

A History of Southern Sudan Refugees in Gambella, Ethiopia: From 1955 –2000

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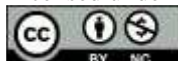
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Abstract: Ethiopia has a long tradition of accommodating refugees. The refugees from Southern Sudan were among the accommodated groups due to the destructive civil war since 1955. However, the experience of those refugees has not been a researched theme. Therefore, there is a need to reconstruct the history of southern Sudanese refugees in Gambella, Ethiopia from 1955 to 2000. This study is historical research in design. The sources were archival documents, informants selected using purposive sampling, and secondary literature. The data from these sources were exploited using narrative analysis. It is a type of analysis that connects events, actions, and experiences and arranges them chronologically. Evidence from these sources indicated that Southern Sudanese refugees arrived in Gambella in two phases. The first phase was started in 1955 due to the conflict between Anya Nya rebels and the government. Those refugees established both camp and self-settlement among local populations. They were supported by international organizations and the Ethiopian government. At that time, refugees had peaceful interaction with the host communities. Nevertheless, after the 1972 peace agreement between rebels and Sudanese government, many refugees were repatriated from Gambella, and some established permanent settlements. The revived conflict in the 1980s resulted in the second phase of refugees' influx into Gambella. In this phase, refugees were accompanied by the militant group known as the Southern Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). The arrival of SPLA had consequences in the interaction of the host community and refugees. Generally, the study discloses the Ethiopian experience of accommodating refugees.

Keywords: Ethiopia; Gambella; History; Refugee; Southern Sudan

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1. Introduction

The varying definitions given by experts of different disciplines make the term refugee vague. However, for this study, the term refugee takes the meaning given by the 1951 UN convention on refugee and Organization of African Unity. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] (1992), a refugee is an individual who is outside his country of nationality due to well-established fear of being persecuted. Similarly, the Organization of African Unity [OAU] (1969), defined refugee as a person who is compelled to leave his place of residence owing to aggression, occupation or alien domination.

A significant number of the world's population became refugees across different periods, but researches introduced the cases of refugees only after the 1980s. Earliest studies on refugees were conducted by scholars of sociology, anthropology, political science and international relation, development studies, and law. Even though the change and continuities in the experience of refugee should be understood as part of historic developments, historical researches concerning refugees have been insignificant (Marfleet, 2007).

Historians overlooked the experience of refugees in national, regional or world histories. In fact, there were specific historical works of literature on refugees such as the Jews and Hindus, but those works of literature considered refugees as passive subjects in the alien land. Nevertheless, history must recognize the experience of different groups of refugees over time, the response of host states or communities, their interaction with the host communities, and various effects (Stone, 2018). In short, the history of refugees should be incorporated and recognized by national historiography.

The refugee studies in Ethiopia have shortcomings like that of the rest parts of the world. Despite its age-old experiences with refugees, studies give priority to recent experiences. The historical perspective of refugees has assumed little emphasis. Researches regarding refugees in Ethiopia were conducted dominantly either by political scientists or anthropologists. As a result, the researches primarily focused on the impacts of refugees, ways of repatriation and the importance of integration (Hammond, 2014).

Despite the settlement of refugees in Gambella since 1955, studies on the issue unnoticed historical aspects and the issue of integrating it into the national historiography. Researchers such as (Mekuria, 2013; Girma, 2016 and Falge, 1997) were dedicated to assessing the impacts of refugees on the host communities and cultural situation within the refugee camps. In addition, the efforts of maintaining earlier tradition by refugees in Gambella were addressed (Falge, 1997). Moreover, Somali refugees have been coming to Ethiopia since 1988, following the civil war of Somalia. However, the studies on Somali refugees in Ethiopia give emphasis on the ways of mitigating the problem. These include repatriation and restoration of the refugees to their homeland (Grayson and Coles, 2013).

