STRATEGIES OF REPATRIATION AND RE-INTEGRATION OF ERITREAN RETURNING REFUGEES

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This study examines the nature and character of repatriation and re-integration strategies of Eritrean refugees, investigates how refugees organise their own spontaneous repatriation and re-integration and establish new livelihoods for themselves in new or already existing villages, and looks at how the government of Eritrea repatriates and re-integrates refugees in settlement projects that advocate self-sufficiency. In this process, it discusses the consequences of the different repatriation and re-integration strategies for returning refugees’ both in the short and long term.

INTRODUCTION

In May 1991, the Eritrean Peoples’ Liberation Front liberated the capital, Asmara, and Eritrea won its de facto independence. During the foregoing thirty years of war with Ethiopia, more than 700,000 Eritreans fled their country, and of these half a million found refuge in the rural camps and urban centres of Eastern Sudan and in and around Khartoum and Omdurman. The majority of these refugees fled from the western regions where the effects of war and drought were particularly prolonged and severe, and where, since the 1960s, these devastations continued to rage reaching new heights and escalations intermittently. Thus, in response to the war situation and recurrent droughts many returning refugees abandoned the western lowlands and migrated to villages, towns and cities in the Sudan (UNHCR 1995:15; Gaim 1996a:67). By mid 1995 only about 165,000 women, men and children had returned in organised and unorganised manner.

The majority of these spontaneous returning refugees were women refugees from the settlement sites in the Sudan and many of them were returning without any capital or means of production, and hence placing severe pressure on very limited facilities and resources of a new nation state (Sorenson 1994:61). Apparently, the fact that war and everyday violence in Eritrea have stopped did not give the majority of refugees enough reason to go back (Moussa 1995:26; Gaim 1996a:51, 1996b:60). This can be understood from the fact that the massive human displacement that took place both within and across Eritrea’s borders was caused by a long-term interplay of political, economic, social, military
and environmental factors, and not exclusively by the actual war. People fled to seek safety and security and for them now to return home means giving up a position of relative security built up in exile over the years (Hendrie 1991:207).

During exile in Sudan the Eritrean refugees have undergone socio-economic, cultural and personal transformation. It has, for example, been observed that community cohesion has to a large extent broken down, market relationships have replaced the main features of the once prevailing social relations between households, which included reciprocal exchanges of food, shelter and labour (Abbebe 1997:431), and social networks that used to provide support in times of crises weakened (Bascom 1996:68; Gaim 1996a:40,1996b:59). Crucial is the observation that refugees returning spontaneously and self-settling and those settled by the government experienced this decline in their security differently and had different strategies of response towards it. In the adverse environments of exile, it was especially women refugees who resourcefully developed new strategies of creating a bearable living for themselves and their communities (Bright 1992:11; Mespadden and Moussa 1993:205; Gaim 1995:16; Moussa 1995:27).

This affected existing social security mechanisms and induced the development of new strategies. In Khartoum, for example, Eritrean women refugees set up community tea shops and restaurants which functioned as information networks and offered support structures. Many took up work as domestic maids whereas others were forced into prostitution in order to generate sufficient income for the survival of their families. Before their diaspora to Sudan, the majority of these women had never participated in work outside the home (Green 1994:7; Gaim 1995:19). These developments are all the more interesting in view of the fact that the Eritrean women had to operate in a Sudanese culture where gender relationships and constructs are defined by shari’a or Islamic law (McSpadden and Moussa 1993:219).

During exile many women refugees have remade themselves in different religious environments in terms of occupation, education and expectations. Such developments clearly have considerable ramifications for the better understanding of gender roles involved in strategies for repatriation and re-integration. This study thus focuses on the post-return strategies of women refugees from the Sudan, looks at their access to services such as health and education, investigates the growth of social and economic networks and the development of human resource empowerment of women returnees, and examines whether the impact of Islam in Sudan on image-building and other exile experiences and change processes continue or cease at repatriation. All these issues are addressed in light of economic changes and political transitions in Eritrea.

During the three decades of war of liberation in Eritrea, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front’s struggle for independence was accompanied by a struggle for the elimination of traditional social divisions based on religion, eth-
nicity, gender, regionalism and class. ‘Gender equality’, which was high on the
list, was implemented through various reforms (Elias 1996:47; Styan 1996:87).
For example, women’s political representation, which had formerly been less
than marginal, was established at village and national levels whereby women’s
concerns were integrated into the national policy-making process through the
intervention of the National Union of Eritrean Women. Women’s grassroots
organisations were set up, focusing on self-help rebuilding of houses, schools,
health clinics and other community services.

Prior to the revolution, land tenure systems did not allow women to
own land or livestock. In about half of the country’s villages, this condi-
tion changed due to the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front’s land reform
which accorded extensive land rights to divorced, widowed and childless
women. One can reasonably assume that these social, political and eco-
nomic reforms envisaged and implemented by the Eritrean Peoples Libera-
tion Front affected existing gender relations and gender constructs (Marcus
1995:13). Although it is well known that the actual impact varied per region
due to differences in the degree and length of Eritrean Peoples Liberation
Front’s control during the conflict, and was further influenced by the ethnic
and religious groups living there, very little information is available regard-
ing gender issues in the post-war period, and therefore this essay critically
examines these gender issues and how Eritrean women and men, both re-
turnees and stayees, found themselves in the insecure reality of a land in
transition from a ‘war culture’ to a ‘peace culture’ (Moussa 1995:21). By
leaving Sudan and returning to their home country, the Eritrean refugees
started on a long-term and multifaceted process of re-establishment and
re-integration into their former society. This process was significantly af-
fected by the articulation of the above described changes in social security
and gender identity that have taken place simultaneously, though with dif-
ferent consequences, in Sudan and in Eritrea.

