the skills and capacities to provide for themselves. The strategy is expressed by a common proverb: “Give a man a fish and he eats today. Teach a man to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime.”

This principle is blatantly disregarded by much refugee programming. Refugees are considered victims of emer-



Tukuls (huts) in Fugnido camp

Profile: Habil Zake — Bonga Refugee Camp

Habil is an ethnic Uduk from Chali, Sudan who has spent the last six years in Bonga. The Uduks are a small ethnic group who were caught in the middle of Sudan’s civil war. They lived on the fringe of the north, but because of their dark complexion, the Sudanese government suspected them of sympathizing with the SPLA (Southern Peoples Liberation Army). Most Uduks did not take sides in the war, but when the fighting reached their land, they were terrorized by both government forces and rebels. Many were killed and their villages burned. Those who survived fled to Ethiopia and live in either Bonga or Sherkole.

Habil served for three years as Chairman of the Bonga camp Central Committee and spoke frankly of the changes and challenges of refugee life in Bonga. First he mentioned educational differences: “*In Sudan we learned in Arabic, here we study English. And we have eleven schools here under shade trees; in Sudan our village had only one.*”

Habil expressed deep concern that Uduk social norms were disintegrating in the camp: “*The youth are trying to change our culture. They don’t obey their parents — now if we tell them to go to work the land, they refuse. Stealing is also becoming common. In our Uduk villages, you could leave something laying on this table, come back in a month, and it would still be here. Now it would disappear.*”

Other generational stresses are expressed in the proliferation of camp marriages: “*Now young people are marrying in their late teens, whereas they previously wed in their mid-to-late twenties. And, they don’t seek the traditional consent of their parents. They just come in and tell their parents they*

are getting married, whether they agree or not. They don’t send elders as was previously our Uduk custom.” Perhaps related, the birth rate in Bonga is extremely high. Aid workers believe this is an effort at ethnic preservation — most Uduks were killed in Sudan and now they are trying to multiply their small numbers.

Habil says the most urgent problem facing the residents of Bonga camp is a lack of food: “*The food rations we receive from WFP (World Food Program) are not enough.⁴ And we have to sell some of it to buy other foodstuffs and necessities — meat, sugar, onions, clothes and shoes. We want to cultivate our own farms and grow our own food. In Sudan, land was free for cultivation. Here it is illegal for us to farm. We only get 20m x 20m backyard plots — it’s not enough; we need more. That’s why some of us have started to grow crops on that nearby mountain and on the other side of the river.*”

They also try to make a bit of extra money to support their families: “*Some people cut grass and sell it [for roofing or fences] to the locals in town. Some refugees also work as day laborers on locals’ farms — but sometimes we work and they refuse to pay us.*”

At the conclusion of our chat, Habil explained tensions between locals and refugees with an analogy: “*If I have a goat and you have sorghum here, my goat will come. If you want to take money from me, you will scatter your sorghum. When my goat enters your house, you will demand I pay.*”

Simply put, Habil feels the locals take advantage of the refugees. “*These problems made us ask ARRA to move the camp. We tried to talk it out, but we couldn’t come reach a solution. Now we just want to move farther from the locals.*”

⁴ WFP has noted food deficiencies in Bonga and in August 1999 raised the daily ration from 1800 to 2100 calories per person, the maximum provided to people in emergencies (assuming they have no other sources of nourishment). If this entire provision is consumed, it is enough to meet nutritional needs. However, some of the food is sold to buy other necessities. WFP Ethiopia plans to conduct a food-security survey in the near future to assess consumption rates and determine how its assistance could be combined with other initiatives to ensure that refugee food needs are fully met.

gencies, and thus receive humanitarian assistance like food aid. Such programs enable those facing dire circumstances to survive. But all refugee situations are not equal. Rapid-reaction relief programs are appropriate for the type of emergencies that occurred in Rwanda and Kosovo, where hundreds of thousands of people fled to neighboring countries (Zaire and Albania) in a matter of days.

Longer-term, institutionalized refugees like those in Fugnido and Sherkole need different forms of assistance, and more innovative developmental programs. Many of them have lived in camps for five, ten or more years, and the Sudanese civil war that brought them here shows no signs of abating. The refugees subsist on handouts and are actively discouraged from providing for their own livelihoods. They are given tiny backyard garden plots to supplement their diets, but are denied larger plots for farming.

