Refugee-Host Relationship in Ethiopia: A Case of Eritrean Refugees in Tigray Region

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Abstract: This study explores the nature of refugee-host relations in Ethiopia with particular reference to the Eritrean refugees and the hosts that are found in the Tigray regional state. To this effect, primary data were collected through interview, focus group discussion (FGD), document review, and observation; participants for the study were selected through purposive sampling technique, and the study employed a basic qualitative data analysis method. It was found out that the interaction between the two groups has been dynamic, changing from almost "closed' and 'antagonistic' to 'cordial' type of relationship in the process, and now, this smooth relationship has been negatively impacted by and faced obstacles due to the on-going war between the Tigray regional state and the federal government. The key factors that are involved in the transformation of their relationship and the status of the refugees in the eyes of the local hosts emerge both internally from the refugees and the hosts themselves (refugees' aspiration, cultural similarity, economic benefits of refugees, familiarity and socialization between refugees and hosts), and externally from the work of the government. The paper concludes that inter-group relationships change across time, and these changes are far from absolute as they are accompanied by continuities of some elements of past relationships.

Keywords: Eritrea; Ethiopia; Host; Refugees; Relationship

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is host to close to a million refugees, who are mainly from Eritrea, South Sudan, and Somalia. As of 30 April 2021, Ethiopia is reported to being a host to around 814,535 registered refugees and asylum-seekers; and this makes the county the third largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, next to Uganda and Sudan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], April 2021). Out of this figure, close to 200, 000 are estimated to be Eritreans, and they have settled in six refugee camps. While the four camps (Shimelba, Hitsats, Adi Harush, and Mai Ayni) are found in the Tigray regional state, the remaining two (Berhale and Asayita) are located in the Afar Regional State (Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs [ARRA], 2011; 2018).

Of course, this Eritrean refugee situation in Ethiopia has been created against the backdrop of the bloody Ethio-Eritrea war (1998-2000) and the post war hostility that developed for about two decades. Seeking a shelter in 'enemy' state is not unique to the Eritrean refugees as this is the case in the Horn of Africa. Yet, the context that brought about the Ethio-Eritrea war is different. Arguably, the war was fought over a range of issues including political system incompatibility, a failed economic integration, and identity (Eritrean and Tigrean identity and the negative image they hold to each other) (Abbink, 1998; Negash and Tronvoll, 2000; Taddesse, 2004). Indeed, Abbink (1998: 551) identified the Ethio-Eritrea War as a "family quarrel between closely related regimes in Eritrea and Ethiopia", while Negash and Tronvoll (2000) understood the war as a conflict between "brothers". This article seeks to shed light on the nature of the refugee-host relationship between Eritrean refugees and their Tigrean hosts in Ethiopia under such political and complex contexts of identity relations.

In terms of literature, the following are some seminal works that investigated refugee-host relationships: Chambers in his article titled *Hidden Losers? "The Impact of Rural Refugees and Refugee Programs on Poorer Hosts"* (Chambers,1986) argues that hosts are ignored, while they are the ones who suffer the most and the refugees are the ones who benefit the most. He also argues that hosts are not the primary target of researchers and consequently there is a dearth of literature on the subject.

Hoerz, in his book titled *Refugees and Host Environments – a review of current and related literature* (Hoerz,1995), argues that refugee impacts upon the hosts is a broad one that includes, but not limited to, environmental, education, health care, service delivery, water, and economy. He argues that not all refugees are "hidden winners" and not all hosting communities are "hidden losers". For him, not all groups among refugees and local population suffer or suffer in the same way through environmental degradation and the depletion of Common Property Resources. The same author also states that the nature of refugee-host relationship can range from conflict to cooperation and participation. Yet, this scenario is context wise. Nevertheless, this same book was primarily concerned with the environmental impacts of refugees and failed to discuss other dimensions of relationships.

Aukot's (2003) work, *"It Is Better to Be a Refugee than a Turkana in Kakuma": Revisiting the Relationship between Hosts and Refugees in Kenya",* examined the relation between the Kakuma hosts and the multi-national refugees (including Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Rwandans, Burundians, Ugandans, Congolese, and the Somali). Aukot's work shows the unhealthy relationship that existed between the refugees and the hosting Kakuma tribe. Refugees were categorically depicted as "threats" to the Kakuma way of life. The article discusses areas of conflict between refugees and their hosts and how these factors endanger refugees' physical protection, and it echoes the hosts' solutions to the conflicts. Unlike Martin's (2005) case-study (see below), the conflict between the refugees and the Kakuma hosts was not transformed, and this has led to a failed local integration.

Since 2015, a significant part of the recent literature focused on the European/ global refugee crisis, described as the worst humanitarian crisis since the end of the Second World War (Saatçioğlu, 2020; Adam, 2017). In 2016, Turkey and the European Union reached a deal in which the latter agreed to host Syrian refugees in return to financial incentives and prospect of joining the EU (Adam, 2017). Turkey consequently hosted more than 3 million Syrian refugees – the largest globally. Only a handful of studies, however, tackled the vital issue of refugee-host relations. Tumen (2016) analyzed

the economic impacts of the refugees and found that the arrival of Syrian refugees in Turkey led to the significant loss of employment opportunities for the locals. İçduygu and Şimşek (2016: 59) in their part assessed measures of integration of Syrian refugees and argued for the need to a "well-established, comprehensive integration policies". In their study Akcapar-Koser and Simsek (2018) have shown that refugee host relations in Turkey are defined by class and skills of which the refugees come with. According to Koca (2016), the securitization of refugees in Turkey negatively impacted on processes of refugee- host relations. These studies are significant in that they shed light on the complex and dynamic refugee-host relations and the factor that shape these processes.