It is estimated that about one third of the refugee households returning
to Eritrea are female headed (Sorensen 1996:61). The process of re-integration
of refugee women returnees is generally assumed to be seriously hampered by
the lack of protection from a male family head, restricted access to land, limited
control over productive resources like livestock and shortage of adult labour
(Green 1994:9; Moussa 1995:30). They are therefore commonly labeled as “vul-
nerable groups”. However, this vulnerability should not be taken as a matter
of course but requires careful examination in the actual daily lives of women
in post-war Eritrea. Expecting to shed a new light on the alleged vulnerability,
this research directs its attention at three fields of investigation: the concept of
human security itself, gender and material and non-material insecurity in the life
histories of Eritrean returnees and repatriated refugees.
Very few studies have so far focused on actual local conditions of insecurity and the multiple ways in which these are perceived and coped with by the people themselves (Benedict 1991:10; Lemay 1993:36). The concept of human security as advanced by Holzner (1997:17) contributes to a better understanding of this very subject, and in this research it is taken as the leading concept for studying the predicament of Eritrean returning refugees for the following reasons: Firstly, the concept of human security provides more scope to include in this research the meaningful participation of returning refugees in order to achieve social security in the places of return. Here returning refugees who experience and try to cope with insecurity are taken as the central point of departure and the primary focus of analysis. In this research, therefore, attention is directed at the diverse and creative strategies which women and men returning refugees as individuals and groups use to manage and transform the conditions of their insecurities and to understand the cultural constructions that underlie these changes. Secondly, Holzner’s concept of human security as a dynamic concept which allows for the study of how the past, present and future are tied together in people’s perception of insecurity and in the strategies they develop and employ to cope with actual instances of insecurity is particularly applicable in contexts of refugee repatriation and re-integration during times of transition and change, like that in Eritrea.

A study on refugees is basically a study on social changes, and at the same time the changes taking place in the lives of refugees and returnees are not definite and isolated events. Rather repatriation and re-integration are just names for one phase in an ongoing process experienced by refugees as continuous rather than as divisible in-separate entities of space and time (Allen et al. 1996:19; Sorensen 1996:44). Thirdly, human security is a wider concept than social security, as it encompasses “all types of security which involve human individuals and/or groups protected or protecting against all kinds of threat found in their human environments” (Holzner 1997:9:25). Insecurity thus involves the socio-economic and the political, but also includes the personal, psychological and emotional insecurity that people feel in situations of poverty, diaspora and/or displacement. For the sake of clarity, in this research, the socio-economic insecurity is referred to as ‘material’ while the mental and behavioural insecurity is referred to as ‘non-material’.

Within the interdisciplinary study of human security it is now generally acknowledged that an institutional approach to social security in the Third World does not provide a full picture of situations because this part of the world is marked by different social and economic realities (Taylor 1994:36; Leliveld 1994:50). Although the provision of human security is usually attributed to the state, in most developing countries the majority of the population remains outside the sphere of state protection and instead has to rely primarily on local
human security arrangements (Hendersen 1997:39). Furthermore, describing different human security systems through terms like formal/informal and traditional/modern is both simplistic and misleading as these dichotomies do not reflect reality but instead show “different degrees of complexity and plurality in the social organisation of human security” (Taylor 1994:83). In a recent contribution to the study of human security in developing countries, the same author argues that these drawbacks will be overcome when the institutional approach to human security is replaced by what he calls a functional approach. The benefits of such functional approach are integrated into this research in order to properly understand the human security strategies of Eritrean refugees returning to rural and urban locations.

In principle, the policy of the Eritrean government allows refugee returnees the freedom to choose their own destination. By comparing those returning to rural and urban areas, this research reveals some of the structural and incidental differences among Eritrean returning women refugees as regards the dynamics of their strategies in averting vulnerability. In this context, the major influences on women refugees’ perceptions of insecurity and their strategies of coping include: a) the socio-economic, cultural and personal transformations undergone while in exile in Sudan, and b) the different resource environments of villages and towns determining the variation in intensity of insecurity and the strategies available for coping with them. The differences between these resource environments involved an investigation of a) the actual material insecurity and access to productive resources, and b) the receptiveness on the part of community members who never left the country as this, to a large extent, determined whether returning refugees are included in or excluded from supportive social security networks (Hansen 1992:28; Mabe 1994:81).

The impact of diaspora and exile on Eritrean women refugees has been diverse. Gaim (1995:15) typifies these varied experiences in Sudan by referring to women refugees in urban areas as ‘agents of change’ and to those in rural settlements as ‘sources of continuity’. However, several other studies (eg. DeWaal 1988:131; Kuhlman 1996:67) also show that in the rural settlements in Eastern Sudan patriarchal relations were intensified, which for the women meant a greater degree of restriction and subordination than before, while many of those living in the city of Khartoum managed to, and were forced to, take on new responsibilities which effected changes in gender relations that instead gave them more freedom. The strength and resilience that many of these women built in exile provided powerful resources for their reestablishment and re-integration into Eritrean society. The rules, roles and responsibilities that govern interaction between returning refugees and ‘stayees’ are defined by how economic security is acquired in either rural or urban places of return. In this respect, the challenge of creating a new livelihood in both rural and urban post-return places is
different. According to Gaim (1996a:33) many of the former rural dwellers who became urbanised in Sudan wanted to settle in popular urban destinations in the western lowlands of Eritrea during return. Elias (1996:24) also notes that many of those who lived in the large refugee settlements wished to return to towns in Eritrea, as they have become used to amenities and services like schools, clinics, running water and flour mills—‘luxuries’ they do not wish to give up.

Indeed many returning refugees from camps located close to towns were technically and socially ill equipped for farming and hence opted to proceed to urban locations to seek employment, market and educational opportunities, and health services. Since they were used to individual refugee entitlements they became hostile to community-oriented approaches in rural settings of return. Such returning refugees also drifted back to towns at the first opportunity of return because of limited cash circulation in rural places, because of lack of the necessary skills, strategies or material resources for rapidly achieving self-sufficiency in rural areas of return, or still due to the acquisition of urban-applicable skills and/or capital during exile.

