

MOTHERS OF STEEL: THE WOMEN OF UMGARGUR,  
AN ERITREAN REFUGEE SETTLEMENT IN SUDAN

Nancee Oku Bright  
Hertford College  
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### Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of the lives and experiences of Eritrean refugee women in Um Gargur, a settlement in eastern Sudan established in 1976. It is based upon fourteen months of fieldwork and builds upon the findings of my 1985 M.Phil. thesis, "A Preliminary Study of the Position of Eritrean Refugees in the Sudan", for which I conducted two months of research in Um Gargur. While the M.Phil. thesis was a comparative study of Um Gargur and two other cases of resettlement in Africa, here I am concerned primarily with questions of gender, everyday life, and how processes of change and realignments of power impact upon women in displaced heterogeneous societies.

After more than a decade in exile the people of Um Gargur continue to be fiercely nationalistic and as unresigned to remaining refugees as they are to assimilating into Sudan. There is also a growing trend towards Islamic conservatism in the settlement. This, coupled with the fact that Um Gargur is composed largely of mistrusted "strangers", means that women experience more restrictions in Um Gargur than they did in their communities of origin. The aim of the thesis is to examine the effect of displacement and exile upon gender roles, social infrastructures, traditions and perceptions, as people of disparate origins, occasionally with conflicting beliefs and mores, negotiate a way of living together. The title "Mothers of Steel" is taken from a riot instigated by women when charges were introduced for water. As the women revolted, their children shouted "Our mothers are steel, our fathers are monkeys!" This represented the main crisis point between men and women. Yet although the title derives from this incident, women, as they feed, nurture, socialise their children and keep their families intact, have clearly become "mothers of steel" in the eyes of their children since they have lived in Um Gargur.

Chapter One introduces an overview of the settlement and shows that women's deliberate exclusion from all formal institutions leaves them at a disadvantage despite the fact that over 50% of them are household heads for much of the year. The following chapters examine how categories as diverse as politics, honour, health, and economics, impinge on the lives of the refugee women and their families, and argue that in contexts of displacement, where social realities are constantly being redefined, these categories all have a moral dimension. In Chapters Three and Four I show how limited employment opportunities in Um Gargur have meant that the majority of men continuously resident in the settlement have lost their roles as providers while women's roles have taken on a new symbolic significance. The society attempts to compensate for men's loss of status by placing greater restrictions upon women. Women's reactions to this are varied, but significant numbers of them have redrawn the parameters of "honourable" behaviour to allow

themselves more flexibility. Women establish ties, not unlike kinship bonds, which traverse ethnic and religious boundaries and offer limited economic power and physical and psychological support. In Chapter Five I explore the tensions between traditional beliefs and practices and "Western" models of health care.

While society's notion of what constitutes honour has calcified in reaction to a situation of extreme social dislocation and jeopardisation of "male" and "female" behaviour patterns, I show in Chapter Six that the women of Um Gargur have recognised their common plight and responded by renegotiating their identity, whilst at the same time being the primary agents - through myths, songs, names, and stories about Eritrea - in the construction of their children's identities as Eritreans. In the Conclusion (Chapter Seven) I introduce the story of the aforementioned water riot to illustrate how radically women's perceptions of their own power have altered, and how their children now perceive them. I suggest that though the process of change has been slow, the pressures faced by the community have meant that women's reconceptualisation of their own roles has been inevitable.

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by

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*To the memory of*

*my grandmother, Anna Elizabeth Goll*

*my cousin, Bai Tamia Moore*

*and my sister, Ramona Okeke Morris*

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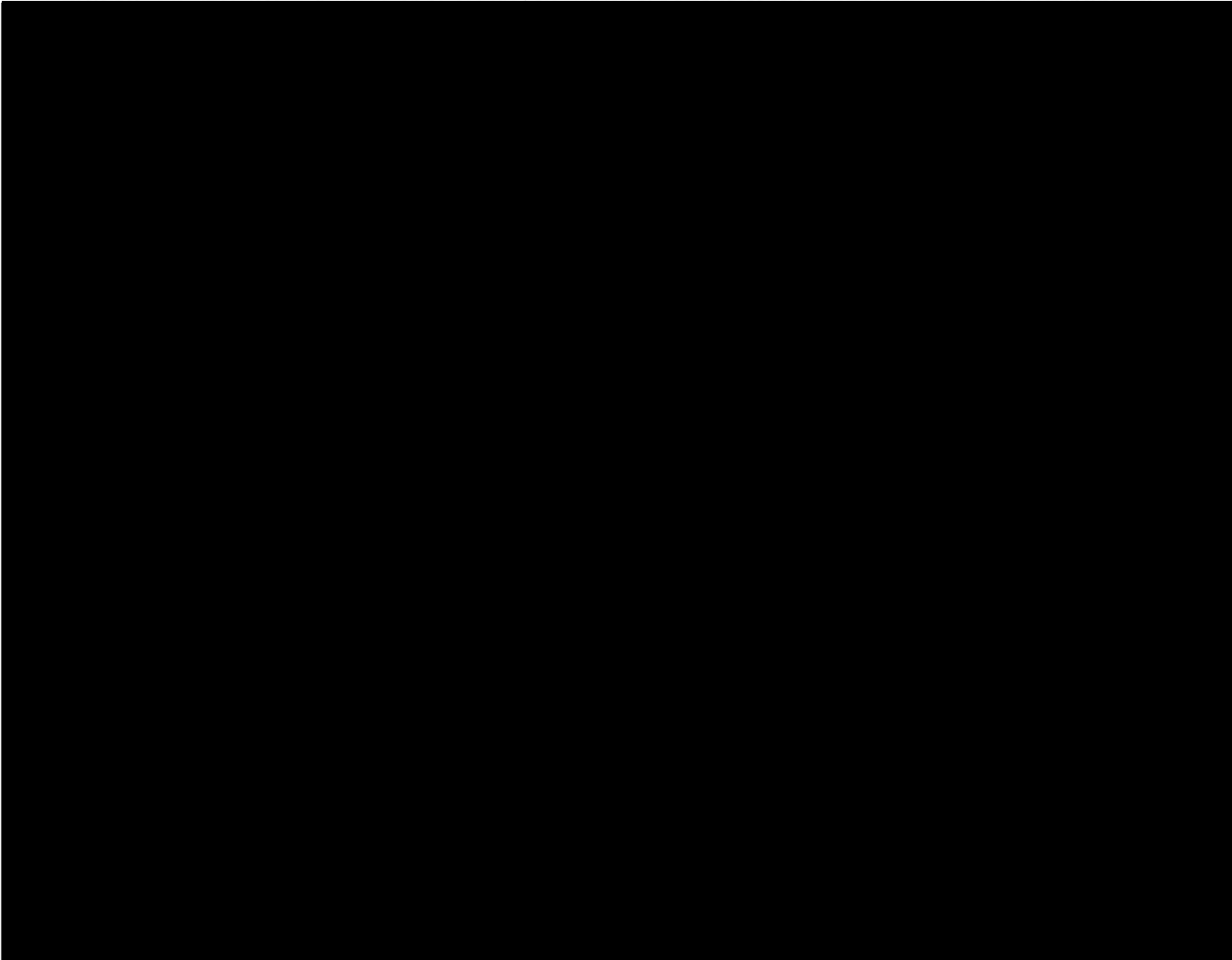
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## Acronyms:

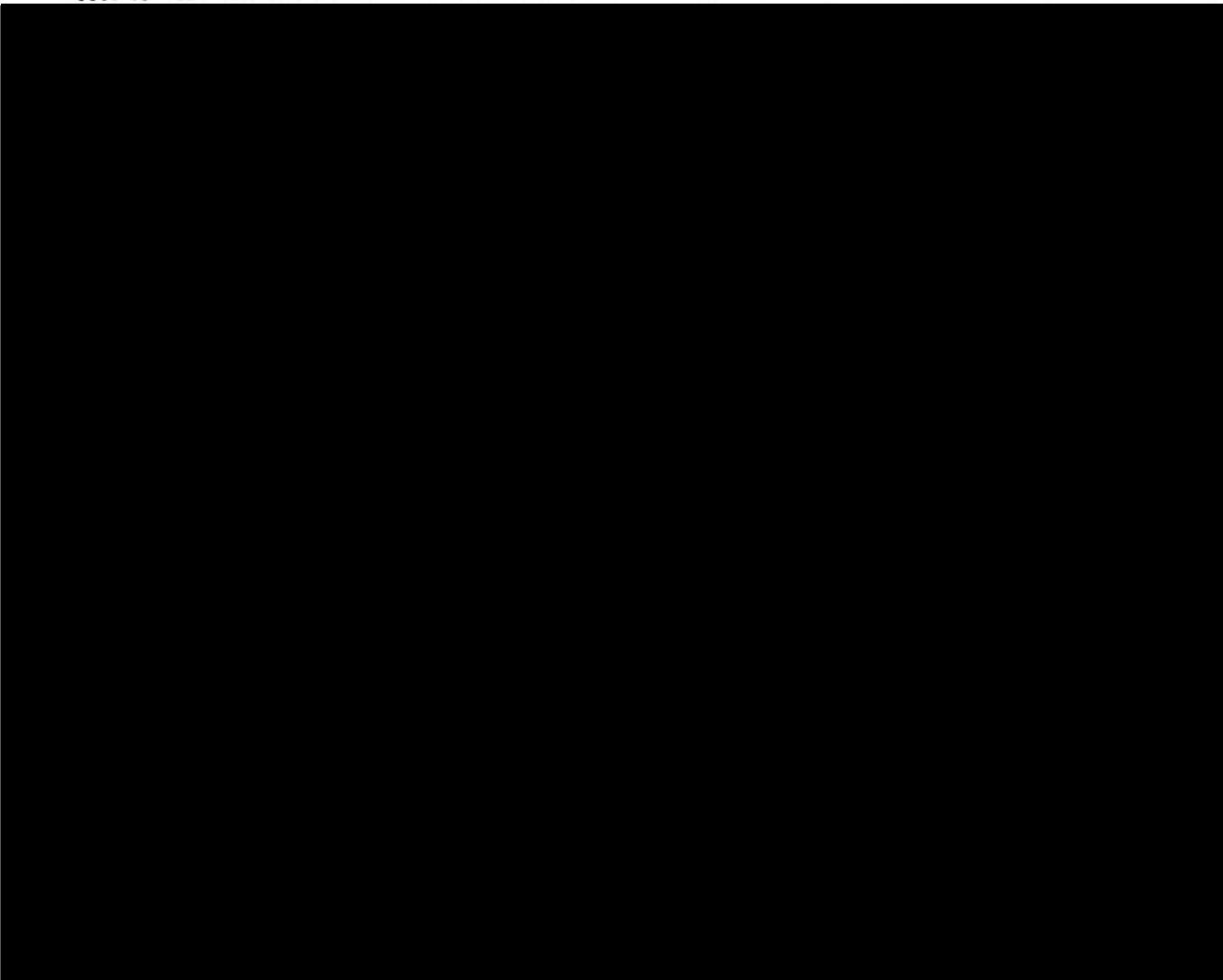
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ELF-PLF	Eritrean Liberation Front-People's Liberation Front
COR	Commissioner of Refugees
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme
SCF	Save the Children (USA)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SCC	Sudan Council of Churches
MCH	Mother Child Health
ILO	International Labour Organisation
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
CERA	Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs
NUEWm	National Union of Eritrean Women