In Sudan, these refugees were hard-working farmers and agro-pastoralists. Now they are being transformed into unwilling welfare recipients. I asked several refugees "If you could change one thing in this camp that would change your life for the better, what would it be?" Almost unanimously, the response was "give us land, so we can grow our own food." Despite the plentiful avail-

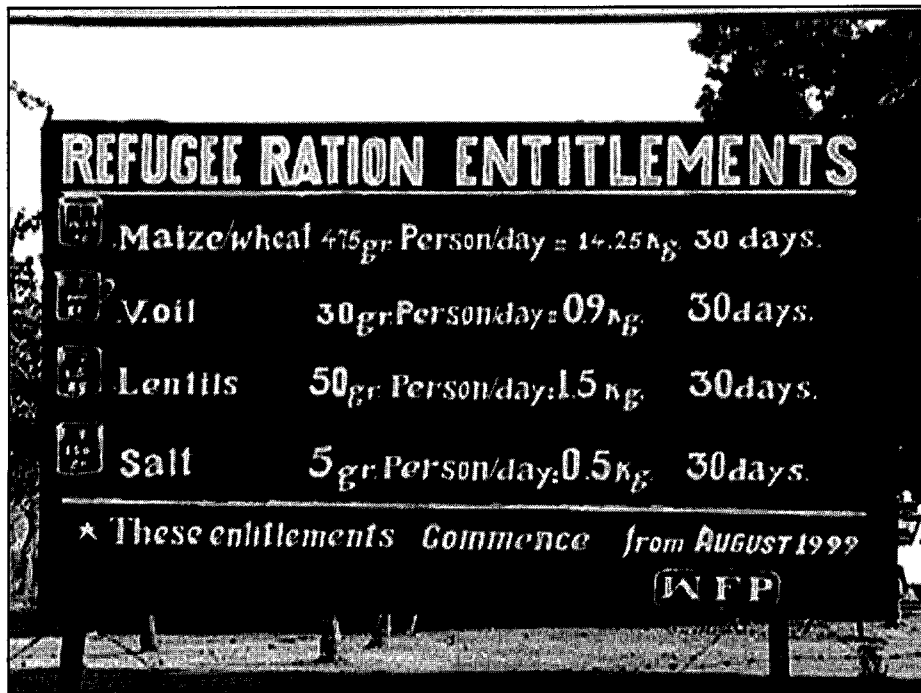
ability of cultivable turf, Ethiopian government authorities have repeatedly ignored refugee requests for farmland.⁵

In the past, food rations sometimes arrived late, especially during rainy seasons when slick clay roads become unpassable. Expatriates working in Bonga camp say the food situation was extremely desperate in 1998. Refugees were starving. These logistical snags have apparently been worked out — WFP is now storing at least a three-month food supply in each camp to cover delays.

Such contingency plans notwithstanding, many Bonga refugees are planning ahead — some are renting land from local peasants and others cross the nearby river to farm empty lands. Strictly speaking, these refugee farms are illegal, but until now they've been tolerated by local authorities. After recent experiences with hunger, the refugees of Bonga see supplemental farming as a matter of survival.

Irony #3: ARRA — Protector and Predator

The Ethiopian Government's ARRA (Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs) coordinates all refugee services. ARRA manages the refugee camps, distributes food, coordinates social and psycho-social services



WFP sign in Sherkole camp

⁵ Why does the Ethiopian government refuse to grant farmland to refugees? Some ARRA staff deflected such questions, saying they have forwarded requests to regional or national government authorities, but haven't yet received any response. Others explain that the Ethiopian government wants to prevent deforestation and doesn't want the refugees to settle permanently. These sound more like rationalizations than authentic explanations. Most likely the Ethiopian government doesn't want to disrupt the international refugee-welfare system. Refugee assistance—supplies, infrastructure, jobs—is extremely lucrative. ARRA receives considerable compensation for distributing food and thus has little incentive to encourage refugee self-sufficiency.

Profile: Pipi Luwin — Sherkole Refugee Camp

Pipi is an articulate, puffy-cheeked woman with a warm, contagious smile. We sat in a relative's spacious *tukul* (round hut), and chatted about the trials of Uduk women in the camp. Throughout our conversation, Pipi's feverish son slept silently on the bed next to her. Signaling that this family is better off than many others, we were served tea, cups of orange drink and chunks of locally-made bread.