Likewise, apart from a few works, literature on this subject appears to be very scant in Ethiopia. For instance, Markos's (1997) study undertook a state-level study and emphasizes state response to the Somali refugees in Ethiopia. In his study, Markos analyzes the treatment of the Somali refugees in Ethiopia with respect to the Ethiopian and international laws and argues that the Somalis were operating within a restricted legal environment in Ethiopia. Martin (2005) discussed the refugee-host relationship in the Bonga camp between the host community (the Bonga inhabitants to which the Anyuak people also belong) and the refugees (the Uduk people). Nonetheless, his study tried to see how environment triggered conflict between the host and the refugee and how these could be transformed. Arega (2017) explored the experiences of Eritrean refugees before their migration to Ethiopia and their lives in Shimelba camp after migration. Arega's work is a phenomenological study and presents an analysis of Eritrean refugees as it is described by the participants of the study. Accordingly, he talks about reasons of flight, the psychological and health related predicaments they faced in the camp. Mubanga (2017) examined the Ethiopian refugee law and tried to show how this law has hindered the Eritrean refugees' from enjoying access to human right protections. Obviously, these works are refugee-oriented studies.

In the wake of Ethiopia's 2016 commitment to the nine pledges made in New York and to the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), several studies, which covered different aspects of the CRRF process, were also produced in Ethiopia (see Mena, 2018; Nigusie and Carver, 2019; Overseas Development Institute/Danish Refugee Council [ODI/DRC], 2020; Samuel Hall, 2018; World Bank, 2020). Mena (2018) investigated the predicaments and possibilities of local integration for urban refugees by taking and comparing the cases of Eritrean and Somali refugee groups in Addis Ababa. The ODI/DRC (2020) studies are a UNICEF funded work and examined the refugees and host communities context in the refugee-hosting regions of Ethiopia, particularly the situations in Afar, Tigray, Somali, Beninshangul-Gumuz, and Gambella regions. Different authors were involved in each of these region studies. The Tigray context analysis was conducted by Ludi and Gebre Yohannes; and examined the economic interaction between the Eritrean refugees and the local communities, the challenges the Eritrean refugees face and their perspectives on local integration and self-reliance by using the case of Shimelba and Adi Harush camps (Ludi and Gebre Yohannes, 2020). World Bank's (2020) commissioned work studied the refugee-host relationship and the multi-dimensional impacts of refugees (economic, social, access to social services) in the hosting community across the refugee hosting areas in Ethiopia, particularly in Addis Adaba, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Somali region. However, these aforementioned works failed to study the host-refugee relationship between Eritrean refugees and their Ethiopian hosts and this study wanted to fill in this gap and contribute to the research on intergroup relationships.

This study explores refugee host-relations in the global south and reveals the complexity and dynamic nature of these relationships. In addition, the study departs from the western, Eurocentric and biased paradigmatic approach on refugee studies to provide evidence and field based research from the global south. Most of all, in a situation where refugees stay for a protracted period in their "first asylum" countries primarily because there is neither the opportunity to return nor a chance to be resettled in a third country, the importance of such studies cannot be underestimated.

The study is organized into three major parts. The first section discusses the conceptual framework of the study. This is then followed by a detailed presentation of the methodological approach of the study. The third section presents the results of the study. The results and the analyses are presented together in this section, mainly, because such an integrated approach is more sensible and productive than a separate presentation of the results and the analysis. The final section presents the conclusion of the study.

Conceptual Framework

Following the work of Levine (1979), who in turn was based on Simmel's (1908) seminal essay on *Der fremden*, this study employed the stranger-host relationship conceptual framework in the context of protracted refugee situation to understand the inter-group contact between the Eritrean refugees and the Ethiopian Tigrean hosts.

There is no single interpretation of the word or concept of "stranger". Since its first introduction by Simmel in 1908, the concept has been employed to understand different phenomenon of strangeness or strangers. A cursory look at the works that employ the stranger as analytical tool reveals this fact. Some employ the stranger to the modern setting. In this regard, Simmel (1908, 1950, as cited in Levine, 1979) was concerned with the European Jew; Park (1928, as cited in Levine, 1979) with the marginalization of immigrant groups in the US and their bicultural complex; Siu (1952, as cited in Levine, 1979) with the sojourner - who sticks to the culture of his/her own ethnic group; Wood (1934, as cited in Levine, 1979) with the newly arrived outsiders and with the "internal adjustments" they make to adapt to the new situation. Still, others employ the stranger to understand the post-modern world. For instance, Bauman (1998, as cited in Marotta, 2000: 121-122) and Diken (1998, as cited in Marotta, 2000: 121-122) tried to understand the stranger in the context of "identity politics, alterity, globalization, hybridity, and the changing nature of work within a so-called post-Fordist society." Given the plurality of works and the concomitant uneven meanings attached to the stranger, it is not the intention of this paper to present a full-fledged review of the concept. Rather, we have presented two seminal works that vividly show the divergent meanings of the concept of the "stranger".

Accordingly, in *The Sociology of George Simmel*, Wolff (1950) presents Simmel's understanding of the stranger. As to Wolff, Simmel used the case of the European Jew and, defined the stranger as "the wanderer who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going" (Wolff, 1950: 402). On the other hand, Wood (1934), by contextualizing Simmel's definition to her study of newly arrived groups in the US, defined the stranger as:

> one who has come into face-to-face contact with the group for the first time. … the stranger may be, as with Simmel, a potential wanderer, but he may also be a wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, or he may come today and remain with us permanently. (Wood, 1934: 43-44, as cited in Levine, 1979: 25).

