

House, home and livelihoods for Eritrean returnees from Sudan

by Gaim Kibreab

Despite deep ties to their houses and land, Eritrean refugees repatriating from Sudan have defied most observers' expectations by deciding not to settle in their villages of origin.

In view of the critical role played by house, land and spatially grounded community in Eritrean culture and social history, researchers and international agencies assumed that returnees from Sudan would settle in their villages of origin in order to recoup their houses, land and membership of communities. However, the large majority of the returnees, instead of going back to their homes of origin, have found new homes outside the places where they lived prior to their displacement.

This is not the only way in which the experience of Eritrean refugees and returnees from Sudan defies conventional expectations. Contrary to received wisdom that refugees 'vote with their feet' and go home once the factors which triggered their flight are removed, a large proportion of the Eritrean refugees in Sudan have stayed put in spite of the fundamental political changes that took place in their country of origin in May 1991. The thirty-year war for national independence which had triggered the refugee flow ended with the defeat of the Ethiopian army and the subsequent recognition of Eritrea as an independent state. The decision of the considerable proportion of the refugees to stay put is surprising in view of the fact that the factors that prompted their displacement were indisputably eliminated with the country's independence and the government of Sudan treats the refugees as temporary guests with no prospects for naturalisation or enjoyment of citizenship rights regardless of the number of years of residence in Sudan.

In the 1990s, only a few had political reasons for not returning. However, after the turn of the new century, the Eritrean government's poor human rights records became a major factor in decisions concerning repatriation and in prompting displacement of new refugees.

Eritreans – regardless of their mode of existence – tend to be powerfully attached to particular places or homes established on the basis of the principle of original appropriation. In a country where territory and community of origin still remain the most important means of access to rights and opportunities of well-being and security, social identity is formed by and is inextricably linked to territory and a community anchored in a particular place. Throughout Eritrea, as elsewhere in Africa, place or home still remains a major repository of rights and membership.

Ownership as source if identity

In Eritrean society, though land has always been the single most important source of livelihood, its importance is not solely measured in economic terms. The ownership of houses and land in particular places commonly known as *adi* (Tigrinya) or *ad* (Tigre) is a source of identity and the foundation of Eritrean society's social organisation. House and land ownership and belonging to particular places (*adi/ad*) ground Eritreans, including those who do not derive their livelihoods from such a re-

source, not only to particular places but also to particular communities. It is common for the overwhelming majority of diasporic Eritreans to build houses in their villages of origin and to be buried in such place. A person without such grounding was and still is considered rootless, with a stigma attached to being without roots. This strong attachment to particular places is manifested in the fact that the remains of most Eritreans who belong to the Christian faith are transported to their places of origin for burial at exorbitant costs from all over the world.¹

Though every certified member of a spatially anchored community is entitled to cultivable land, this right is exercised subject to ownership of

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a house known among the Eritrean highlanders as *titsha*. House ownership is *sine qua non* for land ownership. Thus, since land is the single most important source of livelihood and no land can be obtained without house ownership in most Eritrean communities, a house situated in a particular place, the ownership of which was once established by a founding lineage, is life itself.

More than 250,000 refugees returned from Sudan to Eritrea between 1991 and 2002, the majority of them without receiving international assistance. It was widely expected that the returnees would settle in their villages of origin in order to recoup the houses, the land and membership in their former spatially grounded communities. However, the large majority have instead found new homes outside the places where they lived prior to their displacement.² For example, among the 6,386 families (about 25,000 individuals) who

returned under the Programme for Refugee Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement areas (PRO-FERI) pilot repatriation scheme, 81% were settled in Gash-Setit outside their homes of origin. The majority of the self-repatriates have also settled in the Gash Setit area. The results of a survey conducted by the author in 1998 show that among a sample of 166 self-repatriates from Sudan in Barentu, Gulu and Tessenei, 90% of the heads of respondent households lived elsewhere in Eritrea prior to their displacement to Sudan. Nevertheless, it is not only people who were displaced from other parts of Eritrea to Sudan who have settled in Gash Setit. A large proportion of those who fled to Sudan from Gash Setit have now settled outside their places of origin, mainly in urban and peri-urban areas.

Why have returnees not gone 'home'?

The single most important reason why the overwhelming majority have chosen different destinations rather than their places of origin is because of the profound social change they have undergone in exile in Sudan. As a result, the meaning and value they attach to particular places are no longer based on an abstract attachment to an ancestral village but are primarily shaped by considerations of livelihoods.

When I asked a group of returnees in Tessenei in an informal discussion to explain why they did not return to their villages of origin most asked why they should return to places where there is no future for them or their children. I probed them further as to whether it made any difference that their forefathers and foremothers, as well as the umbilical chords of some of the persons in the discussion group, were buried in those places. Some of the older participants said that this was important and they expected their remains to be buried in the same place. However, their decision concerning the choice of their destination was not influenced by such considerations. For the younger ones, it did not matter where their remains ended up. Regardless of age most of the participants said that the times and the

conditions have changed so much that the things that were important to their forefathers are either irrelevant or meaningless to them. In short, the meaning of home has changed profoundly. For the large majority of young returnees under the age of 40 a home means a house. This is significant because unlike a home a house can be built anywhere provided there is unoccupied space and the appropriation or the turning of such a space into a place is legally possible and is physically safe.

Scholarly opinions are divided on whether belonging has an intrinsic value or if it is rather a means to an end and on the question of whether a group which has become 'detritorialised' can establish viable 'homes' elsewhere. Research findings in Eritrea suggest that once refugees are in their country of origin, their choice of destination is mainly influenced by livelihood concerns regardless of their location within their country of origin. There are well thought out rationales underlying the returnees' choices of destination. The most important factors determining their choices are:

- opportunities for employment and self-employment
- proximity to the country of asylum
- continuity of the trans-ethnic and trans-religious social networks established in exile
- disdain for rural life due to cultural, social and occupational changes experienced in exile
- access to schools, health care and water for human and livestock consumption as well as for rain-fed cultivation and irrigation.

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1. Not the case among Muslim Eritreans as Islam requires prompt burial.

2. See: G Kibreab (2002) 'When Refugees Come Home: the Relationship between Stayees and Returnees in Post-Conflict Eritrea', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20 (1): 53-80.

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