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**MAP 1 ERITREA: IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**



**MAP 2 ERITREA: PROVINCES & TOWNS**



## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Ade Amina, Christian-born injera [unleavened bread] maker, aged 75:

"I went to a school which belonged to the Italian government and completed my studies up to the fourth grade. The Italians did not want us to learn past the fourth grade because they said we would become too educated. At first the Italians seemed good. They gave us food and water and they built many buildings, factories, houses and roads, but they later became evil. If they saw a donkey they would tell us that this donkey looks like your king. They had shops and buses in Asmara which the Eritreans could not enter. There were different shops for the Italians and different shops for the Eritreans. We were seen as animals and they did not want us to walk down some of their streets. They would call us "merda". Still, although the Italians were bad they were much better than the British. I lived in the town so I saw this. When the British came they took everything away, especially in the last two years that they were in Eritrea - all the factories, all the land, everything they took. We came to hate them...I have lived in Um Gargur for nine years. Before that I worked in Eritrea. I owned a store and was making money when Menghistu came and took it all away. Menghistu, that son of a dog. I don't know about Haile Selassie. As an Eritrean I don't like him because he came from his country and started to rule us...Of course in the beginning some of us said let Haile Selassie rule us just for one year so that these British can leave us alone. We didn't know any better. We thought maybe as a black man he is better than the whites. This is what we thought but really Haile Selassie was not good. But it was not until Menghistu came that the slaughtering began."

(Tigrinya)

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1. Brief History of the Eritrean Question

#### 1.1 Italian Colonialism

Italy's first colony was established in 1890. It was named Eritrea, from Mare Erythraeum, the Latin name for the Red Sea which borders this territory. Until Italy colonised it, geographical Eritrea was never controlled by any one centralised political power but was composed of areas which, for centuries, had tributary relationships with local chiefs in the Sudan and with the Ethiopian and Ottoman empires (Pool, 1982:15).

Although it was not until 1896 that Ethiopia officially recognised its right to exist, the process of social and economic change in Eritrea began as soon as the colony was in Italian hands. Both the agricultural sector and urban centres were developed. Factories were built in which thousands of people were employed as cheap labour. The emphasis however, was not placed on manufacturing capabilities because Eritrea "would serve...to absorb Italian finished goods in addition to providing raw materials for Italian industry" (Sherman, 1980:13). The administration and the army also offered lowly but attractive employment opportunities for clerks, messengers, drivers, etc. They introduced facilities such as electricity and running water, health services, and an extensive network of roads and railways.

The purpose of all of this development was not for the benefit of the colonised; it was to encourage the immigration of Italians to the colony rather than to the United States. "Like the British in Kenya, the Italians had come not merely to govern but to live" (Farer,

1979:26). The colonisers employed thousands of Eritreans in menial positions but they were categorically excluded from any middle and upper level jobs in the police or administration and were discouraged from aspiring to posts of authority, all of which were reserved for a select number of the seventy-thousand or so Italians who had heeded the call and immigrated (Trevaskis, 1960:22). Although there was little overt evidence of discontent, much Eritrean land had been appropriated by the colonial government and given to Italian farmers and numerous court cases resulted from these actions.

Italian rule also polarised the primarily Christian Tigrinya-speaking highlanders and the predominantly Muslim Tigre-speaking lowlanders by selective policies,<sup>1</sup> repercussions of which continued to be experienced as late as 1987. Erlich notes that "in the context of their propaganda war against the British in the neighbouring Middle East, they encouraged Islam and Arabic. Moreover, the church was damaged, primarily because of land confiscations, while...sectarianism (was) encouraged" (1983:4). While it did not promote social cohesion, Italian colonialism did much to bring about a growth of political consciousness and hasten the emergence of an Eritrean social identity.

Eritrea also served as a base from which Italy could launch the expansion of its East African empire. Their first attempt to conquer Ethiopia failed when in 1896 they were summarily routed by the Ethiopian army, but on 5 May 1936 the Italians, equipped with "planes, poison gas, and a larger army", entered Ethiopia through its capital Addis Ababa, and claimed it as part of their empire (Farer, 1979:16). In 1941 at the height of World War II, British forces entered Eritrea through the Sudan seeking to destroy the Italian army before it could join up with its

German ally. Two months later the Italians were defeated and the British had taken control of the entire country, heralding an end to 51 years of Italian colonial rule.

## **1.2 British Military Administration**

The British remained in Eritrea from 1941-1952. During this period Eritrea became a hot-bed of political activity which was partly spurred on by the worsening economic conditions brought on by the end of the war. Also those who had previously regarded the British as liberators found that they did very little to dismantle the structure of Italian hegemony. Although they introduced reforms such as the dissolution of the racial laws, it was clear to Eritreans that Italians continued to appropriate Eritrean land and that they were still favoured in applications for business licences. Many Eritreans were educated to a high standard during the reign of the British, and unlike the colonial period, many were also able to gain extensive administrative experience.

Eritrean nationalism had not yet emerged as a significant force, nor was it encouraged but, in fact, ethnic and religious rivalries which had burgeoned in the 1940's were politicised and divisiveness fomented (Erlich, 1983:5). In 1945 a Four Power Commission (USSR, UK, France, USA) was set up to assess the situation in Eritrea (and the other Italian colonies) and to decide upon its future. Various options were presented including the partition of the country along religious lines giving control of the western lowlands to the Muslim Sudan, and the highlands to Christian Ethiopia. There were those Eritreans who proposed complete independence for the territorial unity of Eritrea as it was during Italian rule - mainly Muslims and a minority of

Christians, while there were others, particularly Coptic Christians, who actively sought union with Ethiopia. The United Nations General Assembly later sent its own commission which put forward three proposals: 1) union with Ethiopia; 2) federation with Ethiopia; 3) independence after a ten year trusteeship. Ultimately it was decided that federation with Ethiopia offered the best solution.