Yet, both of these definitions provided by the originator of the concept (Simmel) and his follower (Wood) failed to properly capture the notion of 'stranger' in the current study. Hence, like Wood, in this study a "stranger" is understood as someone who comes today and stays tomorrow or as someone who comes today and leaves tomorrow. But, unlike Wood's assumption, the stranger is not seen as someone who comes into face-to-face contact with the host for the first time; rather he/she is taken as someone who is familiar with the hosts since Eritreans were part of Ethiopia up until their secession in 1993 when they established an independent Eritrean state after a long bloody war. Essentially, this definition, which "moves beyond the Simmelian stranger and its presuppositions" (Marotta, 2000: 121), presents a context-specific characterization of the concept of stranger in Ethiopia.

By the same token, the concept of 'host' lacks conceptual clarity (Rodgers, 2020). Rather, hosts are usually associated with aspects of indigeneity and locality; and this association served, particularly government and humanitarian actors, to label 'hosts' and 'refugees' for their respective purposes. Comparatively speaking, while the distinction between hosts and refugees is reified in rural camps, it is blurred and difficult in urban locations where there is an overlapping displacement situation. This is

due to the fact that in rural settings camps are constructed isolated from the local community; and as such, a physical and geographic boundary is made between refugees and hosts by actors involved in the refugee operation (Rodgers, 2020). As the Gambella case in Ethiopia exhibits, there are cases where the refugee population might outnumber the so called 'hosts' and makes it difficult to label who the hosts are. Also, when it comes to Ethiopia, it is difficult to distinguish between who the refugees and hosts are due to their cultural similarity, shared ethnicity, and fluid cross-border mobility (World Bank, 2020).

Despite this problem, since the current study deals with refugees in rural camps, the definition provided by the UNHCR has been employed. Thus, as to this definition, the term 'host' entails the local community around the Eritrean refugee camps that is in direct contact with the Eritrean refugees.

> A host community … refers to the country of asylum and the local, regional and national governmental, social and economic structures within which refugees live. Urban refugees live within host communities with or without legal status and recognition by the host community. In the context of refugee camps, the host community may encompass the camp, or may simply neighbor the camp but have interaction with, or otherwise be impacted by, the refugees residing in the camp. (UNHCR Resettlement Service, as cited in World Bank, 2020: 23).

When it comes to the relations of the stranger with the host, Donald Levine sees stranger-host relationship in terms of Simmelian conception of stranger where strangerhood is depicted "as a figure-ground phenomenon, in which the stranger status is always defined in relation to a host" (Levine, 1979: 35). In other words, the kind of status strangers assume is demarcated in relation to another group that is defined as the host, or receiving community. Based on such understanding of the strangerhood, Levine formulated a typology of stranger-host relations. Consequently, as Table 1 below shows, Levine identified six types of stranger-host relationship, namely, guests, sojourner, newcomer, intruder, inner enemy, and marginal man. Levine's classification was based on two important factors: the interest of the stranger in the host country and the reaction of the hosts to this interest of the stranger. Accordingly, the aspiration of strangers might include visit, residence, and membership in the host group, while the corresponding reaction of the hosts is assumed to be compulsive friendliness or compulsive antagonism (Levine, 1979: 30).

Table 1. Levine's typology of stranger-host relationship

		Stranger's interest in the host country		
		Visit	Residence	Membership
Host's reaction to the stranger	compulsive friendliness	Guest	Sojourner	Newcomer
	compulsive antagonism	Intruder	Inner enemy	Marginal man

Source: Levine (1979: 31)

Indeed, according to Levine, the aspiration of the stranger and the reaction of the host are in turn affected by other factors. As such, the interest of the stranger is assumed to be affected by reasons for leaving home (alienation, boredom, calling, disaster, economic hardship, political oppression, etc.) and conditions of entrance into the host group (amount of prestige, movable resources, special skills, etc.). On the contrary, the reaction of the hosts is understood to be affected by the extent of stranger-host similarity (ethnicity, language, race, region, religion, value orientations, etc.), the existence of special cultural categories 'and rituals for dealing with strangers, criteria for group or societal membership (classificatory kinship, religion, citizenship, professional certification, etc.), and conditions of local community (age, size, homogeneity, degree of isolation, etc.).

Thus, based on Levine's work, this study attempted to answer such basic questions as why do Eritreans flee their country and what is their purpose of arrival and aspiration in Ethiopia? How has this interest or aspiration of the refugees influenced their relations with the hosting community? What kind of relationship has been established between them and their respective Tigrean hosts across time? Why and how did the kind of relationship they developed over time come to emerge?

2. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative study approach of data collection and analysis, particularly a case study strategy, since our study aspired to understand the nature of the refugee-host relationship in its natural setting with a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the Eritrean refugees and their hosting community and a thick expression on the meanings they give to the character of their relationship (see Creswell, 2009). The researchers are neither members of the refugee group, nor members of the hosting community, nor government officials. The researchers do not have any ethnic, geographic or any other sort of affiliation with the study area and its people. Thus, there is no conflict of interest between the identity of the researchers and that of the conduct and findings of the study.