Pipi says life in Sherkole is okay for women, but not very good. *"We Uduk, we don't sit without gathering firewood and cultivating. Here in Ethiopia they couldn't allow us to do such things. This makes the women in the camp uncomfortable — at first, we would go to the forest with an ax to cut dead wood, but they stopped us... We can't do anything on this land. We are like animals. It makes us think about going*

back to Sudan, so we can do what we know."

She pauses and then sums up their quandary: *"Our ancestors told us if we work hard, we can do anything and get much. Here we can't."*

Pipi views the biggest problem for Sherkole refugees as the lack of land for farming. *"In our Uduk areas anyone can take land and cultivate it freely. Here we asked the government to give us land, but still they didn't reply.... The local people say to us: 'When you go to look for land to cultivate here, pick some up and smell it. Does it smell like Uduk?'"*

"When we leave the camp, the locals ask us 'what brought you here?' If we say we are hunting, they ask us 'Why are you hunting? These animals don't belong to you.'"

for refugees and mediates between refugees and locals. ARRA informs refugees of their rights (to food water, shelter, health care and education) and their responsibilities (to abide by Ethiopian laws and respect local traditions).

ARRA does not (and cannot) work in isolation. The agency is heavily dependent upon its "partners" — first and foremost UNHCR, but also a host of other UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations. These "partners" provide the inputs and pay the bills, while ARRA implements and coordinates.

ARRA is also responsible for the *protection* of refugees. In Sudan, these people were persecuted by either suspicious government troops or marauding rebel forces, and in some cases both. They've watched their relatives slaughtered, their sons forcibly conscripted and their houses and communities destroyed. Some are additionally economic refugees, the terror and violence having been compounded by drought and war-exacerbated hunger. For these refugees, Ethiopia represents a reprieve from war and a safe haven.

In one sense ARRA is their guardian, their protector. But there is a dark side to ARRA as well. Several reliable sources quickly revealed ARRA as a security

apparatus. ARRA is not merely a benign, humanitarian outfit, but also a security arm of the Ethiopian government. Its mandate is dual — provide for the refugees, but also monitor them, control them and punish them when they step out of line.

During my visit to Fugnido camp, several refugees refused to talk with me. They appeared apprehensive, visibly scared. What did they have to fear? Later I realized that it may have been the presence of my guide and translator, an ARRA staff member. This would be the equivalent of visiting a Nicaraguan village in the



ARRA's first makeshift office (foreground) and new UNHCR-funded office (back right) in Sherkole camp

1980s with a local guide that had CIA stamped on his forehead.⁶

Actually, my first experience in Fugnido reinforced this suspicion. I arrived in Fugnido town (a few kilometers outside the camp) with colleagues from UNHCR and an Anuak translator from Gambela. In addition to visiting the camp, I had hoped to interview some peasants in the town, and for that purpose had brought my indigenous Anuak friend. It was lunchtime and all offices were closed until 3 p.m., so we set off on a walk through town to kill some time. Just 100 meters down the road, two Landcruisers pulled up next to us and the occupants said, Get in. One was our UNHCR friend, the other was from ARRA.

The ARRA folks said we didn't have permission to walk around town; we would have to meet with them first. I found this peculiar, since ARRA is only supposed to be responsible for affairs *inside* the camps. And I have a permission letter from the Ethiopian government enabling me to travel anywhere in the country (except the sensitive war zones in Tigray and Afar).

As it turned out, my Anuak guide belonged to an opposition political party. When the district government authorities saw me walking in town with him, they assumed we were out to stir up trouble. They told ARRA to pick us up, and ARRA did so, acting in the role of security agency, not refugee-affairs department. Soon after, they apologized and exhibited strained hospitality, but the dual nature of their role had already been betrayed (as had the acutely sensitive state of local politics).

My encounter with ARRA security was relatively harmless. However, I also heard allegations of serious transgressions. In some camps, ARRA staff threaten and punish refugees viciously. In Sherkole one man allegedly received 100 lashes for informing an international UNHCR staff member of certain ARRA abuses. Frightened refugees maintain a code of silence regarding their treatment, fearing retribution if they reveal ARRA corruption.