Refugees' settlement approaches, the interaction with the host communities, and economic and political situations as a historical process in Gambella had been left untouched. This shows the presence of historiographical gap. As a result, the primary purpose of this study is to reconstruct a history of refugees in Gambella from the 1955-2000. The study answers the following key questions.

1. What were the settlement approaches of Southern Sudanese refugees in Gambella?
2. How was the interaction of refugees and the host communities?
3. Why were refugees accompanied by armed groups?
4. What were the effects of accompanying armed groups?

2. Research Methods

This study was designed to record a history of refugees with special emphasis on Southern Sudanese in Gambella, Ethiopia. Thus, it is a historical research that employs narrative analysis of sources. Historical research is the process of investigating past events systematically to provide an account of happenings rather than mere accumulation of data and facts (Tan, 2015). In addition, it encompasses the identification and classification of different elements in the subject of study. Furthermore, it is analytical because the study focuses on why or how historical events happened (Neville, 2007).

The statements in the study are substantiated by evidence from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include archival documents from Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency and informants from Gambella region, while the secondary sources used were journal articles, books, and web sources. In order to collect sufficient and reliable data, interview and content analysis were used as important techniques.

Archival documents were carefully selected based on content description about refugees. In addition, informants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling because of the nature of the research. The study needs eye witnesses and participants of a historical event. Thus, the selected informants were either refugees or local officials and members of host community in the period between 1950s-2000. The main criterion of this type of sampling is the researchers' judgment (purposive). It is based on judging who is able to provide the best information to achieve the objectives of a study. Besides, it is very useful to construct a historical reality, describe a phenomenon or develop something about which only a little is known (Kumar, 2011).

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Introduction to Refugees in Ethiopia

Political revolution as part of liberation efforts after the Second World War and internal African socio-political problems resulted in refugees. By the year 1967, there were around 730,000 refugees in Africa. The number of African refugees peaked from 400,000 in 1964 to 6.7 million in 1995. In those years, the largest refugee-producing countries include Mozambique, Ethiopia, Angola, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Namibia, Zaire, and Chad (Degu, 2002). Refugees from south of the Sahara constituted an overwhelming number. Since the 1960s, African refugees have been characterized by the steady increase in number. Besides, refugees dominantly settled in rural areas. Those rural settlements resulted in physical changes in many regions. In addition, there were small dispersed urban refugees (Hamrell, 1967). Furthermore, African refugees had unique features such as continuous growth since the 1960s; displacement that tends to cover short distances; refugees' staying in or nearer to the place of initial arrival during their exile, and predominant movement from rural to rural (Degu, 2002).

During late 1970s and early 1980s, East Africa in general and the Horn of Africa in particular, were places for large-scale refugee movements. Civil war and famine were the major reasons for displacement. Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan were the dominant nations in displacing and hosting refugees. For instance, by the 1980s, there were more than one million Ethiopian refugees in Sudan, Kenya and Somalia. Likewise, the Sudanese civil war produced the largest number of refugees who settled in Eastern and Central Africa (Mekuria, 2013).

Ethiopia has a long history of providing relief for the people who sought asylum (Diaz, 2020). Its recorded history of receiving refugees dates back to 615 AD. Qurayish Arab persecution of the first Muslims drew refugees to the ancient Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia. Prophet Muhammad's earliest disciples and of course with his daughter Rukiya, came as refuge to Ethiopia in two phases. Christian king of ancient Aksum had given relief for those Muslims from persecutors (Abbink, 1998).

The other recorded history of Ethiopia's tradition of welcoming refugees was during the world wars. Particularly during the Second World War, large number of refugees flocked to Ethiopia to escape from the devastating conflicts. Similarly, due to the decolonization process of Africa significant number of refugees arrived in Ethiopia. The decolonization process was often accompanied by violent conflicts. Africans who were well aware of Ethiopia's independence arrived in search of humanitarian aids. Refugees from non-independent countries of Africa included freedom fighters, promoters and youths in search of education and occupation or settlement. Politically many asylum seekers took lessons to liberate their country. The visit of Nelson Mandela to Ethiopia and engagement in training could be a bold example in this case. Those refugees from different countries of Africa were supported by voluntary agencies (Hamrell, 1967).