2.1. Scope of the Study

This research was delimited to the study of the relationship between the Eritrean refugees and their Ethiopian hosts. Particularly, Eritrean refugees residing in the four refugee camps located in the Tigray regional state of Ethiopia were included in the research. This was done because of methodological imperatives. First, the bulk of Eritrean refugees are located in this regional state than in the Afar regional state (173, 928 refugees in Tigray, compared to the 26, 061 found in Afar (ARRA, 2018)). Second, the alleged identity dimension of the Ethio-Eritrean war features mainly the Tigrigna language speakers in Eritrea and Ethiopia than that of the Afars. Accordingly, the Eritrean refugees who are found in the four camps (Shimelba, Hitsats, Adi Harush, and Mai Ayni) of the three weredas[1] of North Western Zone of Tigray were the focus of the study. While Adi Harush and Mai Ayni are found in Tselemti *wereda*, Shimelba and Hitsats are located in Tahtay Adyabo and Asgede Tsimbla *weredas*, respectively.

In terms of time, this study is delimited to the events before the outbreak of conflict in Tigray in November 2020; and thus, the discussion presented below do not cover the inter-group relations since the outbreak of the war. The data for the study was collected in April 2018, at a time when the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power.

2.2. Sampling Techniques

The participants of the study (including Eritrean refugees, the local inhabitants as well as ARRA officials) were selected based on non-probability sampling method, particularly through snowball and purposive sampling techniques based on their position, knowledge, experience, and duration of stay in the refugee camps. As a result, 25 key informants were selected from refugees, the surrounding hosts as well as concerned government officials.

2.3. Methods of Data Collection

The study used a myriad of data collection methods, including in-depth interview, focused group discussion, observation and document review. A month of fieldwork was conducted in April 2018 to this end. At this time, we were able to gather data by ourselves from the three refugee camps, while the data from Shimelba camp was collected later in May 2018 via an associate. Data were gathered from 25 key informants who were selected from refugees, hosts, and government officials. Besides, a total of 6 FGDs with 4-6 participants were conducted. Observation, particularly observer as participant, method was also employed, where the researchers were able to observe the behaviors of the population in the study site by sharing or taking part in their life and activities, like going to church, the market, recreational areas and the like. As Creswell (2009: 179) argues, the role of the researcher is known to the people in the study area and this type of method enables researchers to record data about the natural behavior of the group in their natural setting as it occurs. Before the interview began the interviewees and focus group discussants were informed about the objective of the study and asked for their consent. The interview and FGDs were tape recorded and brief notes were also taken.

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[1] Literally, Wereda refers to a district level administration

2.4. Method of Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through thematic data analysis technique or through, what Creswell (2009: 181) calls, the "basic qualitative analysis". First, the raw qualitative data obtained from interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and direct observations were translated from Amharic and Tigrigna local languages to English and the raw data were coded and organized based on its dimension. Then, the description, classification and triangulation of raw data were made and analyzed qualitatively. Regarding the citation of the informants, we merely provided codes (like KI#1, KI#2 … KI#25) to refer to the interviewees 1 to 25.

3. Results and Discussions

Why Eritreans seek refuge in Ethiopia?

The most common answer refugees give to the question why they sought asylum in Ethiopia, a country with which their country has entered into a bloody war, which brought huge loss in terms of human, material, political, and psychological costs, is the existence of unbearable oppressive regime in Eritrea that does not allow them to pursue normal life such as getting an education, working in sectors that fit with their education, and receiving fair and just payment to for their work; and the right to livelihood and to lead a decent life as they fit. A story one male refugee shared with us is illuminating. He stated how the Eritrean government put his family under pressure and eventually forced him to flee:

> My father was an active member of the former Unionist party in Eritrea that supported union with Ethiopia before 1991. But after independence, he became the target of the new regime. Finally, he was put in jail and died in prison. And this condition created pressure on us. The family became divided on how to react to this tragedy. Some of us opted not to work with the government that killed our father. The remaining decided to change this harsh relationship with the government and opted to show loyalty to the government by participating in festivals and decorating our houses and ourselves with the symbols of the new regime. But for me, I could not stand this hypocrisy and pressure anymore and decided to leave Eritrea (KI#12, a refugee, Adi Harush, April 2018).

Another one also claimed to have fled to Ethiopia because he was not able to get any meaningful reward from his Eritrean citizenship and could not lead a decent life:

> I came because I could not get what I deserved as a citizen. I tried to discharge my duties, but could not get anything in return. I joined the national service, but the national service got extended and I came to serve for 16 years in the end. Yet, even if I spent all these years, I could not get something. I could not make use of my citizenship. Therefore, life became miserable to the extent of being unable to even support myself. So, at the end, I should have left, and so I did (KI#25, a refugee, Hitsats, April 2018).

Such findings of this paper also confirm the works of Kibreab (2013) and Arega (2017) that have found the same reasons why Eritreans flee, i.e. they flee because of the oppressive political system and its devastating effects on, *inter alia*, the right to education, employment, and mobility.

When it comes to why Eritreans seek refuge in Ethiopia, while still others seek asylum in Sudan, the common denominator the participants of the study see is cultural affinity (religion, language and blood relations) between themselves and the local hosts.

> To begin with, there is something that binds us. Our religion is the same. Our language is the same. … Everything is interlinked. The people are intermarried. We came to Ethiopia because we believed this thing [cultural similarity] is there. When Eritreans come to Ethiopia, they think of this [cultural similarity]. Hence, there is no question about our unity (KI#21, a refugee, Hitsats, April 2018).

Attesting to the cultural affinity that exists between Eritreans and Ethiopians, a participant described the forced displacement of Eritreans from Eritrea to Ethiopia as a journey from home to home:

> These people are not different. … because there are no differences…. The refugees did not come from faraway places, but from close by. Hence, it is from your home to your home, to your neighbors. As a result, we are here until now (KI#12, a refugee, Adi Harush, April 2018).

