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Changing Ethnic Relations. A Preliminary Investigation of Gambella, Southwest Ethiopia

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Abstract

Der folgende Beitrag¹ fasst einige Beobachtungen zu sich verändernden ethnischen Kontakten und der Transformation von Konflikten in der Region Gambella, dem westlichsten Bundesland Äthiopiens, zusammen. Gambella kann in vielerlei Hinsicht für die Schwierigkeiten von Grenzregionen zeugen. Die ökonomische Marginalisierung spiegelt die periphere Lage fernab des Zentrums wider. Eingekeilt zwischen dem Krieg im Süd-Sudan und dem äthiopischen Bürgerkrieg, war die Region Schauplatz kriegerischer Auseinandersetzungen und Auffanglager für Flüchtlinge, die die demographische Situation in Gambella verändert haben. Zusätzlich zu Flüchtlingen wurden in den 1980er Jahren durch die damalige Regierung Äthiopiens weitere (Zwangs-) Umsiedler aus dem äthiopischen Hochland nach Gambella gebracht. Diese Umsiedlungen und deren Auswirkungen auf die indigene Bevölkerung dienen hier als Ausgangspunkt für die Betrachtung der sich verändernden ethnischen Kontaktsituation. Die diversen Eingriffe in die Demographie Gambellas riefen Konflikte hervor, die sich, entgegen der weitläufigen Annahme, nicht mehr innerhalb der indigenen Bevölkerung abspielen, sondern zwischen der indigenen Bevölkerung und der multi-ethnischen Gruppe der Umsiedler, Händler und Regierungsangestellten aus dem äthiopischen Hochland (*highlanders*).

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1. Introduction

Gambella is one of Ethiopia's three multi-ethnic regional states² and is recognized as such by the Federal Government of Ethiopia. From past to present the area suffers from the multi-layered occurrence of ethnic conflicts. On the indigenous level the root causes of these conflicts reach far back into the region's history, as there have always been competitions for resources among the people with different livelihood strategies (see section 4.1.). Since the incorporation of the region into the Ethiopian state, which dates back only to the beginning of the 20th century, competitions between the indigenous elites and the agents of the central government in Addis Ababa, which is about 800 km away, have increased. During the 1980s the region revealed its full vulnerability as a border region. The civil war in the southern Sudan brought a huge number of refugees, mostly Nuer, Dinka, and Uduk, to the area. The camps established for them by the UNHCR were used as bases by the Southern Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLA/M) as bases. Fully accepted by the Ethiopian government, the SPLA administered the region (see section 4.2.). The region was put under strong central control and a considerable number of resettlers was brought to Gambella in the course of the national resettlement program (see section 4.3.). After the fall of the *Därg*³, the region obtained its status as a regional state, but despite the introduction of the ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, it was exposed to inter-ethnic struggle for political power. These frictions are accepted as conflicts among the two major indigenous peoples, the Anywaa and the Nuer. Today (i.e. since 2003; see section 5) these ethnic conflicts⁴ appear in new constellations of opponents, e.g. as a *highlander*⁵ vs. *Anywaa* conflict.

² Gambella Peoples and Nationalities Regional State (GPNRS) is inhabited by the Anywaa 26%, the Nuer 41%, the Majangir 7% and the Opo and Komo with each 3%. These indigenous peoples live together with a considerable number of people from the northern highlands that make up an estimated number of 29% of the population. This paper will focus on the Anywaa, the Nuer and the highlanders (see below).

³ After Ethiopia's last emperor Haile Sellassie I was deposed by a military coup, a transitional military government, generally referred to as *Därg*, which is the Amharic word for *committee*, was in power between 1974 and 1991.

⁴ These conflicts, sometimes called ethno-centric or ethno-political conflicts, are violent tensions between groups of different socio-cultural backgrounds, that usually occur for several reasons. Among those reasons are the fear of assimilation and/or eroding political power, or the struggle for material resources on the expense of other groups. In this context it is necessary to understand, that "ethnicity" is only a motive or a modality of the conflict and not the basic reason for violence.