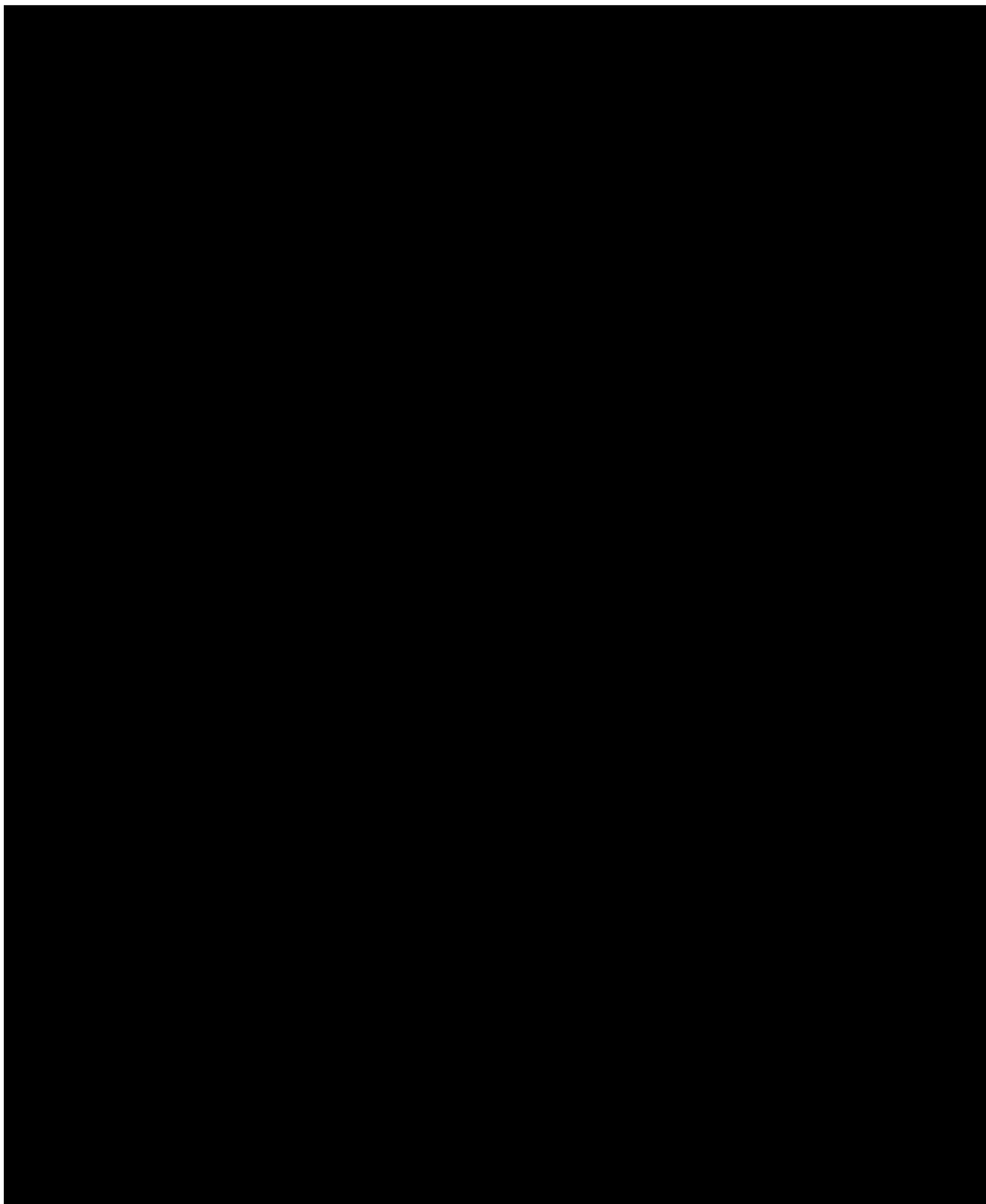
### **1.3 Federation**

Federation with Ethiopia was a disaster for Eritrea. Under the bylaws of the constitution, Eritrea would "constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia", its government would "possess legislative, executive and judicial powers in the field of domestic affairs" and an "Imperial Federal Council composed of equal numbers of Ethiopian and Eritrean representatives" would be established (Sherman, 1980:162). At the time the Ethiopians argued that nothing less than complete union would serve the needs of both countries. The ratification of the constitution by Haile Selassie took place on 11 September 1952 and the Federal flag was raised alongside the Eritrean flag. Since the constitution did not clearly regulate authority and responsibility between the two countries, the Ethiopian government had no difficulty in subverting the autonomy of Eritrea. The Eritrean Assembly was "temporarily suspended" in 1956 and Tigrinya and Arabic, the country's official languages were replaced by Amharic, Ethiopia's official language. The free press was put under federal control, political parties and trade unions were banned, and two years later the Eritrean flag was abrogated and replaced by the Ethiopian flag. In September 1959 the Eritrean assembly voted to adopt the Ethiopian penal code and

annul their own laws and on 15 November 1962, the assembly had voted itself out of existence, declaring the federation between the two countries null and void. This directly violated the stipulation that only the UN General Assembly possessed the power to alter or amend the Federal Act. With this, Eritrea had become fully annexed to Ethiopia and began a new existence as the country's fourteenth province.