In contrast, returning refugees who never had major capital investment nor any particular skill during exile returned to rural life in search of government supported economic security through access to credits, fertilizers, food and fodder, seeds and farm implements and through favourable terms of trade for agricultural products, capital inputs, cooperative activities, and reciprocal exchanges under-girding rural subsistence economies. Indeed, many returning refugees referred to social security advantages afforded by return through kinship relations in former rural communities, while others mentioned that the personal autonomy attained in exile was maintained through return to urban places.

In general, this essay examines the socio-economic contexts of repatriation and re-integration in order to understand the consequences of the different resettlement strategies of returning refugees, and sheds light on the material and non-material insecurities of women and men returning refugees and the strategies and threads of ‘strengths of character’ they developed to cope with these challenges in post-war Eritrea. Its findings indicate that the majority of these refugees encountered feelings of psychosocial and emotional insecurity and material vulnerability as a combined result of the traumatic experiences of diaspora and exile and the challenges of rebuilding a life back home in an environment that has changed.

Given the fact that gender constructs and relations have undergone transformation both among the refugee communities in Sudan and in Eritrea under influence of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front, gender is in this essay, regarded as a crucial factor mediating the process of building a ‘life in security’ upon return. Indeed, it is true that material and non-material insecurity links up with people’s vulnerability, but this research extends this discussion to examine
whether the experiences of diaspora, exile and return affect people's vulnerability in different ways. A comparison between Eritreans returning to rural areas and those settling in towns, for example, illustrates that vulnerability increases through experiences in the urban places of return. In short, this essay shows how women and men mediate their own active involvement in the re-integration process and how in both rural and urban locations they draw on traditional and novel strategies in order to normalise and give meaning to their lives back in Eritrea.

The Eritrean refugees that I describe in this study are almost all in either governmentally-organised camps or in self-settled villages. They recently arrived in the camps and villages and needed emergency care for various medical, educational and economic crises. The majority are self-settled people who have been refugees for a number of years and whose problems are more chronic than they are epidemic. These refugees worked on their own, usually without government direction, to re-establish an independent rural and urban livelihood and lifestyle similar to the one they left behind when they crossed to the Sudan where most of them continued to be refugees for years. This is the major reason why the number of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan kept growing every year. Each new wave supplemented an earlier, relatively stable, existing refugee population. To some extent, this stability prevailed due to the continuation of war and war-related disturbances between Eritrea and Ethiopia that prevented refugees from repatriating. However, stability also existed because Eritrean refugees, even after decades in the Sudan, continued to be defined and counted as refugees. The refugee concept in Eritrea and elsewhere, I am sure, suggests a temporary or transient condition, but one of the key conceptual questions about the refugee status is how it ends. When does a person stop being a refugee, and why? This complex issue has legal, sociological, philosophical, and political dimensions.

In sum, Eritrean refugees have been fleeing war in their country since the 1960s. Crossing into the Sudan, they settled in border villages and some ended up in towns and cities in the hinterland. These returning refugees who in the last decade or so years repatriated and resettled in the Gaš Barka region of Eritrea are all members of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups practicing patrilocal post-marital residence. In this region of Eritrea, patterns of hosting kin were well established long before the refugees began to arrive. I quickly noted that resettlement and re-integration processes had been socially and politically institutionalised and that refugee re-integration was a three-phased process. The first phase was activating kin relationship in order to obtain food and shelter from their kin. Although villagers who never left did not believe in hospitality to strangers, they felt obliged regarding hospitality for visiting kin. The second phase involved gaining permission to reside in the area of resettlement through administrative arrangements. The final phase of re-integration was achieving economic self-sufficiency by building a house and tilling the land.
We know little about self-settled refugees. Chambers (1993:388) outlines serious problems with self-settlement, such as poverty, mixed reception in hospitality, poor access to land, unequal access to goods and services, and costs to the poorer hosts. Moreover, we do not know how they use members of their social networks to obtain assistance or how they get information about formal programmes of support, should such programmes exist in rural areas. It is in this regard that the issue of providing social support to re-integrated refugees merits attention. By 2001, 80 percent of Eritrean returning refugees living in Gaš Barka were self-settled. They were on arrival given plots of land, food rations, blankets, clothing, and sometimes tools, and were expected to become self-sufficient in producing their staple food requirements through farming. In this context, the returning refugees experienced problems related not only to self-settlement, but also to the dire conditions of economic hardships. These conditions only compounded the problems of obtaining social support for the newly arrived refugees. Traditional sources of hospitality were stressed in terms of food production and fewer resources were available for newly re-integrated refugees.

Self-settled refugees in rural villages were more integrated than those who lived in towns because local villagers viewed refugee and host relationship in kinship terms. Indeed, the self-settled refugees who were interviewed and observed in rural villages were no longer considered refugees. They thought and said that they were villagers, and their local hosts agreed to the fact that they were not any longer strangers or new comers. They had stopped being refugees and had in time assumed the status of villagers. In sum, I, in this study, concentrated only on self-settled repatriated refugees in the rural areas of Gaš Barka where relationships are strongly kin-based, and so traditional hospitality in this area meant that repatriated refugees in villages were cared for and provided with food and shelter by their kin. To cope with the stress of re-integration, refugees hold on to the familiar and try to make sense of things as they did before they fled for their lives. To relocate with kin, neighbours, and co-ethnics helped repatriated refugees recreate the security they felt in their previous communities. Therefore, the study maintains that refugees’ social networks are small and composed of relatives and other previously known contacts.

**METHODOLOGY**

Most of my in-depth understanding of Eritrean refugees comes from the intensive study of returnees settled in two urban and two rural locations. The arguments I make reflect the lessons learned over a period of 8 months in these returning refugee settlements. These are refugees who fled from the war with Ethiopia into neighbouring Sudan. Most of them settled in existing villages and towns while some ended up in government-supervised settlement projects.
I first began to learn about and from self-settled refugees while conducting a damage assessment in the war-affected areas of the Gaš Barka region of Eritrea in 1998. A few refugees were arriving from the Sudan during this period, but most of them had arrived three or four years before.