⁵ The term *highlander* refers to people from the highlands of Ethiopia, many of whom were brought to the region during the resettlement program of the 1980's, especially from Tigray and Shäwa as well as from Kambaata and



This paper attempts to discuss the wider ethnic contacts in Gambella e.g. focusing on the history and the probable impact of resettlement as a perspective on the following question: Did the demographic change that occurred during the last decades, contribute to the changing nature of the conflict? The conflict has changed from one among indigenous peoples to a wider network of opponents.

The article is based on literature reviews and a preliminary investigation in the region in September and October 2005. It is mainly inspired by the ideas of two scholars on the question of inter-ethnic contacts and the characteristics of Ethiopian population movements, namely Shiferaw Bekele and Eisei Kurimoto. It attempts to encourage a discussion on the recent conflicts in the region and should be read as a working- or discussion paper.

Population-movement, pressure and interaction have played an extremely crucial role in the history of this country up to the present. Without taking this process into account, it is very difficult to understand fully the political, economic and social history of the Ethiopian region (Shiferaw 1988: 128).

In a sense the society and the culture of a certain ethnic group can be seen as a function of its relations, both past and present, with neighbouring ethnic groups. In other words a present society and culture has been shaped as a result of interethnic relations for centuries. An ethnic identity and boundary itself, which is always 'situational', is a product of such process (Kurimoto 1994: 899).

Haddiyya in the former province of southern Shewa. It marks the distinction between highland-Ethiopia and lowland-Ethiopia. The Anywaa refer to those people from the highlands as *gaalla* (red skins) while the highlanders refer to the Anywaa as to every other indigenous western lowland inhabitant as *shankilla* or *tequr* (slave or black). This code of colour as well as the code of origin is widely accepted by both sides.



2. Resettlement Projects During the Därg

The Ethiopian history of forced and voluntary population movements and resettlement programs is multi-layered and reaches far back in time.⁶ Although neither impulsive nor planned resettlement are new components in Ethiopian history, the state-run resettlement program fully started after the period of Haile Sellassie I. Before that, attempts of resettlement had been rather disorganised and spontaneous (Agneta et al. 1993: 252).

According to Guggenheim & Cernea (1997: 1), the 1980s can be labelled "the decade of displacement." This is also true for Ethiopia. In the first decade after the revolution of 1974, the nationalisation of rural areas brought the power of land disposal to the *Därg*. The regularly occurring droughts as well as two famines within ten years emphasised the need for solutions concerning malnutrition. The establishment of an agency with a mandate to carry out resettlement, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) enabled the state to plan and implement resettlement (Pankhurst 1997b: 540).

Since Ethiopia had been transformed into a socialist state it is important to consider the nexus between state ideology and resettlement. Following the *zämäjja*⁷, the state planners saw the resettlement programs as a chance to propagate socialist ideas by implementing Peasant Associations (PA). By 1984 up to 1.4 percent of the land was under cooperatives, with envisaged 50 percent after another ten years. The general assumption was, that subsistence farming in the highlands was *backward*, relying on "primitive ox-plough technology, doomed to bare subsistence levels and prone to famines" (Pankhurst 1997: 543).

The devastating famine in the north and the state ideology of transformation both contributed to form the myth that "vast areas of unoccupied virgin expanses of wilderness remained in the far West, which could be transformed into a 'bread basket' and help the nation attain the goal

⁶ Dessalegn (2003) has pointed out, that "resettlement, land settlement, colonization or transmigration all refer to the phenomenon of population redistribution, either planned or spontaneous." In the Ethiopian context, the first term seems to be more appropriate as it suggests relocating people in areas other than their own. Therefore the term "resettlement" is used in this paper, too.

⁷ *Zämäjja* is the Amharic word for "campaign." It had been the first measure to mobilise the masses in all parts of Ethiopia after the revolution in Addis Ababa in 1974. The "campaign" started in December 1974. Its aim was to enlighten the rural population concerning the new Ethiopian political program, to alphabetise and to help building local infrastructure. High school students, university students and teachers were obliged and even forced to take part in this mass education program.



of self sufficiency" (Pankhurst 1997b: 544). Despite the actual relief, the programs are today being criticised as counter productive and rather supportive of the food shortage. Moreover, a connection to the civil war in northern Ethiopia was also mentioned, although this seems to be an uncertain aspect (on this discussion see e.g.: Pankhurst 1997b; Dawit 1989; HRW 1991).⁸

On the contrary, many – especially young men – were eager to move with the resettlement in hope for better opportunities.