The nature of relationship between the Eritrean refugees and the Tigrean Hosts

Eritreans are accommodated in four refugee camps that were built at different periods and locations in the North Western Tigray region. In this regard, Waalanhibi was the first camp to be built

immediately after the end of the Ethio-Eritrea war in 2000. But, the small number of the Kunama refugees who constituted this camp at that time were later on moved to Shimelba in June 2004. The flow Eritreans to Ethiopia increased through time and eventually Mai Ayini (2008), Adi Harush (2010), and finally Hitsets (2011/12) came into being (ARRA, 2011; 15; Interview with ARRA protection officers, April 2018). Regardless of the time of establishment and location of the camps, the interaction between the refugees and hosts has exhibited elements of dynamism and improvements over time.

As to the participants, the early contacts between the Eritrean refugees and their Ethiopian hosts were not good. Both of them were said to have been reserved and suspicious of each other. The first group of Eritrean refugees, the Kunama, who came to Ethiopia right after the end of the Ethio-Eritrea war faced a rough reaction from the surrounding local hosts and the same thing happened to each group of Eritrean refugees that were located at different places. As one refugee participant stated:

> It has been now close to ten years since this me'asker [Mai Ayini refugee camp] is opened. The contact the refugees have had with that of the surrounding local hosts then and now is in fact different. At the beginning there was lack of understanding between refugees and that of the local community (KI#6, a refugee, Mai Ayini, April 2018).

Still, other refugees and hosts also mention the prejudice exhibited by the refugees and the hosts and the words or nicknames used to refer to each group:

> At the moment, when I describe it, it is [their relationship] very good. But, earlier, there was a problem … They were offending each other. Ethiopians used to call Eritreans 'Shaibia' and by the same token Eritreans used to call Ethiopians 'Wig'i' [or Waig, Ape]. Even any passerby was attacked by either of them depending on the individual's nationality. And there used to be conflicts between individuals. But, at the moment, these words are not used any more … there is the spirit of interacting and intermingling (KI#14, a refugee, Adi Harush, April 2018).

Likewise, the local hosting communities are of the same opinion to that of the refugees. Local hosts believe their relationships change from negative to positive as time goes on:

> At the beginning, the local people almost did not like the refugees, rather they were threatened by their presence. They were questioning why the refugee camps [Mai Ayini and Adi Harush] are constructed so close to the town [Mai Tsebri]…. They were afraid that the refugees would disturb the town and that there might be conflict between the two groups (KI#9, a host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018).

Of course, the location of the refugee camps also has its own influence on the pace, space, and quality of interaction between the two groups. Eritrean refugee camps are located amidst the hosting community, but at various distances from the international border. The refugee camps are built within the hosting communities so much so that we were able to observe that the camps are open and hosts travel through the main road that penetrates through the Adi Harush camp to access Mai Tsebri town; a construction of a feeder road that crosses the Hitsats camp to reach to the Hitsats town; and the surrounding rural and urban dwellers converging in the market inside the Mai Ayini camps. The data we gathered from Shimelba camp does not show any variation as well. It is indicated that the nearby local communities of the small town called Mai Kuli carry out businesses inside the camp and even a few of the local hosts live in and around the refugee camp, just like the Adi Harush camp (KI#23, a refugee, Mai Kuli, May 2018).

Despite the overall cordial relationship between the refugees and hosts, the negative repercussions of refugee settlement have become sources of tension and conflict. Accordingly, extra pressure on natural resources (like water, wood, charcoal, soil) have been identified as the sources of conflict between the refugees and their rural hosts. In addition to these natural resources, such activities as farming and animal husbandry and their concomitant competition for grazing land has also emerged as a source of conflict, particularly among the Kunamas in Shimelba camp.

> As far as the refugee-host relationship is concerned, as time goes on, there are some questions that cannot be answered easily. For instance, the utilization of wood for cooking. … Most of the time, the refugees are getting resources from the surrounding community like dry wood, wet wood, charcoal … [as a result,] they cut trees. And when this happens, the local community does not like the cutting of trees. In other words, this is degradation and exposes the environment to various problems. … The other is that the surrounding underground water is declining as it is being shared between refugees and the local community … (KI#18, a camp protection officer, Adi Harush, April 2018).

Likewise, drunkenness, theft, violence, and gambling are taken as sources of conflict in the urban setting between refugees and hosts. Participants argue that their culture has become 'diluted' or 'mixed' with the new 'culture' of the refugees and this has been reflected among the local youth:

> Since refugees have experienced different atrocities before they come here, their behaviors like intoxication, fighting, seeing and hearing what awful things they do to their fellow [Eritreans] and others, burglary, and so on which were unknown to the community before are visible here and are associated with them to some extent. …Those unemployed and vulnerable youth began to exercise the same thing. At some point, robbery became common in the town.… I remember one time when houses were robbed in broad daylight. … Some people think that these individuals have learnt it from them [refugees] (KI#2, a host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018).

Although refugees are credited with the positive change registered in the local economy and other rewards, they are also blamed for the skyrocketing price in commodities and its concomitant economic disorder (particularly by the civil servants who do not have any other income other than their monthly salary) and the creation and spread of irregular migration of the local youth through human trafficking (KI#2, host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018; KI#11, host, Adi Harush, April 2018).