The allegations of ARRA fraud and mismanagement



T-Shirts distributed in Sherkole camp

take many different forms: In some cases, refugee rations are "taxed" by ARRA staff, and are then either consumed or resold. ARRA field staff also inflate refugee numbers by giving families extra ration cards (and then taking the surplus) and by trucking in non-refugees for registration during revalidation processes. Some refugees have been forced to include relatives of ARRA staff on their resettlement applications under threat that they would otherwise be denied. Perhaps most seriously, ARRA has allowed the SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army), the very rebel group that many of these refugees originally fled from, to enter the camps and recruit young fighters.⁷

ARRA is thus a functional contradiction. It is simultaneously the protector and the predator. It serves and sustains refugees but also extracts from their scant allowances. ARRA looks out for their interests and also watches them through the lens of a security apparatus. It shields them from harm in their homeland, but inflicts other forms of abuse in their asylum. The degree of ARRA's security operation and the extent of its abuses are difficult to uncover and understand. International organization staff working with refugees in Ethiopia express frustration — they have no choice but to work through ARRA, and they know the agency

⁶ My personal experiences with ARRA staff were quite mixed. As these stories from Fugnido show, ARRA can be quite suffocating. They didn't let me out of their sight and stifled my ability to collect information/stories freely. However, in Sherkole ARRA allowed me to walk around the camp alone. ARRA staff frankly discussed camp problems and encouraged me to talk to whomever I wanted (without any ARRA staff presence). This relative openness gave me the sense that there was less to hide in Sherkole than in Fugnido. I also found some ARRA regional and national authorities to be helpful, earnest and caring. Therefore, as I express concerns of ARRA abuses in this section, I'd like to emphasize that the agency is not monolithic—it has both positive and negative impacts on the lives of refugees.

⁷ Until recently the Ethiopian government actively supported the SPLA rebellion against Sudan's Islamist government in the north. Since the outbreak of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war, alignments have shifted and the Ethiopian government's relations with Khartoum have warmed considerably. It is unclear whether the Ethiopian government continues to support the SPLA.

**Profile: Mach Maduk and Changkuoth Bichiok —
Sherkole Refugee Camp**

Mach is a 23-year-old Dinka who lives in Zone F in Sherkole. While Zone F is exclusively a Nuer-populated zone, Mach lives there with his closest friend Changkuoth Bichiok.

Mach was born in Sudan's Upper Nile Region and fled to Itang, a massive refugee camp in western Ethiopia, in December 1985. Like most of the 300,000 Sudanese who lived in Itang, Mach returned to Sudan in May 1991 as the Ethiopian government changed. He soon came back to Ethiopia and lived as an urban refugee in Addis Ababa for four years.

Mach was attending a missionary school in Shashemene (southern Ethiopia), but during a semester-break visit to Addis Ababa, he and Changkuoth were ripped from their lives. *"We got rounded up in January 1998. The police came to our house at 5 a.m. and we were put in Gullele (prison) camp."* Mach points to a black scar running from his forehead down to the bridge of his nose: *"We were mistreated there. I was beaten and two others were shot and killed."*

After three days in Gullele they were transported to Sherkole Camp and have been there ever since. *"We were just dumped here. It was bush; we cleared it, but at first we slept under trees. Feeding was also very tough — [we had] no blankets or cooking materials."* Living conditions in the camp have since greatly improved, but Mach remains frustrated. *"Most of Zone F are young people who came from Addis Ababa. Now we are all confined here in camp without studies."*

The Nuers of Zone F are atypical; they are generally more educated than the other refugees, more urban and modern, and consider themselves superior. Other tribes in the camp consider the Nuers to be troublemakers, disrespectful of elders and a bad influence on their children. I asked Changkuoth about this and he shrugged: *"We respect our elders."*

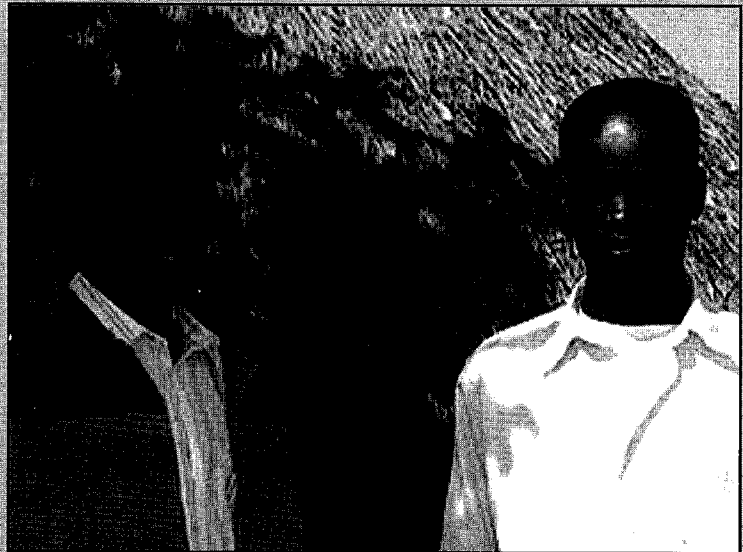
When I pursued the issue, he admitted: *"Some of the youths here grew up without parents. Those who missed their parents for a long time don't respect elders as much; they can be rude."*

Mach added: *"In the camps there are no traditional*

household heads like in Sudan. Since everyone gets rations without working, young people don't rely on their parents so much anymore."