In western parts of Ethiopia two patterns of resettlement were institutionalised. *Conventional sites* were mostly located in the western lowlands, namely in the border regions near Sudan such as Gambella, Assosa and Mätäkäl. Additionally, smaller *conventional sites* were found in Wälläga. The *integrated sites* were mostly built above 1500 meters in Illubabor, Wälläga and Käffa. The first pattern was linked to the villagisation project (s. below), which was supported by mechanical agriculture as well as high medical and educational logistic, while the second pattern rather depended on ox-plough cultivation and was suggested to be integrated in the local PAs (Pankhurst 1997b: 546). After 1985 the *Därg* had resettled up to 600.000 people in both schemes from the highlands to the lowlands of Ethiopia.

The programs were badly organized and a common feature of most projects was mismanagement. The grave implications following these events were twofold: First, the resettlement program had left many people traumatised because of family partition. A considerable number even died on the journeys. In 1986 the government tried to face this problem and started a campaign to reunify families. Dawit (1989: 304) identifies the factor of torn families who were never willing to adopt the new life as one of the major obstacles to achieving the relief aims of the program. Another effect of resettlement was the occurrence of ethnic conflicts. The conflicts occurred between the native inhabitants of one area and the new-comers. Settlement sites were occasionally attacked. But violence occurred among the settlers as well. The understanding of ethnic differences or prejudices was of subordinate importance to the political planners (Braukämper 2006: 39). Neither were local structures of decision-making considered during the planning, nor were there any means of compensation given to those who had to abandon their land in favour of the newcomers.

⁸ Notable resistance grew especially in Eritrea and Tigray after 1975.



Even before the fall of the *Därg* it became obvious that the programs had not brought about the anticipated effects of food self-sufficiency or improvement of production capacity (Braukämper, 2006: 40).

3. Villagisation

As mentioned above, in addition to the *Därg's* policy of relief programs the socialist agricultural program aimed to convert traditionally prevalent subsistence farming into planned state run agriculture. Therefore, scattered villages were regrouped into artificial modern villages in order to "promote social and economic development and facilitate the delivery of services such as education and water supplies" (Human Rights Watch 1991: 231).

Villagisation politics was based on the model of Tanzania's *Ujamaa villages*, but as documented by the Human Rights Watch (1991: 231), these programs were carried out in a far more militant manner⁹.

According to the information offered by Human Rights Watch (1991), these new villages could rather be seen as work camps than social institutions. The government imposed *work routine* and strict control of food supplies. This met two government objectives at once: Firstly, higher allocations of crops from farmers were obtained, and secondly, it could withdraw access to food for rebellious groups (Human Rights Watch 1991). Furthermore, trade was restricted. The selection of village sites was mainly guided by strategic considerations, rather than by the availability of natural resources. The farmers had to walk long distances for water access, forcing them to alienate their grazing grounds. Ignoring the widespread resistance to the program especially in northern Ethiopia, the *Därg* had already villagized 12 million people by August 1984 (Human Rights Watch 1991: 234).

⁹ This is in accordance with information provided by an university lecturer who was a student during the time of the resettlement program and was forced to build villages in the Gambella area. The students were flown to Gambella in Antonov aircrafts that were not constructed for human transport. Half of the students lost their hearing due to the air pressure condition in the plane. While being forced to work in Gambella they were treated friendly by the Anywaa, but the government soldiers were walking by with machine guns and forced them to cut wood and construct huts. Many of the students fell prey to malaria and got sick because of the weather conditions (personal Interview; Meqelle, Tigray, 13th August 2005).



4. A Conflict Map of Gambella

Gambella can be seen as an example for one of the most, if not utmost, complex regions in Ethiopia with regard to contemporary political conflicts. Its status as a border region, its multi-ethnic composition, its exposure to the Sudanese civil war and the inner-Ethiopian dynamics between centre and periphery, as well as the developments in oil drilling, contributed to the recent extension of the conflict in the area. Each of these causes and events is equally important for the understanding of the region and should never be seen as separate from each other.

Although this paper focuses on recent events of the conflict and the understanding of the dynamics between centre and periphery, a short introduction to the historical events seems necessary for gaining a deeper understanding of Gambella's situation today.