I have returned to these villages and towns a number of times since then, most recently for an extended stay of five months in 2001. Once I arrived in Gaš Barka, I shared a house with a repatriated refugee family in Fanko. The senior Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Commission person arranged a meeting with repatriated refugee representatives in Fanko and Alebu in order to explain the study. These representatives had worked as interpreters on earlier projects. Since my interpreters were not from the immediate areas, they worked under these representatives’ supervision. Being long-time residents of these areas, the interpreters helped to validate the accuracy of the data that I gathered.

I learned of the arrival of new refugees in Fanko and Alebu from these representatives, and used snowball sampling (gathering additional repatriated refugee names from interviewed refugees and other villagers) in order to gather additional names from the repatriated refugees themselves and from their relatives. I talked with more women than men because they were easily available in the domestic domain. I talked to one adult per household who was at home and studied nearly all of the known repatriated refugee households in and around both villages within which there were 896 households that contained 3584 repatriated refugees. Seven households refused to identify themselves as repatriated refugees, in spite of neighbours and relatives identifying them as such.

All the interviews were conducted in the various languages of the repatriated refugees using representatives and interpreters. Prior to interviewing, I reviewed the interview schedule and practiced the process with both the representatives and the interpreters. I made both of them check each other’s translations to ensure that the questions and responses were being translated appropriately. Moreover, as I was alternately living in both Alebu and Fanko, I was able to observe daily life and verify some of the information presented in the interviews. Daily discussions with UNHCR officers confirmed present observations of life in the various settlement areas. In addition to the structured interviews, I mapped the social networks of 50 of these repatriated refugees. This smaller subset of consultants consisted of my key consultants, who were willing to do this additional task. In addition to asking each of these consultants about the people in the network, I met with each other person (alter) listed in the networks. The key consultant and I visited villages where each listed alter lived and asked that person who he knew on the social network lists. Although quite amused and somewhat befuddled as to why I wanted this information, they all willingly talked to me. They confirmed directly who they knew on the network lists, thus validating the data reported to me by the primary consultants. I did not measure
the consultants’ views of the support, but instead interviewed them to confirm the accuracy of their perceptions of how dense the networks were.

I used the household as the single most reliable indicator of accumulated wealth, but there is little variation among the Eritrean refugee samples in this indicator. Ownership of a blanket or a ploughshare, for example, clearly differentiated two categories of repatriated refugees. Not all self-settled refugees owned both or one of these items. Many refugees in the villages were embarrassed when asked about the number of blankets that they owned. The repatriated refugees earned some money from crops, livestock (mainly goats), and cutting wood. Everyone participated in agriculture and, to varying degrees, received some cash income through cash sales. The other sources of cash were gender-specific, linked through the customary divisions of labour and responsibility to one gender or the other. Men earned money through herding while women did so by cutting wood for fuel selling. Men refugees earned more cash income than women in all categories.

In practice, I established the degree of food self-sufficiency by asking several questions about the repatriated refugees’ behaviour during the period of study: a) Have the refugees obtained all of their staple food from their own fields? b) Which staple foods have the repatriated refugees eaten? c) What crops did the repatriated refugees plant last year? d) How many millet fields do the repatriated refugees have currently? e) Have the repatriated refugees purchased any grain flour? f) Have the repatriated refugees received any staple foods as gifts? g) If there were purchases or gifts, who else was involved, and what were the amounts and prices? The answers to these questions provided a multidimensional picture of the relationships among the production, local distribution, purchase, and consumption of staple foods. I also was able to verify in several ways whether home production provided enough staple food for repatriated refugee households, and whether these households were partially or totally dependent on kinsmen or others for staple foods. Overall, the research focuses on questions about strategies of survival adopted by returning refugees in self-settled locations and on what I learned about the relationships among self-settlement, re-integration, and the definition of refugee. These have important implications for refugee human rights and for recommendations about durable solutions.

There are methodological difficulties to this sort of study. Firstly, I did not investigate attitudes about re-integration in Gaš Barka by asking the individual point-blank where he or she felt integrated or not. The people of this region have no appropriate concepts or terms for refugee, repatriation or re-integration. Secondly, the data were self-reported and there were no direct measures of goods or services exchanged. In this context, social support is strongly influenced by perception. For example, actions meant to be supportive in the villages of resettlement were not necessarily perceived as supportive by assistance
recipients. This research did not probe into the shared cultural perceptions of what support means or how it is defined by this repatriated refugee population. It would indeed be interesting to compare repatriated refugees’ perceptions of support with villager hosts’ perceptions of support. Although perception is unique to individuals, one could assume that, with a shared ethnic and linguistic background, certain social norms regarding support would be also shared (Abbebe 1997:443). However, the question arises how re-integration affects that perception. Further research is therefore needed to more finely interpret the meaning of support for this and other repatriated refugees.

The villages’ sample included people who had fled Eritrea during the war and, as a control group, people who had been living in Eritrea since then. The most common reasons for self-placement from both refugees and residents were as follows: a) “I belong here”, “I am member of the village”, b) “I have built my house and I have fields”, c) “I have lived here a long time”, or “I have grown old here before I left to the Sudan”. Only very few defined themselves as strangers. These are very ill, octogenarians who all the persons whom they knew had already died, and who were now left to die among people they did not know. They were also considered strangers because local villagers continued to complain about the presence of refugees in these villages and to emphasise that the refugees did not belong there. Similarly, the men and women who settled in towns were not considered part of the local towns. Instead, they had become permanent strangers.