How do they fill their days? Mach is an ARRA social worker, but Changkuoth is unemployed: *"We have no work, so we sit idle. We visit friends, pray, waste our time, and sleep."* These two bright young men are dejected; they want to continue their education, but thus far the camp authorities haven't been able to help them start a secondary school.

The tone became more grave as we discussed the most serious problems facing refugees in the camp. Mach says, *"The 14-kilogram ration of grain is too small. People finish it a week to ten days before the next month's distribution. Sometimes when they finish their ration they stand outside the ARRA compound and just watch the wheat in the store. It is really a pity."* What do they do to cope? *"Some go to the*



Mach Maduk and Changkuoth Bichiok

forest to get edible plants." Other refugees work for locals or borrow grain from them.⁸

As we walked out of Zone F, the conversation shifted. Changkuoth asked *"What is it like in America? If we agree to 'resettlement' there, can we ever come back?"* For those with a high-school education, resettlement in the United States, Canada or Europe is a real possibility. Both Mach and Changkuoth consider resettlement a short-term solution but harbor longer-term apprehensions. Ultimately, they want to return to their homeland.

⁸ According to WFP's nutritional surveys, malnutrition rates in the western camps have recently declined considerably. In 1997, malnutrition rates in Bonga and Sherkole were termed "serious," and the situation in Fugnido was "alarming." By 1999, these rates had greatly improved—Bonga and Fugnido are "good" and Sherkole is "satisfactory." Such studies show important positive trends, but many refugees still complain that they are not receiving enough (nor a sufficient variety of) foodstuffs.

is both a helper and hindrance to refugee welfare.

Irony #4: Cultural Sensitivity, Cultural Dislocation

The trauma of war causes permanent psychological scars — Sudanese refugees will never forget the horrors they experienced and witnessed. Much less dramatic, but perhaps more enduring, is the gradual social dislocation of camp life — the unraveling of traditions, the dilution of culture, the reordering of social relations, the forgotten means of agricultural subsistence. And for the children born in the camps, the social impact may be the greatest. Camp life is all they know. They are being raised in an artificial construct, a temporary community created to shelter and protect them, but not teach them how to relate to the land. How will that generation cope with repatriation?

After the most pressing considerations of daily survival, refugees expressed deep concern about the impact of camp life on their culture. Some customs are preserved through mechanisms of self-governance. Each camp has a refugee Central Committee that maintains liaison between refugees, ARRA and other aid agencies. These Central Committees are meant to mobilize camp residents for programs and resolve minor disputes.

Fugnido Central Committee members described their efforts to adapt Sudanese traditions to camp governance. Take the handling of adultery cases. With refugees living in cramped conditions, idle for most of the day, the temptation of extra-marital affairs is great. Among many Sudanese tribes, especially those where marriage is a sacred transaction fortified by payment of a dowry, adultery is an extremely serious offense. But with more than a dozen tribes living in the camps, how are thorny cross-cultural adultery cases resolved?

William Deng, General Secretary of the Fugnido Camp Central Committee explains: "We have our own traditional law in our culture, in our villages. We use it here. We bring the offending man here and punish him. We must give the husband compensation so that he doesn't seek revenge.

"In the most recent case, we brought the man here. In our tradition we charge six cows for adultery, but here in the camp we have fewer cows. So, we told the family of the offender they must pay two cows. We called both the husband and offender to our office and discussed the case until we solved it."