Post-colonial African conflicts also disturbed the lives of many people in forcing them to leave their homes as refugees. The genesis of colonialism and lack of political intelligence among Africans resulted in frequently erupting conflicts. Those conflicts consumed the lives of many Africans and evicted many more as refugees. The Sudanese refugees were the results of post-colonial African conflicts. These refugees rushed to escape from the danger caused by the conflict between the rebels and the government (Nobel, 1982). According to Hamrell (1967), there were more than 100,000 Sudanese refugees settled in different countries of Africa. The vast majority of those refugees settled in central and Eastern Africa. Accordingly, around 27,000 refugees settled in Central African Republic; 24,000 refugees settled in Democratic Republic of Congo; and 55,000 refugees entered into Uganda in 1967. Ethiopia also provided shelter for refugees as signatory countries to the 1951 United Nations (UN) and 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Conventions, respectively. It maintained open borders for refugees seeking protection in the country (Girma, 2016).

There was large number of Southern Sudanese refugees who arrived at Gambella since 1955. The arrival of Southern Sudanese refugees at Gambella can be divided into two major phases. The first phase started after the eruption of Sudanese Civil War in 1955, which was fought between the Anya Nya rebels and the Sudanese government in Khartoum from 1955-1972. At that time, the Southern Sudanese communities were disturbed by Sudanese government troops and the rebels. There were also the Nuer and Anuak guerrillas who set up their bases near the border of Gambella. As a result, many Southern Sudanese were forced to cross the border into Ethiopian sub-province of Gambella (Mekuria, 2013). Most of the refugees who sought to be in Ethiopia were from the surrounding Sudanese provinces. The Ethnic composition of refugees included Shilluk, Nuer, Denka, Murle, Anuak and others. According to the memo from Gebremariam (1970), who was governor of Gambella sub-province, there were approximately 30,000 Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia after the 1955 incident of Southern Sudan.

However, with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972, which ended the First Sudanese Civil War, many South Sudanese refugees were repatriated to their homeland. In spite of this, many people from Southern Sudanese Nuer and Anuak permanently settled in Gambella Sub-province (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 1991). The first repatriation attempt was unsuccessful due to the eruption of second civil war in the 1980s. The second Sudanese civil war was erupted in 1983 and resulted in a new arrival of refugees to Ethiopia. This commenced the second phase of refugees' influx into Gambella.

3.2. Refugee Settlement Type in Gambella

Refugees often settle in two ways. Those were camp settlement and self-settlement together with the host communities (McConnachie, 2016). Similarly, Southern Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia inhabited in camps together with the host community. The memorandum from Regional Affairs Coordination Office (1989) to Hailu Yimenu, who was Ethiopian Workers Party (EWP) Committee Member and Vice Minister, showed that the onset of camp settlement in Ethiopia has been associated with the arrival of Southern Sudanese refugees in 1955. Accordingly, the Ethiopian government opened refugee camps in collaboration with the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Three camps in Asosa area in Benishangul Gumuz Region and four camps in the Gambella Region were established. Most of the refugees were settled in Southwestern Ethiopian region of Gambella. As stated by Riek, an informant, refugee camps were opened in Itang, Phunydo, Bonga and Dima. Among the refugee camps in Gambella Region, Itang was the largest of all. The refugee camps were established to give protection and deliver humanitarian aids.

Itang was established by the joint effort of the Ethiopian government and the UNHCR in 1983. The administrative issues were given to Ethiopian Administration for Refuge Affairs (ARA) and the camp communities. Other relief provision activities were done by the World Food Program (WFP), the UNHCR, and other non-governmental organizations. The overwhelming number of refugees in Itang comprises Nuer. Besides, a significant number of Dinka and a small number of Shilluk, Anuak,

Didinga, Latuka, Toposa, Murle, Nuba, Uduk, and people from Western Equatorial constituted the camp population (UNICEF, 1991). The memorandum from Regional Affairs Coordination Office (1989) indicated that those refugee camps hosted more than 300,000 Southern Sudanese refugees. An informant, Deng, also estimated more than 300,000. Indeed, the people in refugee camps were not only the Sudanese, but some Ethiopian citizens who were registered in search of social services, such as health and educational facilities.