Irregular migration of the local youth through human trafficking has been singled out by the FGD conducted with the local hosts as the common social problem created in connection with the refugees. Eritrean refugees try to reach Europe or another country either legally (via resettlement) or illegally (via human trafficking). Subsequently, the local youth are drawn to the same idea of reaching Europe illegally by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, although this was not the case in the past before the coming of the Eritrean refugees. They argue that this issue has become a critical threat and a great problem for parents who are forced not only to pay thousands of *birr* to the human traffickers, but also sometimes to witness the death of their children while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea or at the hands of the traffickers.

That is being said, since the conflict broke out between the federal and that of the Tigray regional governments in November 2020, the positive changes observed in the refugee-hosts relationship have been reversed and transformed into yet another confrontation. The on-going war in Tigray is said to be hampering the refugee operation in Tigray and refugee-host relationships in the region. For instance, out of the four refugee camps, two of them (Shimelba and Hitsats) are reported to be completely destroyed, while the remaining two camps (Adi Harush and Mai Ayni) have been exchanging hands between Tigray and Amhara forces since the conflict started in November 2020. The refugees who used to reside in the destroyed camps have been forced to flee in search of security and shelter; and also the whereabouts of the majority of these refugees is not known, too. Moreover, the Eritrean refugees sheltered in the latter two camps are said to be facing huge suffering and inhumane treatments under the hands of Tigray rebel group. Statements made by Babar Baloch (UNHCR's spokesperson) and Ann Encontre (UNHCR's Representative in Ethiopia) support this observation (UNHCR, 15 July 2021; UNHCR, 27 July 2021). As Babar Baloch, UNHCR's spokesperson, stated, "an estimated 24,000 Eritrean refugees in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps in Tigray's Mai Tsebri area are facing intimidation and harassment and living in constant anguish, cut off from humanitarian assistance" (UNHCR, 27 July 2021: para.1).

Shared spaces and spaces of mutual activities

Refugees and hosts were found to interact in different spaces, share different things and even perform some activities together in some instances. And these spaces they share run the whole gamut from market places, religious places, recreational zones, environmental activities, social provisions, development works, and resources to social affairs. An informant from refugee camp stated that

> We share many things together. Particularly those of us who came earlier are participating in funerals, birthdays. … In the market, we go and buy whatever we want. There is no such thing as you stay or you go ahead. Again, at the bank, we are served equally [just like the hosts] (KI#16, a refugee, Adi Harush, April 2018).

Another one added: "Here we [the refugees] have St. Gabriel church and the surrounding community come to and pray at our church. And at another time we go to the churches [of the host community] around us like St. Michael, St. Mary" (KI#17, a refugee, Adi Harush, April 2018).

Others mentioned the environmental activities they carried out:

> The refugees, along with the local community, are participating in the conservation of the soil and water and the planting of trees. Since the majority of the surrounding community are farmers, even sometimes refugees [who formed family ties through marriage] also help them with their farming activities" (KI#6, a refugee, Mai Ayini, April 2018).

Still others highlight social and business aspects of the interaction between the two groups:

> Eritrean refugees are integrated with the local community in many dimensions. If you take marriage … some are married to Ethiopians and live here. They also come here [Mai Tsebri town] and stay until the time they are allowed to… they have fun and enjoy as they wish. If it is shopping, they also shop and go. So, there is no such discrimination (KI#8, a host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018).

Also, social services and public facilities (like schools, water, electricity and health centers), which are constructed and provided within the refugee camps and among the local residents, are accessed and shared by both refugees and hosts. For instance, children of the local communities and refugees go to similar primary, junior and high schools depending on where the schools are located, where a high school built by the local hosts admits refugees and primary schools built for refugees admit students from the local population. By the same token, the surrounding communities and refugees also share health centers that are found in the refugee camps and in the towns like Shire, respectively. This finding is supported by UNHCR's report that shows how Ethiopia is progressing in the inclusion of refugees in the country's national systems like education, water, child protection, and health. This integrated approach is supposed to benefit both the refugees and the hosts (UNHCR, 2017).

Also, refugees and hosts are said to celebrate annual political holidays like the downfall of the Derg regime (May 28) and the establishment of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (February 18) (from the Ethiopian side) and the independence of Eritrea (May 24) (from the Eritrean side); and religious holidays like Christmas and Easter. In some areas where land is available (like the Shemelba, Mai Ayini, and Adi Harush camps), refugees are also renting farm land from and entering into sharecropping agreements with the local peasants through an unofficial method and producing various agricultural products like onions, maize and tomatoes. In addition to renting and sharecropping arrangements, the Kunama refugees in Shimelba are also utilizing the gardening area. It is given to them by the authorities. 198 households have become beneficiaries of the gardening area that is close to a total of 4 hectares (KI#23, a refugee, Shimelba, May 2018). As one local host stated, in all these cases of spaces of interaction and shared spaces as one local host stated, Eritrean refugees seem to be understood and treated as neighbors, not even as strangers.

Factors behind the changing refugee-host relationships

As it has been stated above, the initial contact between the two groups was not friendly. And the reasons for such characteristics are said to be such interrelated factors: the character of the refugees, the attitude of the hosts towards the refugees, the formative years of the camp, and the lingering impact of the Ethio-Eritrean war. Here is how a participant described the refugees at the beginning, *"initially, they* [refugees] *used to get drunk, stay long even after 6 pm* [the deadline to go to their camp]*, and disturb the town"* (KI#3, a police officer, Mai Tsebri, April 2018). Also, some have highlighted 'bad' sexual behavior of the refugees (like hugging and kissing in public and recreational spaces) that did not conform to the culture of the local hosts as a factor that negatively influenced the attitude of the hosts.