Other traditions have also adapted. For example, mar-



Young girls in Sherkole camp

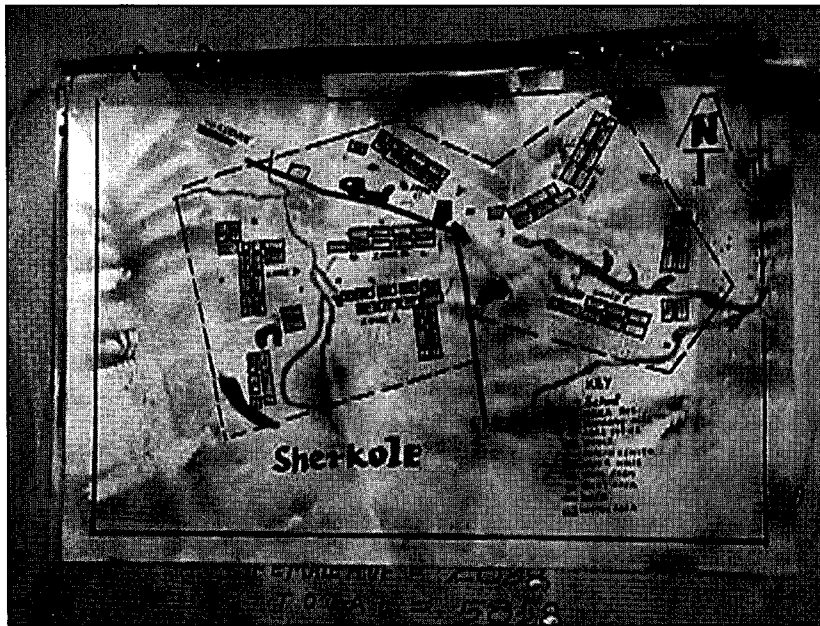
riage dowries of 30 cattle or more have now been lowered to a few cattle and an IOU. The husband agrees to pay a full dowry upon return to Sudan, some undetermined time in the future.

Despite the cultural sensitivity of camp governance, the artificial constructs of camp life are causing serious social and cultural rifts. Refugees in Fugnido and Sherkole come from no less than 15 diverse ethnic groups. Most lived in their own spacious areas of Sudan, often far from other tribes and even fairly distant from neighbors of their own tribe. Now they are all tossed together into one multi-ethnic melting pot. Dinkas, Anuaks, Nuers, Uduks, Funge, Mabane all live in close quarters in the camps.

Sherkole camp is divided into tribally-based zones — Zone A is Anuak, Zones B, D, E are Mabane, Zone C is mixed (including more than 10 smaller minority groups) and Zone F is Nuer. But such exclusive domains are artificial — throughout daily life all the groups mix — on the streets, in schools and health centers and in camp-wide programs. This mixing has several socio-cultural affects — some positive, some negative. Certainly there is a richness to camp life borne of diversity and shared experience.

However, several of these groups are historical enemies. The Dinka and Nuer, both pastoral peoples, have fought and raided each other for centuries. The Nuer and Anuak have their own bitter rivalries over land.⁹ These conflicts don't simply vanish in the camps; long-standing tensions can become newly activated and explode into episodes of violence.

For the most part, the groups live in relative harmony, tolerant of difference. Dafallah Eissa Zayid, Vice Chairman of the Sherkole Central Committee, is proud of his



Sherkole camp showing tribal "zones"

committee's achievement in creating a peaceful atmosphere in the camp. While infrequent outbursts do erupt, my experience in Sherkole tends to support Dafallah's claim. The mood is light and free of serious overt tensions.

The more troubling social impacts of camp life are subtle. Strong cultural identities are diluted as people, especially youth, interact in the camps. As Changkuoth, the young Nuer observed: "Many boys say 'we're all equal,' so they don't respect their elders anymore." In a traditional Uduk family such broad conceptions of equality are cultural taboos. Habil Zake of Bonga camp laments that "now young people don't get up when elders enter the room...and they don't listen to what their elders tell them."

Generational conflict is reinforced by the camp leadership. The camp Central Committees are relatively young and formally educated. ARRA requires that Committee members speak some English (so they can communicate with ARRA and UNHCR staff). Such requirements exclude most "elders" from the Central Committees, displacing their authority and subverting their traditional decision-making and dispute-resolution roles. The younger generation has usurped power in the refugee community, and elders have been pushed into the background.