4.1. Introduction to Region and People

Speaking about the social impact which the resettlement program and the influx of refugees had on Gambella, two things are worth mentioning: Firstly, what today is known as Gambella obtained its regional status only after the fall of the *Därg* and the takeover of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1994. During the Imperial Period of the *Därg* era Gambella had the status of an *awraja* (district) in the Illubabor Province and was upgraded to an *Administrative Region* in 1989. Today, Gambella is one of the three multi-ethnic regional states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). Secondly, it is necessary to see that the Anywaa are the ethnic group that first inhabited the region. The Anywaa see themselves as the hosts in the region and feel a lot of pressure arising from the arrival of the different groups.¹⁰ Therefore, a few words about the Anywaa seem suitable for a deeper understanding of the region.

¹⁰ I guess this is the most crucial point in the whole discussion. According to Kurimoto (1994: 903), the Anywaa recognize that they are not the natural inhabitants of the region but that their ancestors migrated from Bahr al-Ghazal to settle along the Sobat (Sudan) and Baro (Ethiopia). Today the Anywaa literally suffer from the feeling that they are expelled from their homeland by invading foreign factions. This perspective will be further clarified



The Anywaa, speakers of a western-nilotic language, live in the borderlands of Ethiopia and the Sudan.¹¹ Today, the core population of the Ethiopian-Anywaa lives in the federal state of Gambella.

The Anywaa are sedentary farmers. Unlike adjacent western-nilotic cattle nomads, as the Dinka and the Nuer, the Anywaa only keep a small number of cattle. Instead, fishing, hunting and gathering make up the second largest contribution to their economy.¹²

As a striking fact, today the Nuer constitute the majority of Gambella's population.

Throughout history the relation between the two groups varied from a ranged form of a peaceful coexistence and intermarriage to trade and ethnic conflicts. The ethnic contacts among the people of the region are a sensitive field, that needs further study. Generalisation seems a major temptation and may block the way for understanding conflicts in the area. Anywaa and Nuer differ substantially in their modes of living and production. Due to that, both groups seem to be accustomed to a tradition of ongoing conflicts concerning power and access to natural resources. Nevertheless, the Nuer gave shelter to the Anywaa when they came into conflict with invading Oromo and the Anywaa apparently introduced the Nuer to ivory trade with the Oromo. This implies that they have not always been in conflict.

On the contrary, the Nuer have a strong desire for territorial expansion due to an integrative social system and high mobility (Dereje 2003: 37), while the Anywaa are characterized by territorial focusing.

The notion of territoriality which is embedded in their belief system partly explains the high degree of Anywaa irritation concerning continuous encroachment into their territory by their pastoralist neighbours. In fact it is striking that the economic argument is less

in the following chapter. But the view that the current government, with the help of *foreigners*, is "trying to brake the backbone of Gambella" (i.e.: the Anywaa) is prevailing among many Anywaa.

¹¹ According to the 1994 census Gambella has 222 000 inhabitants. The Anywaa amount to 27%, while the Nuer make up 40% (Dereje 2004: 4).

¹² For an extensive anthropological record on the traditional political and socio-economic system of the Anywaa see: Perner, Conradin 1994: *Living on Earth in the Sky. An analytic account of the history and the culture of a nilotic people*, vol. 1&2; Basel / Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1940: *The political system of the Anuak of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, New York. Most traditional systems of the Anywaa were deconstructed by the *Därg* for being backward and anti-revolutionary, but it is beyond the purpose of this paper to go into further anthropological details.



emphasised than the symbolic, sensual and political dimension of the land question in the current politics of identity (Dereje 2003: 34).

Due to the abolition of traditional institutions during the *Därg* and especially since the time of the TGE (Transitional Government of Ethiopia / 1991-94), fighting between the Nuer and the Anywaa for political leadership in the new framework of ethnic federalism became endemic. The causes for those events must be traced back to the time of the Sudanese civil war (the second war in Southern Sudan began in 1983), during which the SPLA forces in the region had a strong influence.