#### **1.4 Armed Struggle and Refugees**

The resistance movement in Eritrea began in earnest in September 1961 with a Muslim separatist group which called itself the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Numerous other factions were to follow, the most important of which is the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) which came into the being in February 1970. Under these two fronts (and later mainly under the EPLF), the war for independence in Eritrea continued more or less unabated for thirty years until 1991, although it was really in the late 1970's that the war became of strategic importance. During this period an Eritrean national identity and consciousness was shaped and made inalienable by the deaths of the thousands who had fought for independence. These years witnessed the end of the reign of Haile Selassie and the fall seventeen years later of his successor, Menghistu Haile Mariam. It lies outside the scope of this thesis to document the succession of events which led to the end of these two regimes, or to chart the disunity which manifested itself finally in a full-scale civil war between the two fronts. It is necessary however to note that the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has, directly and indirectly, forced large numbers of people into exile, fleeing Eritrea in search of safe-haven elsewhere.



**Figure 1** : Pattern of Eritrean refugee movement into Sudan

Source: UNHCR; A. Wilson, 1991; J.R. Rogge, 1985; R. Sherman, 1980

It is believed that the first exodus of people began as early as the 1950s but increased markedly in 1967 as a result of fighting in the western lowlands of the country. Before the early 1970s most of the refugees were Muslim lowlanders but that composition changed abruptly after the Ethiopian revolution in the mid-1970s when fighting escalated in the urban areas and many Christians began to flee. By 1991, about 700,000 Eritreans had left their country because of war - one-fifth of Eritrea's population - of which an estimated 500,000 have been absorbed into the refugee camps or urban areas of Sudan.<sup>2</sup> Many more have also settled spontaneously among their ethnic relations in the border villages.

## **2. Methods and Sources**

I first travelled to Sudan in the summer of 1984 to conduct preliminary research in one of its many refugee settlements. I visited five settlements in the eastern region - Um Ali, Abuda, Tawawa, Karkora and Um Gargur - before deciding which one best suited my interests. Although the refugee settlements in Sudan were established with the purpose of hosting single "nationalities" (Ugandians, Chadians, Ethiopians/Eritreans), I was aware that what had often resulted were a conglomeration of groups having diverse cultures, ethnic origins, languages, religions, political affiliations and traditions, living together for the first time in single villages. I wanted to assess the extent to which people had assimilated and whether traditions or stereotypes were altering as a result of the proximity in which the refugees lived.

The first settlement I visited was Tawawa, an extremely large (pop.

15,000) urban settlement in which there were people who were recognised in international law as Ethiopians but who identified themselves as having separate nationalities as Tigrayans, as Ethiopians and as Eritreans. I spent three weeks in Tawawa but excluded it as a possibility because it was beset with problems at the time. While hundreds of refugees fleeing famine in Ethiopia were arriving in that settlement daily, Operation Moses, the Israeli airlift of Falasha Jews, was taking place. Sharia law was being strongly enforced, tensions were high and security was tight. I quickly realised that the complex nature of an urban settlement such as Tawawa meant that refugees were justifiably suspicious of any strangers. This precluded any possibility of the type of inquiry which I proposed to undertake.

Um Ali and Abuda were both of a size and composition which was favourable for my research purposes, but both settlements were newer (est. 1981) than either Um Gargur (est. 1976) or Karkora (est. 1978) and thus had not been in existence for a sufficient period to allow for the possibility of a "melting pot" experience to occur. They were also rather inaccessible during the rainy season. I finally chose Um Gargur because it was an older settlement than Karkora and had all of the elements which interested me. All of its settlers were Eritrean, but came from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic and political backgrounds. It was sufficiently isolated that contact with a Sudanese population was rare, and so there were very few influences outside of the Eritrean context.

I stayed in Um Gargur for two months at this time. Upon my return to England I incorporated the data collected in Um Gargur into my M.Phil. thesis, "A Preliminary Study of the Position of Eritrean

Refugees in the Sudan". The thesis was also an investigation of the legal definition of "refugees" in international law, and examined the historical background of the movement of Eritreans between Sudan and Eritrea. It compared the case of Um Gargur to two other resettlement situations: that of the Gwembe Tonga in Zambia, forcibly removed from their homes in order to make way for the Kariba dam (Colson, 1960), and that of the Luvale people from eastern Angola who fled their villages to settle spontaneously among their kin in Zambia during Angola's liberation war (Hansen, 1977).

While among the groups studied by Colson and Hansen the necessity for acculturation was minimised because of the homogeneity of the communities, Um Gargur's heterogeneous composition meant that the refugees not only had to adapt to a new environment, they also had to adapt to living in close proximity to "strangers", whose political and cultural backgrounds often differed from their own. The conclusion reached in the thesis was that although all cases of involuntary displacement are undeniably traumatic in the initial stages, they differ widely in regard to their long-term implications. Among the most important variables to be taken into account are the degrees to which marginalisation, assimilation, integration and self-sufficiency take place.

New networks appeared to be burgeoning among women in Um Gargur in 1984. These were novel because they often extended across kinship, ethnic, and political boundaries. The nature and extent of such networks and their apparent potential of transforming the nature of the settlement was of great interest to me and warranted future investigation. I returned to Um Gargur in 1985 where I conducted just

over one year of research, returning to England at the beginning of 1987. This D.Phil. thesis builds upon the findings of the earlier thesis, and presents a closer examination of the processes at work in Um Gargur, in particular their impact upon women in the settlement.