Apparently, such kinds of ideas were repeatedly mentioned by the local hosts and as such might have contributed to the already negative attitude the locals had towards the refugees. The local hosts saw the refugees as threat to their normal life and these threats were linked with issues of land, socio-economic problems, and the location of the camps:

> … [sections of] the local population felt that they would lose their land … they thought their land was going to be occupied by Tegaru [Tigreans]. Some also felt that this [settlement of refugees] would

create social and economic hardships. …they were complaining that the camp was close to the town … [hence] the people were asking the wereda officials why they were settling refugees here (KI#7, a host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018).

Such feelings of the local hosts appear to go contrary to what the ARRA officers claim and show that the Ethiopian government probably did not properly involve the local population at large. As to the ARRA officers, site selection for the refugee camp takes three issues into consideration, namely, the issue of land, popular consent, and the environment.

> The decision to establish the camps was based on the topography of the land and the utility of the land at that specific moment. … [And also] how the local resources supports such size of refugees. It [foundation of the camps] took the issue of resources into consideration so that it could avoid scramble for resources with the local community and even environmental degradation. A camp is founded only after a land that the surrounding community has not utilized until now was identified, studied, and finally a decision is passed. … with the permission of the zone, wereda, kebele administration and eventually discussed by the people (KI#15, a camp coordinator, Embamadre, April 2018).

Evidently, the popular consent the government claims to have is not corroborated by the data we gathered from the hosts. A testament to this argument is what a certain participant said: "What will you do if the government decides [to settle refugees]?" (KI#11, a host, Adi Harush, April 2018).

The other interrelated factor mentioned by the hosts has been linked to the formative years of the camps. As to the hosts, in the earlier years when the refugees arrived, there was no exchange of goods taking place in the camps and refugees flocked to the nearby towns to satisfy their needs. This happened to exacerbate the fear the hosts had.

> At the beginning, we used to see some problems … because at that time their camp [the refugees] was not furnished and they used to carry out much of their activities here [in the town] with us. … for market, to entertain, to use internet …[as a result] they used to spent much of their time here and it was common to see them here … so, there were some problems at that time like fighting in the bars and pubs (KI#7, a host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018).

Lastly, besides to these factors, the impact of the Ethio-Eritrean war was implicitly mentioned by the local hosts as a reason why there was no friendly contact at the beginning. For instance, local hosts used to see the refugees as spies of Isayas Afeworki and as such see them as a threat to the Ethiopian people and state. But, it must be admitted, this 'war effect' appeared to have limited role in the discussions we had as the participants focused largely on their socio-economic conditions and 'bad' character of the Eritreans.

The unfriendly atmosphere did not last long, however. It was eventually replaced by a much better atmosphere. As time goes on, the relationship between the refugees and the hosts have changed for better. And the factors that facilitated the current course of their interaction are further discussed below.

The aspiration of the refugees: except for the elderly among the Kunama refugees who preferred to stay in Ethiopia, the majority interviewed refugees either on one-to-one or in group basis are interested first of all to go back to their home state (voluntary repatriation) and next, to go to a third country either in Europe or the North America (resettlement).

> To begin with, if things change in Eritrea and there is peace, then we want to go to our country. … But, until peace comes … until something happens to the regime there [Eritrea]… because the youth generation wants to do something in their life and transform themselves economically, it would be nice if a resettlement opportunity is created so that the youth could work and be self-reliant (KI#21, a refugee, Hitsats, April 2018).

Indeed, refugees' interest to achieve either of these durable solutions emanated from the reasons for their flight to Ethiopia, namely, to escape political oppression and economic woes. In fact, many of the Eritrean refugees are said to have families or relatives abroad and these refugees seek asylum in Ethiopia in order to join their families via this same country. Likewise, as to the hosts, the refugees are not interested in staying in Ethiopia; rather they want to use Ethiopia as a transit to reach their imagined or planned destination:

> The refugees are using their [refugee] status as a bridge to reach another foreign country. That is it. Their objective is to go abroad legally or illegally via human trafficking. As such, they want to have a

peaceful relationship with the local community. … Because they are looking for a passage until they go …. (KI#8, a host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018).

The documents reviewed attest to this. Compared to the other refugee groups that are living in Ethiopia, the Eritreans have highly engaged in secondary migration out of Ethiopia due to the inadequacy of humanitarian, support their prior of reaching Europe via Sudan, Egypt, and Libya (Samuel Hall, 2014; ARRA, 2015, 2016). The UNHCR/DRC (2016) study, which examined the attitudes of refugees in Ethiopia towards secondary migration revealed that 56 percent of the Eritreans refugees in the Tigray region showed intentions to engage in secondary migration, while one-third of Somali refugees in the Somali region and one percent of Eritreans refugees in the Afar region indicated to do so.

Moreover, the cultural and ethnic affinity that the participants of the study indicated with that of the local hosts can also be taken as a key factor in encouraging the prevailing favorable interaction between the two groups.

Shared Economic Interests: The attitude of hosts has also changed over time. The change of perception is understood to originate from different sources. Some see the economic benefits that came with the refugees as a central reason. Refugees are said to have established economic links with the rural and urban hosts are supporting the local economy. For instance, rural hosts supply the refugees with charcoal, wood, agricultural products, animals (like sheep and goat), and labor force (women and men), while urban hosts provide refugees with services, including hotel, cafeterias, banking, shops, boutiques and other recreational centers. Likewise, refugees supply the rural hosts with things that cannot be found in rural areas, namely, coffee, sugar, drinks, and the like. Thus, economic relationship is established as the refugee camp is serving as an urban location and source of consumption for the rural hosts and urban services.