However, all the incoming refugees were not hosted at the camps. From the total number of refugees who had arrived in the late 1950s, around 26,000 were in the refugee camps and the remaining refugees were living together with the host communities (Girma, 2016). In connection to self-settlement, urban refugees had arrived in the Town of Gambella that hosted around 5000 refugees. The refugees were allowed to dwell in the east of Jejebe River, where the office of the UNHCR was based (Mekuria, 2013). According to Tut, an informant, the place was formerly known as Chankuar, but later on, this name was changed to New Land.

The presence of fellow ethnic groups, geographical proximity, and their livelihood opened the doors for permanent settlement. For instance, most of the refugees escaped the civil war with their cattle. Some of the severely affected regions, due to civil war, were the adjacent area of Gambella in South Sudan, Upper Nile and Jongle States. The people who live in this region are Nuer, Dinka, Anywak, Murle, and others. Especially, during the civil war the factional fight within Southern Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) seriously affected the Lou and Jikany Nuer (Informant, Tut). Since the adjacent land to Gambella in Sudan is settled by Nuer, the majority of the refugees are ethnically Nuer. Some of the refugees from Anuak and Nuer did not settle in the camp and started life with their fellow Ethiopians. There were Nuer refugees who got Ethiopian Identity Card, learned in Ethiopian schools, joined higher education and employed as citizens (The memorandum from Regional Affairs Coordination Office, 1989).

3.3. Refuge Interaction with the Host Communities

3.3.1. Hospitable environment and host interest in refugee camps

Ethnic homogeneity of refugees and host communities had created opportunities for marriage arrangement and establishment of permanent settlement. The refugees from Anuak and Nuer ethnic groups could be best examples of such integration. For instance, the pastoral economic activity of the Nuer and the availability of suitable grazing land in the Ethiopian side can be a pull factor. In addition, there were no identity cards issued by the government for refugees. Earlier competition to get loyal citizenship of the people in the borderlands between Ethiopia and Sudan also continued. The sub-provincial administration in Gambella was not happy with the activities of non-governmental organizations when they had tried to identify refugees and Ethiopian citizens (The Memo from Gebremariam, 1970). The refugees that came with their cattle preferred to settle outside camps. Refugee camps were not suitable for herding cattle due to lack of water and grazing land. Thus, self-settlements were easily integrated with to ethnic groups. They began to share available resources of the host communities with them (Informant, Choul).

Ethiopian citizens had interests in refugee camps due to several factors. First, the second Sudanese civil war extended battlefields nearer to the Ethiopian border. As a result, there were an intensified insecurity and instability in the region particularly closer to the international boundary. Ethiopian citizens in the borderlands were forced to leave their dwellings. Some of them moved to refugee camps and others went to urban areas. Ethnic similarity with refugees helped citizens to join camps easily (Tadesse, 2002).

Second, better social services established in the refugee camps attracted a lot of people. There were limitations on the government to build infrastructure for the local communities whereas the refugee camps became centers of vast aid operations run by UNHCR. Educational facilities and the food aid available in refugees' camps were the main sources of attraction. The educational support package arranged by the UNHCR for refugees included scholarships (with food, shelter, and allowance) all the

way up to college and university levels. Better education facilities attracted Ethiopians to the Sudan side refugee camps. They preferred to send children to schools in refugee camps to governmental schools (Minda, 1975).