SETTLEMENT STRATEGIES

This section of the discussion is an attempt at describing how returning refugees strategise their self-settlement and how they obtain social support from villagers who never left Eritrea. The displacement of Eritrean refugees from the Sudan and their subsequent repatriation to their country of origin are important development issues that primarily affected an already war weakened economy. In this regard, the long-term consequences of refugee settlement and re-integration are important for refugees and their hosts. There were two apparent settlement strategies developed by those refugees who settled in rural places. Many returning refugees organised their own settlements and established new livelihoods for themselves in already existing villages. This strategy, as indicated earlier, is known as spontaneous settlement, or self-settlement. What are the consequences of this settlement strategy for the Eritrean returning refugees’ well-being in the long term? The advantages and costs of this strategy have been widely debated. I conclude that, in self-settlement, the refugees retain more power over other people and, thus, more stability and control over their lives. Many attest that durable solutions occur when refugees stop being refu-
The most logical way for dropping the refugee status is repatriation to and re-integration in their country of origin. The Eritrean refugees from the Sudan achieved a durable situation through this same process.

By and large, the repatriated refugees in Alebu and Fanko were found to be self-sufficient in food resources. Self-sufficiency for both men and women repatriated refugees correlates fairly well with differences in the average yield per millet field, supporting the impression that variable control of field grown millet is the single most important factor in terms of food self-sufficiency. Approximately one-fourth of repatriated women refugees in each category were found to be totally dependent on others, usually close kin, for their staple food, but total dependency was not very common for repatriated men refugees. Similarly, there were greater differences between men and women in the repatriated refugee populations in both Alebu and Fanko than in the host populations, but the differences were not always in the same direction. For example, repatriated refugee men were self-sufficient and had more crop yields than repatriated self-settled refugee women.

The major staple crop in these locations is bultug (Pennisetum typhoides). Although bultug is not hard to pound by hand, most repatriated women refugees preferred to take bultug to a grinding mill in order to process their staple food. The grinding mills in both Alebu and Fanko have over the years worn out, and with the recent repatriation of refugees, the remaining mills have become overworked. Many refugees reported that they sometimes had to wait in line at a mill for one entire day to have their bultug ground. This is the reason why repatriated refugees in these two villages sometimes purchased bultug flour when they still had bultug grain stored in their houses. This perhaps is also one of the reasons why some repatriated refugees are not eating the normal two meals a day.

A meal for the large majority of repatriated refugees in Alebu and Fanko consists of a bultug pancake and some sort of vegetable or lentil sauce, prepared in the traditional manner, sometimes accompanied by a relish side dish of flesh foods. Only these combinations make a meal; other foods and other means of preparing them are by most repatriated refugees categorised as “snacks”. Refugee household members who have consumed only snacks describe themselves as having not really eaten a meal. For them two meals a day, usually one around mid-day and another in the early evening, are normal. Some repatriated refugees eat less than twice a day because they have no appetite, but fewer than two meals a day is usually understood by them as a sign of lacking critical resources.

The differences in meal frequency between married repatriated refugee men and women is influenced by marital patterns because a polygynously married husband will receive food from both wives. In both village locations, repatriated women refugees eat less frequently than men, reflecting the relative
poverty of women, particularly those who are unmarried. Of all categories, self-settled women refugees were found to eat least often. For men refugees, there is general agreement between the data on meal frequency and food self-sufficiency. The data for women refugees are not as consistent. Repatriated refugee women were better off in terms of total self-sufficiency and numbers of millet fields, but worse off in terms of meal frequency.

The study also measured the attitudes of repatriated refugees and host villages about refugee re-integration. In essence, repatriated refugee men and women were found to be completely re-integrated. All of them felt re-integrated and at home; Alebu and Fanko villagers considered the repatriated refugees to be part of the community. Very few repatriated refugees still considered themselves as “strangers” to members of host villages even after a year’s stay in these locations. An important factor contributing to this feeling of strangeness is the attitude that for villagers and townsmen repatriated refugees have been away for far too long to be accepted as members of these communities. I did not investigate attitudes towards re-integration by asking the individual refugee point-blank whether he or she felt reintegrated or not. Attitudes towards re-integration were measured by asking about relations in general between repatriated refugees and local stayees, and whether repatriated refugees were well re-integrated.

These attitudes were also vividly expressed by refugee responses to a question about desires to repatriate to Eritrea when the war is over. A large majority of the refugees from the Sudan wanted to repatriate. The desire to repatriate was always prefaced by the qualification that the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia must really be over, since the refugees were well aware that the war has died down in the past, only to begin again, as in 1998. Statistics on attitudes toward repatriation do not represent all of the refugees since the 1960s; although the refugees interviewed included those who repatriated and resettled in these villages as of those years. Over the intervening years, in particular in the years after liberation, a large number of Eritrean refugees had already repatriated. A sample of interviewed people in Alebu, Fanko, Haggaz, and Aqordat suggests that about 10 percent of the self-settled refugee men and about 8 percent of the women had already repatriated since 1991, while about 90 percent of the refugee men and about 92 percent of the refugee women had crossed the border into Eritrea in different years since 1993. In general, it is not exactly known how many refugees repatriated to Eritrea, but consultants in the villages mentioned that many refugees returned in the years that the war seemed to be over.

Another reason given by refugees for their desire to repatriate was: “Sudan is not my country”. When asked to explain why they thought that Sudan was not their country, the repatriated refugees mentioned name-calling and exclusion and modes of ill treatment by host communities in the Sudan. Repatriated refugees also noted frequently their unhappiness with needing to obtain travel
permits from the local Sudanese administration in order to be able to leave their camp or work. Another reason given by the refugees for their desire to repatriate was the anticipation that economic condition in Eritrea would be better than those in the Sudan. For example, refugees mentioned that the depopulation of rural Eritrea because of the war meant that there would be more fertile land for crops. These local-level economic factors were commonly cited as reasons why some refugees had already repatriated over the years, and why some of them continued to travel to Eritrea after the war. The worsening national economic conditions in the Sudan also played a part in refugee dissatisfaction. Repatriated refugees talked about the high prices for many goods and the unavailability of others. For example, salt, sugar and cooking oil were not available in the border camps during much of the year. There was a limited amount of cross-border trade, mostly in food items, even with the continuing war.