> The refugees have become the key to the active economic activity in the town… Thus, it [the economic benefit] has changed our minds. We see it as a compensation to what we have lost during the war [Ethio-Eritrea]. …. What you can take as a major contribution is there is an economic awakening [of the town of Mai Tsebri]. …. if you had seen the town ten years ago and if you saw the current state of the town and compared the two, there is a clear difference. Shops have mushroomed. Tea houses and some entertainment businesses have increased. Such things are linked with them [the refugees] to some extent. They [the refugees] have revived the town. They buy raw materials from the local community. … like vegetables, fruits, sheep, goat, and the like. This increases the transaction (KI#4, a host, Mai Tsebri, April 2018).

Thus, the local economy has been booming and traders were benefiting. Apparently, hosts are also said to have frequently asked the authorities why they put restrictions on refugees' mobility to towns and made them go to their camps before 6 pm (KI#20, a camp protection officer, Hitsats, April 2018). The local economy is also assumed to be dependent on the refugees so much so that the local communities are worried about what would happen if and when the refugee camp is closed: "they ask what would be the fate of this Mai Tsebri town when refugees go" (KI#18, a camp protection officer, Adi Harush, April 2018).

Better Social Service Provisions: Apart from the economic aspect, others also refer to the social provisions local hosts are getting by the very presence of refugees: "even if it is not enough, the local communities are sharing such services as education, health, water, and electricity with the refugees because of the refugee program. They are beneficiaries of clean water, free education, and free healthcare system…" (KI#15, a camp coordinator, Embamadre, April 2018). Another one added: "We are doing great. Our children are getting education. … The government is providing them with a school uniform, something that we cannot afford. … We are washing our clothes with clean water … associations are supported by NGOs … (KI#13, a host, Adi Harush, April 2018).

The role of the government: ARRA is Ethiopia's refugee agency. As a result, as far as refugees and hosts are concerned, ARRA is involved in many activities with the end aim of consolidating the 'people-to-people' relationship between refugees and local hosts. ARRA (along with UNHCR) selects the site for the settlement of the refugees by taking the availability of land and other resources in to consideration and getting the permission from the local administrators and people. ARRA also plays

key role in shaping the interaction between refugees and hosts. For instance, it gives orientation to the refugees about vital issues they should bear in mind while they reside in Ethiopia like Ethiopian law, the hosts, and potential sources of conflict; it conducts meetings with the refugees and hosts; it establishes *selam* committee (a peace committee formed by refugees and hosts), conducts *selam* forums (that includes refugees, hosts, and authorities), and participants in the *timir* committee (a joint committee at wereda level with local administrators that focuses on security) (KI#20, camp protection officer, Hitsats, April 2018). Also, ARRA intervenes when conflict occurs between refugees and hosts and attempts to solve it through informal discussion as well as formal legal channel (KI#15, camp coordinator, Embamadre, April 2018). Local hosts and refugees also acknowledge the key role ARRA plays in the smooth interaction between the refugees and hosts.

4. Conclusion

The study has found out that the interaction between the two groups has been dynamic, transforming from almost 'closed' to 'cordial' type of relationship in the process; and now, this smooth relationship has been negatively impacted by and faced obstacles due to the on-going war between the Tigray regional and the federal governments. The key factors that have been involved in the transformation of their relationship has emerged internally from the refugees and the hosts themselves (refugees' aspiration, cultural similarity, economic benefits of refugees, familiarity and socialization between refugees and hosts) and externally from the work of the government (orientation to the refugees, establishment of *selam* committee, intervention when conflicts erupt, and conducting *selam* forums). The two groups have formed a friendly interaction despite the fact that Ethiopia and Eritrea went through a destructive war between 1998 and 2000. Thus, the impact of the war on their relationship is found to be temporary and insignificant, as (apart from their initial contact that was characterized by suspicion and restriction and where refugees were seen as threats to the Ethiopian people and state) the two groups have come to develop positive relations. Moreover, the findings of this study are also found to be relevant to the work of Levine (1979). The aspiration of the refugees was shaped by their reason of flight to Ethiopia (political oppression and economic hardship) and the reason why sections of the refugees choose Ethiopia over Sudan is cultural similarity with the local hosts (like ethnicity, language, and religion). On the other hand, the reaction of the local communities to the refugees was affected by past history (Ethio-Eritrea war) and socio-economic concerns, while later on by the social and economic benefits they are getting from the presence of refugees. Thus, cultural similarity between the refugees and local hosts did not feature in the initial contact; rather it came later on as the two groups develop some kind of mutual benefit, confidence and familiarity. Particularly, this is accurate from the perspective of the local hosts who did not see cultural similarity as a source to establish smooth relationship with the refugees from the outset. Also, as the study has revealed, the aspiration of the refugees is to visit (as they are interested in either repatriation to their country or resettlement to third country), not residence or membership, while the local hosts have exhibited elements of both reactions antagonism and friendliness as they were initially suspicious and later on more open and tolerant towards the Eritrean refugees. However, the word "compulsive" has been found to be problematic in the current study, as the participants did not show any sign of uncontrolled emotion or compulsiveness; and indeed the current cordial relationship is not entirely free from tension and conflict as well. Finally, among Levine's six types of stranger-host relationships, two of them (intruder and guest) by far reflect and relate to the current case. This is due to the fact that the aspiration of the refugees in Ethiopia have so far been restricted to visit and the related reaction of the local hosts has undergone transformation from antagonism at the beginning (intruder) to friendliness at present (guests).

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