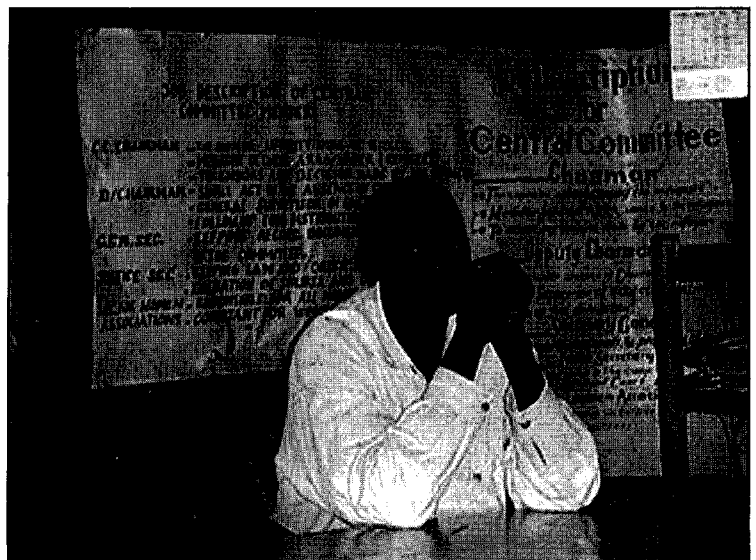
Another source of cultural stress and dis-

comfort comes from the simple act of settlement. The Nuer and Dinka are pastoralists — they herd cattle and move seasonally in search of grazing lands and water. As herders deprived of cattle and as pastoralists denied mobility, the Nuer and Dinka as sedentary refugees almost cease to be Nuer and Dinka. Refugee status enables them to physically survive, but decimates their traditional life style.

Social ills such as laziness, drunkenness and stealing are also flourishing in the poverty-filled camps. Bored and hungry, young men look for escapes. Such problems tend to affect men more than women. Even in the camps, the work of women is done — they must collect water and firewood, cook, wash clothes and look after children — just as they did in their

home villages. Female refugees must be more resourceful to care for their families with less. While men are forced into idleness, women maintain extremely heavy workloads.

Idleness is one camp scourge that could easily be solved. Young men are itching for things to do — advanced studies, vocational training, farming. All it would take is a bit of administrative flexibility and a small infusion of resources. Lack of creativity and a willingness to break out of standardized pre-fab refugee



Fugnido camp Central Committee member

⁹ In *The Nuer*, British anthropologist EE Evans-Pritchard notes the nature of Nuer conflicts with neighboring groups: "The attitude of Nuer toward, and their relations with, neighbouring peoples are influenced by their love of cattle and their desire to acquire them. They have profound contempt for peoples with few or no cattle, like the Anuak, while their wars against Dinka tribes have been directed to seizure of cattle and control of pastures." (p. 16)

programming appears a much greater constraint than limited resources.

For example, several young men expressed a desire to continue their studies, and pointed out that some refugees are university-trained teachers. An informal, self-managed high school or study group could easily be formed under a sprawling shade tree. All that is needed are a few books to guide learning, some notebooks, pens and a small heap of encouragement.

A bit of creative programming would go a long way toward restoring refugee pride and self-respect.

They need opportunities — not large-scale enterprises or massive projects, but small chances to bring new meaning to their lives. They need activities that allow them to retake responsibility for their own welfare and remind them that they are *people*, not just “refugees” or helpless victims.

Such initiatives are the best that can be expected for the short-term. Nothing less than the end of Sudan’s protracted civil war will enable refugees to return to their homes and start life anew. For now, they are managing as refugees do — thankful for the little they have and surviving a difficult life laden with irony. □

Religious Encounters — Missionaries, Church-goers and X-Mas

A colleague in Addis Ababa drafted a list of contacts for my stay in Gambela. “Start with Father Richard. He’s lived there for more than five years; he knows the area very well, and he’s American...like you!” Upon arrival at Gambela airport, I picked out Father Richard immediately. He had come to pick up four old friends, fellow Maryknoll missionaries visiting from Tanzania and Kenya.

I introduced myself and was surprised to find he had heard of my impending visit. [Another agency had passed the buck on trying to find me a guide and had asked Father Richard to help.] We had a quick chat, coffee the following morning, and then he invited me to a chicken dinner that evening. After two meals at the Ethiopia Hotel (which I sarcastically renamed the “*Yelem*” Hotel (since they “*don’t have*” anything you ask for)), I welcomed the offer.

The conversation was light and easy — the banter of old friends sharing stories of God’s miraculous interventions

in their adventurous lives provided an entertaining evening. That by birth I was condemned to membership in the lost tribe of the Jews thankfully never came up. Even more thankfully, my lingering agnosticism didn’t surface either. For the most part I behaved well, eager not to insult my hosts with my own peculiar brand of heathenism. But of course I had to stick my foot in my mouth at least once.