The aid foods include beans, rice, wheat flour, biscuits, cooking oil, sugar and various tinned foods (Feyissa, 2010). Informant, Tut and Gatluak also listed the aforementioned aid items provide to refugees. In line with, the food aid available in refugee camps, Ethiopians got it in two ways. Either they bought the food from refugees or they registered as refugees to get it for free. Ethiopians who were pastoralists benefited from this opportunity. In fact, the people in Gambella had the habit of crop production along the rivers after the end of the summer season, but due to dependence on hoe cultivation, often recurring natural hazards such as flooding, and drought prevented them from being self-sufficient. Therefore, the arrival of refugees was an opportunity for Ethiopians that enabled them to have easy access to food items (The memorandum from the then ice Prime Minister of Ethiopia, 1990; Memo to Illubabour Province, 1982).

3.3.2. The role of SPLA in the host-refugee interaction

The Southern Sudanese Liberation Movement (SPLM) or Southern Sudanese People Liberation Army (SPLA) was founded in 1983 for the self-determination of Southern Sudanese people. It had the political aim of creating democratic and secular Sudan. It was founded as a reaction towards the exploitation and discrimination of the south by the north and the introduction of sharia law by President Nimeiri. The movement mobilized the Nilotic southern people of Sudan to struggle against the Sudanese government. The British colonial administration used to rule Sudan by dividing it into south and north. This had a profound effect for the development of separate identities. The disagreement went bitter and culminated in conventional fighting (Falge, 1997).

The SPLA was allowed to establish its base in Ethiopia by the Derg as a tit-for-tat action against the government of Sudan (Bayissa, 2007). The Government of Sudan gave political and military support to the various Eritrean liberation movements. In addition, Khartoum backed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), and Gambella People Liberation Movement (GPLM). The Derg employed possible efforts to respond to such activities (Feyissa, 2010). The Derg responded by providing the more militant SPLM/A with comprehensive support (Wassie, 2014). In the early years of the SPLA establishment, the rift between the governments in Addis Ababa and Khartoum were getting wide. There was fierce competition between the two governments to destabilize one another.

The SPLA was not only allowed to use Gambella as a base, but it was also put in charge of security in and around the refugee camps and the border areas in collaboration with the Ethiopian government. With its headquarters near Itang, the SPLM/A set up several camps in the region and a military training center at Bonga around twenty kilometers to the east of Gambella Town. Bonga was selected probably due to its distance from the army of Sudan government considered as enemy. Its location along the mainline to Addis Ababa could make the communication between SPLA and Derg easy. Besides, SPLA had an opportunity to have health posts inside Ethiopian Region (Informant, pal).

The presence of the SPLA had a number of effects on the people of sub-province. First, it forced them to participate in the conflict with Sudan which happened in two ways. Ethiopians who had been living in the borderlands were disturbed by the fighting in the neighboring country. Sometimes, there were insurgent attacks launched by the army of Sudan inside Ethiopian territory. The refugee camps were also used as recruitment centers for the SPLA. Ethiopians inside and outside the refugee camps were forcefully recruited. The government did not give protection to citizens (Minda, 1976).

Second, since the first arrival of refugees during the imperial period, there was no hostility between the host and refugee because of cultural similarities, but during the second phase of refugee flight to Gambella, things changed. The foundation and movement of the SPLA in the region brought about destructive effects in their interaction with the Anuak. Most of the members of the SPLA were the Nuer and Denka. Soldiers of SPLA brought atrocities against the host communities. South Sudanese

Nuer participated in the conflicts with the Anuak in Ethiopia around refugee camps. Thus, peaceful interaction between Ethiopian Nuer and Anuak was disturbed. The temporary presence of the army resulted in lasting bruises on their interaction (Mekuria, 2013).