Flight from one’s country, planned or not, is traumatic. Refugees often lose their homes, family ties, friends, neighbours, social acquaintances, and material goods. In the most dire circumstances, refugees lose their lives in flight. Usually, repatriation is easier if refugees have family and friends in their new home who provide social support and ease their adaptation during re-integration. In traditional societies, hospitality is offered by kin, neighbours and friends. Ethnographic findings of this study, however, indicate that these traditional forms of hospitality are merging with other forms of social support mechanisms as survival strategies. The theoretical frameworks used by psychological anthropologists to describe stress, coping, and social support (for example, Lazarus and Folkman 1984:21) have been tested in, and are based on, Western cultures. Whether these constructs have validity in non-Western contexts, specifically regarding refugee issues, has yet to be demonstrated. With that caveat in mind, and lacking alternative concepts of support specific to traditional cultures, I use these constructs to organise and define interactions between support providers and support-recipients in order to understand settlement strategies.

Coping is a process that occurs as people attempt to deal with everyday life events, as well as with times of unusual or heightened stress. There is little argument that the process of becoming a refugee, and subsequently of becoming repatriated and resettled in a new area, creates a situation of extreme stress. For many repatriated refugees, re-integration involves entering a situation that is precarious and marginalised. In this context, the relationship between the person and the environment includes stresses such as lack of food, shelter, in addition to psychological stress experienced during resettlement and re-integration. In this regard, Kulman (1995:105) argues that social support mitigates the effects of stress and acts as a coping strategy. He conceptualised support as coping assistance, or actions of significant others to assist an individual’s stress-management efforts.
Kahn and Antonucci (1980:271) offered the following typology of support functions: a) affirming or endorsing the person’s beliefs or values; b) expressing positive affect; c) offering information or education that may be useful in dealing with the situation or useful for making informed decisions, and d) providing material supports. Dakof and Taylor (1990:281) advocated the need for social support research that considers both the support provider and the type of support received. Hence, social support is not provided in a vacuum. It originates from relations with members of one’s social network. These are a series of structurally and functionally varying ties between individuals (Heller and Swindle 1983:91). Networks that are diverse in nature and capable of providing multifaceted support appear to enhance perception of social instrumental support that the refugees received during their re-integration. One of the earliest anthropological studies of social networks was Mitchell’s Social Networks in Urban Situations (1969:47). This volume of essays regarding social relationships in Zambia and Zimbabwe focused on urban-based networks and did not consider rural networks. By contrast, my study concentrates on rural, village-based networks of returning refugees who self-settled in and around Alebu and Fanko in Gaš Barka.

DISCUSSION

When the repatriated refugees first arrived in Alebu and Fanko, their most pressing problems were about survival. Lack of adequate food was the first major problem. Food was given to the refugees by relatives, Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and the UNHCR. Selling possessions and using their own money to buy food also served as ways to obtain food. These categories are not exclusive, as more than half of the sample listed two to three sources of food. Lack of blankets and clothing were the next most frequently cited problems. Repatriated refugees dressed in tattered clothing and many only owned the clothing currently worn. For some unknown reason blankets were a luxury in these villages at this time and were almost impossible to purchase or obtain. At the time of my interviews, 22 percent of the repatriated refugees reported now having insufficient blankets and almost half of them did not have adequate clothing. Interestingly, no one listed shelter as a problem, although all the repatriated refugees had to obtain housing with someone else initially. The majority of the returnee sample (80 percent) were given shelter by the government and the UNHCR while others (20 percent) received housing assistance from sympathetic villagers who were previously known to them. All of the older refugees stated that they had first stayed with non-relatives. This demonstrated a change from traditional customs of only obtaining shelter from kinsmen.
When asked the question “who gave you help when you first repatriated and arrived in Alebu or Fanko? The majority of the returnees identified the government but a small number of them reported that relatives were helpful to them. Apparently, the vast majority of the repatriated refugees had relatives in these two villages, and local custom stipulated that those relatives had to help, and hence many had no problems initially due to the hospitality of their kin. Indeed, food and housing are still expected from kin because kin-based support is a group norm. Identifying one particular provider of support is thus conceptually inside this cultural norm\(^5\). In urban locations like Haggaz and Aqordat, being employed, rather than receiving assistance, continued to be the most frequently cited means of support. What are then the cross-cultural interpretations of support and social networks?

The constructs of social support and social networks vary across cultures. In addition to the varying social norms that influence the definition, perception, and use of support, other influences may affect social network functions and characteristics. Ethnic values such as the degree to which altruism is culturally reinforced, population density, and rural versus urban conditions affect social norms and how social support is obtained from social networks. Reciprocity is an example of a social norm that may have affected perception of support. It is a strong cultural norm that prescribes kin assistance in Gaš Barka. In spite of their own impoverishment, 74 percent of the repatriated refugees in both Alebu and Fanko said that they would help other newcomer refugees. This reflected a new pattern of reciprocity in which repatriated refugees gave to the next wave of refugees, rather than back to their own support providers. I observed my own consultants assisting newly arrived refugees with gifts of food and shelter. The cultural principle is to give, but the object of the assistance had shifted to new refugees in need. There was no sense of the need to repay others for having received assistance, but there was a continued sense of commitment to helping those in need.