We had been discussing population migrations and history in this ancient part of Africa. Thinking of Lucy and other recent archaeological discoveries, I interjected “Yes, it seems the first men actually came from this part of the world.” An awkward silence ensued and the Creationists side-glanced each other. Recognizing the *faux pas* I squirmed in my seat, eyes downcast as I scanned the ground for a small hole in which to crawl.

After a few moments, Father Richard gracefully came to my rescue: “That’s right, many Ethiopians claim



X-Mas celebration in Sherkole camp

the Garden of Eden is here!!!”

Phew!....an opening. With renewed enthusiasm I chimed in, “Yeah, when I traveled north to the great Blue Nile Falls at Tis Abay, they told me ‘this is the Garden of Eden.’” The tension was broken, lightness restored, and the dubious evolutionist remained unexposed.

The following Sunday, Abraham, an extremely articulate Khartoum-educated Anuak, was sent by Father Richard to guide me around Gambela. We walked around town, visited the market, interviewed a few people and made our way to Church. Since Father Richard had asked him to help me, Abraham assumed I was Christian and thus would enjoy sampling local church life.

As we approached the United Evangelical Church, energetic drumming and singing greeted us far outside the compound. A group of young children stood outside the walls and peered in with curiosity. We made our way to the back entrance of the long rectangular structure and watched the final ten minutes of the service. The worshippers sang “O Father” in Anuak with eyes closed, some raising their open arms in gestures to Jesus, all praying with depth and enthusiasm.

The service concluded and Abraham and I were stuck in the doorway, shaking hands with everyone as they departed. I must have been seen as a visiting priest from a concerned congregation in a far-off foreign land, scouting the status of our good Lord in the farthest reaches of his Kingdom. To the contrary, I felt like I was in the reception line at a Bar Mitzvah — ‘thanks for coming, let’s dance the Hava Negilah.’

When I returned to Addis Ababa and searched the internet for information on some of the remote ethnic groups I’d met — Anuak, Uduk, Mabane, Funge — most of the sites I found were those of evangelical churches. They are enlisting their fellow Christians to pray for these peoples, so that they might hear the word of Christ and be ushered from the depths of darkness into the warm light of heaven.

As the above cheekiness indicates, I have little affection for such perspectives. But I would scarcely deny the good work being done by some missionaries. Unlike their secular counterparts who work on two-three-year contracts with non-governmental organizations, many missionaries make long-term commitments to the communities they serve. Barbara Harper of SIM (Sudanese Inter-Mission) at

Bonga Refugee Camp has spent 20-plus years, first in Sudan and now in Ethiopia. Father Richard and his colleagues have spent similar stretches. They speak local languages fluently, understand local culture and traditions, and have earned the respect of people by the goodness of their actions. Of course, the boundary between the religious mission and social mission is often murky — to my mind teaching literacy for the primary goal of “bible evangelism” can be deceptive and ethically questionable. But I would not dispute that these missions provide valuable and much-needed services to distant, otherwise ignored rural populations.

Keeping with the religious theme, my trip to Sherhole camp coincided with Christmas festivities. This camp opened in February 1997, and there are no missionaries working there. Sherhole refugees arrived in Ethiopia as Christians (although some may have been converted by missions at home in Sudan).

As dusk descended on the eve of Christmas eve, a dancing troupe of church-goers bounced through town singing and bearing banners of jubilation. The following afternoon all denominations (and there were many) convened near the center of the camp for a joint celebration. The event was touching. Each group sat patiently, watching and listening as the others read prayers in their native tongues and performed songs and dances from their own traditions.

The Christmas-day atmosphere was light, festive and energetic. I had to remind myself several times that I was in a refugee camp. It felt more like an upbeat rural village. But as one Mabane man told me, “The difference between our Christmas in Sudan and this one here is like the difference between night and day...[Here in the camp] we don’t have anything. In Sudan we would prepare a big feast and invite friends and relatives.”

Osman Solomon said his Uduk neighbors were making the best of it. They prayed together at church, and sang and drank tea and coffee together. Later in the day a soccer match between two Uduk teams was planned, as was a traditional play depicting religious themes. While the celebration lacked some of the material adornments of Christmases-past, creativity and community spirit provided depth and richness. For that special day the people of Sherhole transcended the daily ardor and struggle of refugee life; they celebrated the birthday of their Lord Jesus Christ, and prayed for a better future in this life and the next.

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