4.2. The Impact of the Sudanese Civil War

In the course of the Sudanese civil war many Nuer fled from the Sudan and took refuge in Gambella. By 1990 their number is said to have reached some 355 000 (the numbers range from 270 000 to 400 000). The *Därg* strongly favoured the Nuer who were incorporated into the local administration (Johnson 2003: 87). This made the Anywaa feel as though they were becoming a minority in their own land. In this context the decline of living conditions has to be pointed out, which were better in the camps than outside.¹³ Thus, jealousy arose. According to Human Rights Watch (2005: 7), the dramatic demographic changes are to a large extent the reason for the persistent ethnic tensions. The flow of aliens (non-Anywaa) into what the Anywaa consider as their homelands, has enforced a fear of erosion of the Anywaa's political power. The insecurity among the Anywaa grew bigger because the SPLA used the region as their military base while supported by the Ethiopian Government.

In reality Gambella was put under a kind of joint administration by the Ethiopian government and the SPLA, in which the latter was particularly in charge of security in and around the refugee camps and the border area (Kurimoto 1997: 800).

¹³ This is still a major but underestimated factor in the ethnic conflicts. I visited the Sudanese refugee camp of Finyudo. Water and food seemed sufficient and good, respectively clean. Especially the schools gave a good impression. It seemed more desirable to live in a refugee camp than anywhere outside in Gambella.



The SPLA played a key role in the destabilisation of the region. It was the main source of modern firearms and, as members of the SPLA, many Nuer were supplied with sufficient firepower to impose their will upon the Anywaa. The increasing influx of modern fire arms into Gambella made way for modern warfare and the conflicts among ethnic units caused heavy casualties on both sides (Seyoum/Heran 1992: 35). The relations between the Anywaa and the SPLA soldiers were far from being friendly. A feeling of helplessness seemed to have taken hold of the Anywaa because of frequently committed rapes, robbery, harassment and killing by the SPLA forces (Kurimoto 1997: 800).

At the same time, another factor became important: the emergence of strong central rule on behalf of the Ethiopian government, that triggered demographic changes by installing resettlement programs in the region.

4.3. The Gambella Resettlement Program

The aims of the resettlement program in Gambella were twofold: Firstly, as mentioned before, it aimed at resettling northern highlanders to the fertile grounds in Gambella. The second aim was to strengthen and eventually transform the modes of food production among the Anywaa and the Nuer.

A paper of the RRC about the "Gambella Settlement Project"¹⁴ stated:

Gambella *awraja* in the Illubabor Administrative region has an area of 25,600 sq.km and a population of about 125,000 people. Gambella *awraja* is inhabited mostly by the Anuaks and Nuer. (...). Communication with the people and provisions of services for them have consequently been difficult. The government of socialist Ethiopia, through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission is embarking a settlement program for the local population (...).

¹⁴ I have to thank another friend, Emishaw Tegane, with whom I conducted interviews in Addis Ababa and who completed this work while I was in Gambella. He also provided me with rare documents about resettlement that are otherwise hardly accessible such as this document from the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.



Among the concrete objectives were the increase of agricultural production, the reduction of dependence on subsistence, and the integration of different isolated tribal groups into a mutually coexisting society. The scientific view of those days was that the Anywaa and Nuer communities "need immediate help and attention in all spheres: Health, Education, Transport Service. Their instruments of production, particularly in agriculture need to be changed" (Aleme 1978: 16).

The Anywaa were forced to abandon their traditional subsistence economy. The regime of Haile Sellassie I is generally referred to as "the good old days" by the Anywaa, with a deep appreciation towards the emperor (Kurimoto 2002: 222f.).¹⁵ The era of the *Därg* brought a selection of severe changes to the traditional Anywaa society, especially because "a variety of traditional customs and institutions were banned by the *Därg* as being 'feudal', 'reactionary' or 'anti-revolutionary'" (Kurimoto 1997: 799). Following the socialist idea of the regime, men were organised in PAs, women and youth in similar associations. These associations were governmental instruments for implementing socialism, and, furthermore, for collecting fees and taxes. Schools were built and, due to the area's vast lands and water supply, state farms were established.