During my second stay in Um Gargur I stayed in a small *tukul* (hut), in the homestead of Luigi Viglio (son of an Eritrean mother and an Italian father). I shared this hut with two of his daughters, 13 and 15 years old. They were a great source of information and inspiration, teaching me how to grind grain, prepare *injera*, and *kisra*, flat unleavened breads made from fermented grain, and brew traditional highland coffee, all skills I would need should I ever wish to become a perfect Eritrean wife. Luigi was a Catholic and our homestead was in the Christian section of the village. He was also a member of the ELF which meant that ours was one of the few Christian households in which Muslims were often present. Although I was unaware of his political affiliations when I first went to live in his home, this worked to my advantage as it allowed me access to two worlds. Had I lived first with an EPLF family I am certain that I could not have established ties with non-EPLF families very easily. EPLF Christians were as suspicious of my motives for living in Um Gargur as ELF Muslims, but because I lived in close proximity to them, many of my acquaintances who were pro-EPLF rapidly became my friends. I remained in Luigi's homestead for approximately ten months. I later moved to the homestead of Kiros Sereke, the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) medical team leader, where I lived for the final three months. Although Kiros' family was firmly pro-EPLF, by this time I was well enough established in the village not to excite suspicions of adherence to any particular faction.



I drew on my identity as an African "foreigner" rather than as a woman in order to facilitate my entry into the society of men. This allowed me access into male strongholds such as the market-place and the tea-rooms where I discussed politics and other issues with numerous men. Later I was called "sister" although admittedly unlike any other sister they had known. When I left the public sphere for the company of women, my persona changed immediately into a more intimate, confiding one. As a woman among women we openly shared and exchanged information. I found however, that I occupied a very peculiar position in relation to other women. On the one hand I was trusted and, I think, respected because I was an African woman who many villagers regarded as a "sister" or "daughter" who had made achievements. As a result, men who would otherwise have been extremely reluctant to let their wives leave their homes (except in large groups) to attend weddings or other ceremonial occasions, would happily allow them to go in my company. At the same time people expected me to follow rules of decorum which were not necessary for white women who visited or lived in the settlement. I witnessed this double-standard often with American and German women who worked for aid agencies. When they smoked or wore short trousers, people would merely shake their heads in wonderment and remark how like men the *khawajia* (Western women) were. I am certain that had I done so I would have jeopardised my relationships because although I was regarded as different, I was not so unlike them that I could flout those particular codes of behaviour. Of course aid workers in Um Gargur were also seen to be contributing to the settlement and occupied roles of authority, whereas my position was quite ambiguous and relied very much on maintaining a good reputation.

I was often plagued with self-doubt whilst in Um Gargur. So much depended upon whether I was liked and accepted by the people with whom I lived. In many ways I felt like a parasite, dependent upon the villagers for so much and yet being able to give so little in return. None of my friends had much in the way of material wealth but they opened their homes and their hearts to me. So much had been made of the importance of "objectivity" in anthropology and yet it became increasingly clear to me that the quality of anthropological field-research rests almost entirely upon the relationships that are established in the research setting.

Jacques Maquet noted that "the anthropologist perceives the social phenomena he studies not from nowhere but from a certain point of view, which is his existential situation" (1964:51). In terms of my own research so many variables came into play, particularly regarding my self-identification. After some consideration, I decided not to align myself with any of the other foreigners who visited Um Gargur, ultimately curtailing my contact with all non-Eritreans. Nor (after a brief spell in the home of the Sudanese headmaster and his wife) did I spend any time in the company of the Sudanese who lived in Um Gargur. I did not want anyone to begin to doubt my loyalties. Indeed, although this was part of my research plan, in time I grew to love and respect a number of people and my loyalties came quite naturally. I began to avoid all of the foreigners who came to Um Gargur, especially those from the various donor agencies who had heard that I was living in the settlement and sought me out as an "expert".

I was never sure whether I was doing the right thing. On the one hand I knew that there was a possibility that some of what I had learned

might be of use to the aid agencies and encourage positive policies for the refugees. At the same time I knew that the villagers did not generally trust the Sudanese or the expatriates and that much of the information which was imparted to the refugee agencies was motivated by a desire for change. Some of it was true and some exaggerated but I did not want to be in the position of verifying what was said. There was information which I knew could harm the refugees and I had neither an interest in harming them nor, in falsely giving them cause to believe that my contact with expatriates might alter their circumstances.

I know that there were those who remained, quite naturally, suspicious of my motives for living in Um Gargur. I also know that there were those who came to trust me. I would like to think that at the very least I entertained many people - particularly the women with whom I interacted most frequently - and offered them temporary respite from the monotony of settlement life. I told them about my family and friends and shared my photographs from Liberia, America and England with them so that my life outside of Um Gargur could be contextualised and conceptualised more easily. All of my friends in Um Gargur knew the names of my parents and had seen their photographs. They often commented on how beautiful my mother was and how unlike her I was. They would laughingly add that I was blessed in personality with the equivalent of what she had in looks. When I was asked about my religion I professed no faith but mentioned that in my family there are both Muslims and Christians, a fact which seemed to give my questioners much pleasure.

I spent 90% of my social time in the company of other women. For several days a week my life was very structured. Although I had no

formal medical qualifications, I had previously worked in a maternity hospital in Liberia delivering babies and decided to do the same in Um Gargur. I worked in the SCC clinic examining pregnant women and young infants and carrying out deliveries. I also helped to conduct a nutrition survey in the settlement and it is this survey from which much of my statistical information is derived. All of these formal activities also contributed to my being accepted by the villagers and allowed me to establish lasting friendships with several women. There were about fifteen households in which I felt very much at ease, and in all of these I carried out extensive interviews with household members. Eleven of these households were Muslim and four were Christian. In most households I became accustomed to assisting in whatever the day's work was, whether it was grinding grain, making stew or preparing *kisra* or *injera*. In this way I participated in the daily lives of the women while at the same time learning about their experiences. There were perhaps another fifteen households in which I was an occasional visitor and I also interviewed various members of these households.