Defining social support in a manner that made sense to these Eritrean repatriated refugees was not straightforward. Almost all Western definitions of social support include affective or emotional support as a critical element. However, with the Eritrean repatriated refugee population, it was almost impossible to obtain data about the affective component of support. For example, I asked “who would you talk to or confide in if you had problems or if you were lonely?” Most repatriated refugees chose a relative, while a small number of the sample would talk to no one. Probing further on these responses, however, made it clear that the repatriated refugees operationalised all support in terms of need for land, for food, and for clothing and shelter. No matter how the question was phrased to elicit information about affective support, the responses clearly meant instrumental support. In this context, I tried to generate lists of social network contacts by asking who was important to these repatriated refugees and
who gave them support. As explained above, the “important people” component of the question created conceptual difficulties and did not translate across the cultural boundaries. After several weeks of observing village life, I finally asked “who do you go to visit on a daily basis or every few days?, as visiting is an important social event with the people of Gaš Barka. This question gave me the information that I was seeking regarding the types of relationships that the repatriated refugees had been able to establish in these villages.

I traced the networks of eleven repatriated refugees who had a combined total of 251 alters listed in their networks. The mean number of people listed for these networks was twenty three, but my own observations of village life indicates that the average number of people that the repatriated refugees visited was much higher. I also calculated a density measure of these networks. A density measure of 1.00 indicates that everyone knows everyone else in the network. Density of these networks ranged from 0.61 to 1.00. There is little variation in the densities measured in these networks, as six out of the eleven networks had density measures from 0.95 to 1.00. Clearly, the repatriated refugees were not isolated in Alebu and Fanko, but had overlapping patterns of long-term social relationships within and outside these settlement sites.

The fact that social networks of the repatriated refugees were very dense reflected closely bonded social groupings. Rather than having to live in isolation, the repatriated refugees were accepted by people of these villages. The composition of the networks and the support providers indicates that cultural norms regarding support and hospitality may be shifting away from kin hospitality. Indeed the information I have supports the first hypothesis that social support is provided by kin and also reveals that traditional forms of hospitality in these places of resettlement appear to be merging with other forms of assistance, such as that provided by non-relatives.

The presence of both close and distant relatives drew 76 percent of the repatriated refugees to these rural and urban locations. A small percentage (15 percent) of the repatriated refugees had no particular reason for coming to these areas, and a few (8 percent) had reasons such as “they were the closest locations to turn to.” A small number (11 percent) of the newly repatriated refugees were living with relatives who were not considered to be the “traditional” relatives from whom one would normally seek assistance. For example, there were husbands seeking help from their fathers-in-law and divorced women living in the village of their divorced husband’s kin without their ex-spouse’s presence. An additional 9 percent of the repatriated women refugees complained bitterly that their male relatives were not providing adequately for them and that this was not traditional hospitality as it should have been practiced. It may also be that the pressure for survival is greater than the pressure to conform to cultural norms. Additionally, the current difficult economic condition of an emergent nation
certainly played a role in the shifting resource allocation away from kin.

The view that people who provide support to repatriated refugees would be the same people listed in the visiting networks, was only partially supported. Although 53 percent of the alters listed in the networks were kin, nearly half (47 percent) were non-kin. Obviously, the social networks reflected the expanding circle of contacts that the repatriated refugees were able to establish with women and men who never left Eritrea. The repatriated refugees followed a conservative strategy in the sense that bonds of kinship and shared ethnicity in Gaš Barka provided continuity with the repatriated refugees’ past. However, the data also indicates that traditional patterns of support are decreasing in importance and are being supplemented by other sources, such as help from non-kin villagers.

The degree of local economic impoverishment is a factor that merits serious consideration in a future study of support systems to repatriated refugees in this region of Eritrea. Although it is not clear why traditional patterns of support decreased, it may be that poverty diminishes the ability to give material goods to others. The relationships with non-kin individuals thus reflect the determination for re-integration of the repatriated refugees and their desire to shift their ways of life in order to succeed in the larger social structure of the rural and urban settings of Alebu and Fanko and Haggaz and Aqordat respectively. In general, repatriated refugees were found to be well integrated and “at home”. They are no longer “refugees” in their eyes or in the eyes of their local hosts. Instead, repatriated refugees are now “poor peasant Eritreans” who have reintegrated socially and politically. Here the focus is on social re-integration rather than on material wealth because the former is a durable solution, and thus of special importance in any discussion of refugees. The social status of a refugee is devoid of many rights and privileges, so refugees become fortunate when they can drop that status. Because they are re-integrated and enjoy local social support, the self-settled refugees are powerful and self-confident.

Although these arguments about empowerment seem to rest on the assumption that re-integrated refugees lose all their power by becoming refugees, so any power they possess during re-integration and resettlement must be due to empowerment, I also think that the loss of power is a variable. What seems to have happened in this case of Eritrean refugees is that self-settlement allowed re-integrated refugees to conserve more of their original or pre-flight power because village life maximised “the transfer or maintenance of previous rank, status, and prestige.” Indeed re-integrated refugees continue to live in a place where their experience, skills, and acquired traditional knowledge may be put to use to rebuild their life again. These refugees became re-integrated in the rural locations not only because they are qualified in terms of kinship, or other personal or social resource relationship, but also because these changes allowed self-settled refugees to become de jure as well as de facto Eritreans and thus re-
duced the atmosphere of their insecurity in the re-settlement villages. How representative of other African refugee re-integration and resettlement situations are then these Eritrean findings? Which is better, a mode of re-integration that promotes material benefits, or one that promotes social reintegration as a durable solution? Can the procedures followed in Eritrea be modified to improve the consequence of this mode of re-integration? What are the implications for governmental and international interventions in refugee aid? The answers for each of these questions entertained in this study shed light on processes of empowerment. Chain repatriation in these villages suggests that the existence of previously settled refugees in an area may be an impetus for the repatriation of new refugees. Their successful adaptation is a source of support to the impoverished newly arrived refugees and a reason for further repatriation. In fact, new refugees saw earlier repatriated refugees as important links in resettlement. Thus, while the social networks reflected some degree of linkages to previously established relationships, it is also clear that newly formed relationships with strangers were also seen as important to the repatriated refugees. Other people listed in the networks included relatives, neighbours, friends, and other categories of relationships. My field notes indicate that 47 percent of the alters were not kin. This wider circle of contacts may suggest that the importance of kin ties as providers of support may be weakening.