Apart from this, another enormous number of people, namely between 50.000 and 60.000 (Kurimoto 2005: 1, HRW, 2005: 7) highland settlers, were resettled in the area which challenged the patience of the Anywaa host-community: The first settlers came to Gambella in 1984. Ethnically they were three different groups, Amhara from Wällo, Tigrayens from Tigray and Kambaattaa as well as Haddiyya from the southern highlands. Of a total number of 600.000 in the whole nation, these 60.000 who went to Gambella possibly suffered the most. The host environment was hostile, malaria would weaken and kill the newcomers and the climate did not allow them to grow their staple crops, such as *tef* and *ensete*.

The *refugee/settler/state-power complex* had a tremendous impact on the region regarding cultural, environmental, economic and political effects: Culturally, the Anywaa, as we have

¹⁵ Interesting enough, the *Därg* today is also recalled as the "good old days," especially by the Anywaa. When I came to talk to people about the *Därg* era, they told me how good Mengistu was, how the *Därg* built bridges, roads, schools and hospitals and how much Mengistu himself did care for the people in Gambella. This refers to the wider context of disappointment with the current regime.



seen, were forced to abandon their traditional way of life and to arrange themselves with the socialist regime. Environmentally, Gambella fell prey to the extensive needs of the settlers and refugees concerning food and fire-wood. The need for meat was satisfied by the killing of wild animals, one of the Anywaa's major source of dietary fibre (Kurimoto, 2005: 8). Population pressure grew, and aliens, the SPLA, administered the region. But it was only after the demise of the *Därg*, that a sense of ethnicity and territoriality began to take hold of the minds of the Anywaa-elites and violence openly broke out against the highlanders. This was the case in Ukuuna, where Anywaa militia men and peasants killed 200 settlers in 1991. According to my findings, similar incidents happened during that time in the sites of Baro Abol, Tata und Ubala.

4.4. The Introduction of Ethnic Federalism

In May 1991, during the fall the *Därg*, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Gambella Peoples' Liberation Movement (GPLM) took hold of Gambella after a series of fights with *Därg* and SPLA troops. These fights were followed by violent clashes between all armed groups, most notably between Anywaa-GPLM and Nuer-SPLA. The GPLM was also engaged in fighting with the EPRDF. As Kurimoto (1997: 807) puts it:

It seems as if hatred and hostilities which had been accumulated during the Derg era exploded all at once when the powerful centralised regime collapsed and there was a sort of power vacuum.

In June 1992 an election for the Regional State Council was held in Gambella and three other districts. Twelve council members were elected, seven of which were Anywaa¹⁶; three were Majangir, one Komo and one Amhara. No Nuer was among those elected. Only after the Nuer

¹⁶ The Council elected the chairman of the GPLM as President, who was killed just one month later by a group of his own GPLM soldiers attacking his house. He was said to be compromising with the EPRDF too much (Kurimoto, 1997: 809f.).



built the Gambella People's Democratic Party (GPDP) in order to challenge the GPLM during the general elections of 1995, the Nuer became adequately represented in the council. The outcome was an Anywaa elected as President, a Nuer as Vice-President and a Majangir as Secretary General. This reflects the fact that in the course of the transitional period of Ethiopia, people became more and more "conscious of politics and power balance in terms of ethnicity" (Kurimoto, 1997: 810). Political turmoil continued throughout the following years. Only the elections of 2005 saw a peaceful transition of power.

As the political profile of the EPRDF sharpened throughout the years after 1994, it introduced a civil service reform in 2002. Thus, qualification was given priority and not the applicant's ethnic background. Therefore, a lot of Anywaa were deposed from their posts. Especially highlanders were appointed to the vacant posts because of their better access to education. This forced many government officials and especially policemen to go into the bush and become *shifita*¹⁷ in order to make their living. Since then the human security in the region dramatically decreased.¹⁸ These bandits are said to have put the elimination of Gambella's highlanders on the top of their agenda, having the putative intention to bring freedom to the peoples of Gambella. Since that time, highlanders were steady targets of ambushes and violent attacks.

¹⁷ *shifita* is the Amharic word for bandit.

¹⁸ I consider this as an explanation for the insecurity of the region within the Nuer society. Among the Anywaa there was a denial of knowing who the bandits were and why they were there.