At the first stage of my research I had two assistants; Abdel-Aziz Ismail Osman who helped me to conduct interviews in Tigre and Arabic, and Kidane Ghebray who assisted me with Tigrinya. Because they were both male, this presented both practical and ethical problems. I was very interested in women and their points of view and quickly discovered that many women were not prepared to answer, through a male interpreter, some of the highly personal questions I would ask them. This applied to both married and unmarried women. I was fortunate that both of my male assistants, one Christian and the other Muslim, had extensive networks of family and friends who were willing to be interviewed. Most of my

contacts with other women were derived from these networks and soon (within two months) I decided it was more appropriate not to rely on my assistants when interviewing (they themselves were also often embarrassed and could appreciate my predicament) and worked instead on my own. As my linguistic skills improved so did my range of contacts. In the rare instances where there was a breakdown in communications, a daughter, sister, or friend, would help to translate. Because there were six indigenous languages, I chose to communicate in Arabic - the *lingua franca* of the settlement - my level of comprehension being equivalent with most of the refugee women. I managed to pick up some Tigre as well and could thus listen in on and contribute to numerous conversations which I had not instigated.

One of the problems which I encountered had to do with whether my study would benefit the villagers in any way. I believe that in any situation where there is economic deprivation, outsiders who journey from the West will be regarded with a mixture of suspicion and expectation. In the refugee context where everyone wants to escape, this is perhaps even more pertinent. In the beginning I was often asked what the purpose of my research was, and I replied that I was interested in learning about the life-stories and experiences of women, an undertaking everyone, even my closest friends continued to regard as nothing less than frivolous. I said that when the women of Um Gargur finally returned to Eritrea no one would understand what had happened to them while they were in Sudan and that it was important to record their experiences for posterity. Because I knew that believing otherwise might affect their answers, I had to make it clear that no gain would come to anyone from sharing these tales with me. After living in the

settlement for some months during my second trip to Um Gargur, I realised that I had occasionally been given misinformation during my preliminary stay and I was determined that the same thing would not happen again. I often told women stories about my childhood and customs in my own society in West Africa, and this often prompted responses; however in the first months I relied mostly on the information given to me by those whom I had come to respect and trust. Later I felt secure enough linguistically and in terms of my own experiences in Um Gargur to vigorously talk over any communications which seemed unusual or contrived. In time, many women, amused and pleased by my interest in their life stories, willingly gave their time and information to me.

The thesis includes a glossary of some of the words which were in frequent use in the settlement among people of all groups. In the text I have listed these words according to their perceived origins. Tigre words are indicated by the letter (T); Tigrinya by (Tya); and Arabic by (A). There are many Tigre words which derive from Arabic, and several words which exist in both Tigrinya and Amharic. In the instances where these words occur in the thesis they are noted as Tigrinya and Tigre rather than Amharic and Arabic. The Arabic transliterations are based on the language as it is spoken in Um Gargur and several people assisted with the Tigre and Tigrinya transliterations.

Most of my extensive interviews were taped. Unless otherwise noted, all of the data presented in this thesis is based on these interviews which were conducted entirely by me. All of the quotations in this thesis are also, unless otherwise noted, from interviews conducted in Arabic. The first quotation which appears at the start of the introduction was from an interview which was conducted in Tigrinya and

is the only quoted interview for which I required a translator. For this, Emnetu Woldeselassie, a Tigrinya schoolteacher, provided me with valued assistance. I draw almost exclusively on these oral accounts of people's lives before and since becoming refugees, although I occasionally refer to the work of historians when placing these accounts in a temporal framework. Of course there are problems in relying entirely upon oral accounts because of the biases which they bring to bear. However as all history has its own biases and the problem of recharting the histories of this diverse group of people is fairly insurmountable, I rely on the refugees to recreate their lives for me. This is extremely important because it provides us with information on how they perceived their lives in the past and how they regarded their position in Um Gargur at the time when this study was undertaken.

Finally, this is a community which is, and has always seen itself, as a temporary one. At the time of my study the war in Eritrea showed no signs of abating; yet none of the refugees imagined Um Gargur as a place they would remain. People looked to the future and for them, the future was Eritrea. In May 1991, four years after I had completed the research for this thesis, the war in Eritrea ended and the political landscape was incontrovertibly altered. The country is now liberated and thousands of refugees with the means to do so have reportedly returned home, including a number from Um Gargur. Many more will return with the help of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs, established in 1987 to assist Eritreans abroad and now helping to facilitate their repatriation. The dream of return can, for all of them, now be realised. Although Um Gargur's community will soon disappear into the

towns and villages of Eritrea, this thesis will serve as a record of their dreams, hopes, and experiences during their time in exile.

### **3. Analysis and Purpose**

Almost a decade ago a prominent academic was moved to remark upon the dearth of academic material on refugees, compared to the ever growing numbers of refugees in the world. "It has been estimated that up to 140 million people have been forcibly uprooted in this century alone! In view of this it is remarkable that social scientists have generally neglected refugee studies and research...May it be that...refugees are seen as immigrants with little distinction between them? Or could it be too difficult an area to research, involving a multi-disciplinary approach which academics tend to dislike?...Perhaps it is also too painful a subject for social scientists to get close to?" (Baker, 1983).