CONCLUSION

Eritrean refugees began fleeing into the Sudan with the commencement of the struggle for national liberation against Ethiopia in the 1960s. Intermittent flows of refugees repatriated into their country of origin after national independence in 1991. Because the Eritrean government has always allowed repatriating refugees to self-settle in their place of choice, successful self-settlement did not require concealment. I conducted field research in the villages of Alebu and Fanko and in the towns of Aqordat and Haggaz between 2000-2002. The primary research method that allowed me to discover the extent of refugee self-settlement is interviewing and long-term participant observation. The majority of the repatriated refugees studied are Tegrā speaking as are their village and town hosts. This study of Eritrean refugees highlights some of the common difficulties and problems that refugees face from the early immediate attempts to find food, shelter and other resources to their latter attempts to integrate permanently, and generates some hypotheses in order to understand self-settled refugees. The majority of Eritrean refugees are self-settled. In this context, self-settled refugees in the rural villages were more integrated, felt more at home and were content about repatriation than those who settled in urban locations, and
that the long-term consequences of the two settlement strategies are that the rural self-settled refugees have become fully re-integrated, while those who self-settled in urban locations still sense some refugeeeness. From this point of view, the conclusions diverge in two different directions. One direction concerns the criteria for labeling people as refugees. The other direction deals with differences in strategies adopted by both those who settled in villages and towns.

The first issue revolves around the original assignment of refugee status and a disagreement between official and local people’s cultural categories. The large majority of returnees in Alebu and Fanko believed that the self-settled were no longer refugees. In internationally accepted legal terminology, Eritreans had become refugees when they fled into the Sudan.Returning refugees disputed that fleeing and coming back to kinfolk within their traditional territory constituted enough of a socio-economic, political and cultural break to make them refugees. They argued, in essence, that they ceased being refugees once they settled in places of their choice in Gaš Barka. Fundamentally, the desire for repatriation and re-integration was mostly caused by the voluntary movement of refugees into the various regions of Eritrea. This emphasises the need to a) question whether various groups involved in refugee situations share the same cultural interpretations of alienation and attainment of refugee status and b) critically examine the human consequences of voluntary movements of refugees during repatriation and re-integration. Finally, self-settlement not only means that Eritreans continue to settle themselves through customary processes that allow “strangers” to become re-integrated, but it also signifies that refugees commonly escape the notice of their governments.

In short, the status of a refugee is surrounded by declarations and covenants that are supposed to protect an individual who is temporarily unable to call upon for protection. According to UNHCR criteria, the most durable and preferred solution is repatriation. Though I agree that repatriation is often the best option and that many people wish to repatriate, I disagree with the assumed universality of repatriation. The desire to repatriate is a variable rather than a fixed value, and many propose that refugees should be given the option to settle where they want19. What then constitutes a durable solution? Durable solutions occur when refugees stop being refugees through re-integration. Indeed this case shows self-settled refugees, with the help of their local hosts, achieving de facto re-integration. At the end of my research, I noted the differences in strategies and degree of re-integration between returning refugees who settled in villages and towns, and the fact that some still considered themselves to be “strangers” in Alebu, Fanko, Agordat and Haggaz. Yet the stability of the Eritrean refugee population is, to a great extent, a result of the commitment of the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission and the local communities supporting refugees to stop being refugees, and to exchange their refugee status for another status in their country of origin.
Abbebe Kifleyesus

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NOTES

1. For an extended discussion of this phenomenon, see Rogge (1994).
2. In this context, self-settlement refers to repatriated refugees settling themselves in existing villages and towns. This kind of settlement was in some ways assisted by the government and the UNHCR.
3. For a detailed discussion regarding the arguments surrounding self-settled refugees, see Hansen (1994:4-5).
4. Despite restrictions from administrative authorities, repatriating refugees were by this time still actively entering through the Sudanese border and choosing to reside as self-settled returnees, in lieu of registering with the UNHCR.
5. UNHCR officers studied repatriated refugees in both Alebu and Fanko for six months, and I used the same rural locations to obtain comparative data on the current status of newly repatriated refugees.
6. These include widespread poverty and the breakdown of civil society due to conflicts with Ethiopia. Moreover, partly because of such factors, Eritrea has been particularly prone to major movements of human populations driven by war.
7. Some African governments sometimes place refugees in agricultural settlement projects where the refugees can cultivate and, hopefully, attain self-sufficiency. These refugees receive governmental and international assistance, often for many years. This strategy is called scheme-settlement. For details in these kinds of developments, see Benedict (1991) and Chambers (1993).
9. All repatriated refugees had at one time or another acquired Eritrean registration cards.
10. Official records of the International Red Cross, the UNHCR and the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission vary with regards to the number of refugees that repatriated to Eritrea from the Sudan in the years after independence.
11. Throughout this section, I refer to these social support systems as “visiting networks” because the repatriated refugees discussed their social relationships in terms of visiting.
12. Stress itself may be defined as a “particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984:19).
13. Lazarus and Folkman (1984:141) define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.”
14. Social network ties can be used to describe characteristics that constitute the opportunity for social support (Isreal 1982:66; Maxwell 1982:276).
15. Clearly, the economic situation of Eritrea had not improved due to the recent
Abbebe Kifleyesus

border war with Ethiopia. The repatriated refugees were thus asking support from people already in dire economic circumstances. 

16. Density refers to how many people in the network know each other in addition to knowing “ego”, the person whose network is being mapped. 

17. Issues of empowerment and dependency elsewhere in Africa are well discussed in Harrell-Bond (1986:78). 

18. From the viewpoint of individuals and families, many wars in Africa are lasting forever. After all, two decades is a generation in the life cycle of families. When will, for example, the wars in Sudan and Somalia be finally over? Repatriation and re-integration in one’s own country of origin is an option that could end the refugee experience for millions of Africans. 

19. This is repatriation of refugees to a location where previously known refugees had repatriated.

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