5. The Current Situation

"If they were not brought to us then, they would not have killed us today."¹⁹

Finally two incidents should be analysed in order to understand the current situation in the region. In December 2003, after the Anywaa had launched a deadly ambush on highland aid-workers, an incident occurred that has changed the quality of wider ethnic conflicts in Gambella. During a two-day massacre many Anywaa men were killed. The pogrom was initiated by highland civilians in Gambella town and Finyudo and was obviously backed up by the National Defence Forces (NDF). The Gambella police had presented the mutilated bodies of aid workers on a pick-up truck to the public by driving parade through the town, thus sparking the outrage of many civilians. Needless to say that not every highland-rooted inhabitant of the two towns was involved; many are reported to have saved the lives of victims. During the pogrom in Gambella town (the events continued in Finyudo), many Anywaa were killed and many Anywaa huts and compounds were looted.²⁰ Many victims thus left the region and were seeking refuge in Sudan or hiding in the surrounding bush. While I was in the region two years after the events, an unbridgeable gap was still visible between the Anywaa and the highlanders, expressed through separation and mistrust. This is no generalisation of the relationship between the two groups. Peaceful coexistence subsists despite the cloud that has been overshadowing the relations since 2003.

Due to the fact that many highland civilians took part in the killing, the Anywaa in Gambella blame the resettlement program because their impression is that those who settled were now participating in the killings.²¹ In October 2005, a counter-attack on the Gambella police

¹⁹ This quotation from a woman in Burri Säffär, Gambella town, describes the feeling of the victims, that those who were brought by the resettlement program have now become the participants in the December 2003 massacre. I found this notion several times throughout my interviews.

²⁰ The number of dead is hard to reconstruct. Human Rights Watch (2005) speaks of more than 400 including women and children. According to my data the numbers are smaller, and women and children are said to be spared. This is not a denial of what happened. In fact it is very difficult to reconstruct the events.

²¹ This notion is repeated over and over throughout the interviews that I collected. Whenever I came to talk to Anywaa about the massacres of 2003, the people saw a direct connection between resettlement and participation in the pogrom.



station was recorded. The chief of the police along with 50 other policemen was killed and some prisoners were freed. While the endemic attacks on highlanders seemed rather disorganized and spontaneous, the above described incident shows a high level of organisation. According to a message in the internet posted by a group called the Gambella Peoples' Liberation Movement/Front (GPLM/F), the attack was politically motivated aiming directly at the central government. Until now, no similar incident has been reported. The most recent developments on the contrary include an assault on a regular bus in June 2006, in which highland travellers were walked off and subsequently executed. In August 2006, a vicious attack on a cargo truck was launched. Unconfirmed reports say that, in the aftermath of the latter incident, 15 soldiers of the NDF were killed in the surroundings of Gambella town.

After the massacres of 2003 a shift in the Anywaa's perception of who is the *enemy* can be recognised. What may have started as an act of revenge of a few dismissed officials, has developed into the widespread belief that the government is trying to eliminate the Anywaa with the help of the highlanders. Currently, the Nuer are recognized as the group who protected the Anywaa from being killed during the pogrom by hiding them in their huts and on their compounds. The prevalent feeling is that the historical bonds between the two groups have ever been peaceful while the government is blamed for having pitched the two groups against each other in order to control the region and keep both groups away from peaceful coexistence and self-administration.²² In other words, the Anywaa's fear and anger is at the moment focused on the government and its local agents, settlers and workers – thus highlanders as a whole.

6. Conclusion

The resettlement program cannot be considered as the sole factor for increasing violence against the highlanders, even though for the Anywaa these settlers play a key role in their own

²² This view was prevailing throughout my interviews and describes the current (post 2003) core problem. The EPRDF is focused as the new enemy through its agents, the highlanders, while the Nuer are accepted as friends and helpers. Additionally, some Nuer were also targeted by highlanders during the 2003 pogrom, if they were lacking the traditional scars on the forehead.



explanation of the conflict. Neither can any other form of governmental intervention in the region, be it the villagisation or the support of aliens, account as the sole reason for these outbreaks of violence.

It is rather the fact that the Anywaa feel the steady and ongoing exposure to central interventions, which seems to have grown to a level of undifferentiated hatred towards the highland community.

This paper focused on the inclusion of highlanders into the current conflict map of Gambella. This inclusion should be taken into account and should also be paid more attention to on the grass root level, be it among national and international NGOs or by the Ethiopian government.

7. References

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