Thirdly, undisciplined soldiers of SPLA participated in illegal activities such as rape, labor abuse and forceful confiscation of properties. Ethiopians were not exceptions from the atrocities. Sometimes, they also engaged in conflict with SPLA. For instance, in May 1985, while SPLA members were transporting ammunition and maize from Minkong to Burbiey, Ethiopian Nuer fought and took materials at Makiey. SPLA members then took punitive measures against Nuer. The Derg was accused of keeping silent for such threats of the army on the citizens. Moreover, the SPLM activities put a serious threat to the wildlife in the area. Soldiers hunt animals for food, ivory and skin. This caused a great loss of wild animal population of the area (The memorandum from Regional Affairs Coordination Office, 1989).

4. Conclusions

Ethiopia had been accommodating refugees mainly from its neighboring countries in its age-old history. The refugees from Southern Sudan were among the different groups who arrived at Ethiopia. Southern Sudanese refugees began to enter Gambella from 1955 due to the erupted civil wars. The refugees entered Gambella in two phases. The first was from 1955-1972, and the second followed after 1983. The fighting between the rebels and the Sudanese government brought about a humanitarian crisis in the region. Gambella was the nearest place to those refugees to cross and settle. Most of them were from the adjoining areas of Sudan. Although they were diverse in terms of ethnicity, the Nuer and Anuak dominated the refugee population.

The refugee settlements in Gambella were of two types: camp settlement and self-settlement (together with the host communities). In the former case, after their arrival in Gambella, the refugees were registered by the UNHCR that provided them with shelter, food and other social services in the refugee camps. Refugee camps were established in Itang, Phunydo, Bonga and Dima. However, all the refugees were not settled in camps and registered by UNHCR. There was a significant number of the Sudanese who settled together with the host communities. The existence of fellow ethnic groups in Gambella enabled them to settle out of the refugee camps easily. Possession of a larger number of cattle and available land for pasture also contributed to the settlement of refugees with the host communities.

The relation between refugees and the host communities was peaceful in the first phase. It incorporated economic relation, and cultural and trade exchanges. However, the arrival of the SPLA/M in the second phase disturbed host-refugee interaction. The Southern Sudanese refugees in Gambella were accompanied by an armed group known as SPLM/A after 1983. The presence of armed group disturbed the lives of Ethiopians in Gambella. Members of the SPLA used to force locals to participate in the conflicts, engage in plundering cattle, abduction, rape, and other activities. It also resulted in prolonged inter-ethnic conflicts between the Anuak and Nuer. Many of the SPLA members were from the ethnic groups of Denka and Nuer. They used to involve in the local conflicts between Nuer and Anuak supporting one over the other.

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List of informants

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Date of interview	Place of interview	Remarks
1	Bol Tut	M	82	March 9, 2018	Tierkidie refugees' camp, Gambella	He arrived in Gambella in 1958 as a refugee. He was repatriated to Sudan after the 1972 CPA. He came to Tierkidie Refugee camp in 2014 after the onset of civil war in South Sudan.
2	Gach Deng	M	76	January 16, 2018	Kule refugees' camp, Gambella	He was in Itang Refugee Camp after the eruption of the second Sudanese civil war, repatriated in 1990, and came as refugee to Kule Camp, Gambella in 2014.
3	Gatkouth Choul	M	78	March 9, 2018	Tierkidie refugees' camp, Gambella	He lived as refugee in Ethiopia in the earliest two civil wars of Sudan. He came to Tierkidie refugees' camp due to the civil war in South Sudan.
4	Thuwat Pal	M	NA	February 13, 2019	Telephone conversation, he was in Kenya at a time of interview.	Thuwat was the secretariat of Ethiopian Workers Party/EWP in Illubabor province during the Derg regime. He was the leading individual when Gambella was promoted to administrative region. He is also the son of Qegnasmach Pal Chay.
5	Tut Riek	M	80	January 16, 2018	Kule refugees' camp, Gambella	He was in Itang Refugee Camp after the eruption of first Sudanese civil war, repatriated in 1990, and came as refugee to Kule Camp, Gambella in 2014.
6	Wiyual Gatluak	M	76	January 16, 2018	Kule refugees' camp, Gambella	He was in Itang refugee Camp in the 1980s. He came to Kule Refugees camp in 2014.