Since then a body of multi-disciplinary work on refugees has emerged which has gone some way towards redressing the balance (Goodwin-Gill, 1983; Dick and Simmonds, 1983; Caulton, 1985; Karadawi, 1988; Harrell-Bond, 1986; Rogge, 1985; Kibreab, 1985; Bulcha, 1987; Daley, 1991; Peteet, 1991; Steen, 1992). There are now also several research and documentation centres world-wide devoted to refugees; among the most notable are the Refugee Studies Programme based at Oxford University, the International Refugee Documentation Network in Geneva, the Refugee Policy Group in Washington, D.C., the Resource Centre on Refugees at York University in Canada, the Refugee Studies programme at the American University in Cairo, and the Research and Resource Division for Refugees at the University of Khartoum in Sudan.

Until recently however, the young discipline of Refugee Studies has been preoccupied with immediate political and humanitarian concerns. In spite of their relevance, such concerns have not incorporated questions about the long-term strategies for survival employed by refugees, or about the daily processes of urban and settlement life. Some researchers, while conducting valuable inquiries, have spent very little time among the subjects of the studies, relying instead on data collected primarily from surveys and questionnaires for which there are generally circumscribed responses. As a result, though the literature currently available has been of some theoretical value, much of it offers a relatively superficial understanding of what refugee life entails. This study stems in part from a concern about the neglect of the discipline to address long-term refugee concerns - particularly within the settlements, many of which have been in existence for over a decade.

My own specialised area of interest has been Eritrean refugee women. Despite the fact that there is now a growing corpus of work on Eritrean refugees (Palmer, 1976; Johnson, 1979; Smock, 1982; Laman, 1984; Pezaro, 1984; Kibreab, 1985; Caulton, 1985; Kuhlman, et al., 1987; Francis, 1987; Goitom, 1987; Cope, 1988; Bascom, 1989; Kok, 1989; Asfaha, 1990; Sendker, 1991), when I developed an interest in the subject in 1984, there was not much in the extant literature which was of use to my inquiries. As an anthropologist I sought out studies within my discipline, finding in 1984, few in-depth investigations on refugees (Hansen, 1977; Spring, 1979; Braukämper, 1982; Harrell-Bond, 1982). At that time I also came across only five short general papers on Eritrean refugee women (Mebrahtu, 1981; Laman, 1984; Palmer, n.d.; Pezaro, 1984;

von Vietinghoff, 1983).

Refugee women were generally discussed in passing, as though gender was not a relevant factor of the refugee experience (El-Beshir, 1978; Braukämper, 1982; Rogge, 1985; Kibreab, 1985). Surprisingly, even today there is not an abundance of data on refugee women (Eritrean or otherwise), an oversight noted by others (Kay, 1987; Callaway, 1987; Indra, 1989; Daley, 1991). And to date there are still relatively few anthropological studies on refugees, although the need has been noted by anthropologists who have charted such territory (Bright, 1985; Callaway, 1987; Kay, 1987; Waldron, 1988; Sendker, 1989; Colson, 1989; Indra, 1989; Davis, 1992).

This neglect may be because refugee research has been considered marginal to the study of social anthropology and so no comprehensive methodology for the study of refugee communities has been developed in the subject so far. Stein suggests that this "scholarly inattention" results partly from the fact that refugee problems are regarded as "temporary", "isolated" and "atypical" and because refugee research "is not a ready-made field of study. It lacks standard texts, a theoretical structure, a systematic body of data, and even a firm definition of the subject or the field" (1986:6). Yet the subject of refugees lends itself rather neatly to anthropological investigations, in part because the discipline is interested both in social and cultural change, and in the study of marginal beings, which refugees are by virtue of their alien status (Simmel, 1950; Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1969).

Colson makes a strong case for the necessity of anthropology to focus on the political/historical context of refugeehood: "If anthropology is more than a game or an academic discipline that provides

employment to anthropologists, then at least some of its research effort should be focused on policy environments that...create the political chaos that currently has driven 10 million refugees into flight across international borders" (1989:3). While it is not the brief of this thesis to examine "policy environments" in detail, it is an overdue attempt to address Waldron's (1988) call for anthropologists to take on the role of communicators and cultural translators who are able to lend an insight into the perspectives of refugees. It therefore attempts to bridge a crucial gap between the types of research possibilities which anthropology can pursue. As Shipton rightly notes, the anthropologist "offers *time* in year-round research, and in historical perspective -- both missing ingredients in development and relief" (1990:370).

Because the refugees of Um Gargur are in a rural setting which happens to be characterised by certain specifically urban elements (Bright, 1985), the refugees' environment is, in a sense, "undefinable" (Douglas, 1966). All aspects of their lives are marked by a quality of limbo, for they remain on the outside of the host society. Those refugees in the Sudan who "pass" as Sudanese succeed in crossing the liminal threshold, but for refugees in settlements such as Um Gargur passing is not an option that they would choose for themselves. They consciously remain Eritreans, and therefore consciously remain marginal.

To date however, there has been little interest in long-term investigations of camp settings and therefore no exploration of what concepts such as "marginality", "power", and "powerlessness" mean for those refugees within settlements. Data on the coping strategies of refugees in camps is practically non-existent. Perhaps this reluctance stems from the peculiar character of the settlement situation, the

investigation of which may easily lend itself to accusations of voyeurism. A more plausible explanation is that proffered by Robert Chambers who notes that when it comes to exploring the refugee experience, "Urban refugees are more likely to be investigated and understood than rural, they are politically more visible and vociferous; and they are more convenient for researchers" (1981:16). Certainly in the case of Eritrean refugees, the ratio of urban to settlement research appears to be consistent with Chamber's observation (Cope, 1988; Kuhlman, et al., 1987; Shone, 1985).

Yet the existing literature does not effectively explore either the differences or the similarities between the refugees in rural settlements and those concentrated in urban areas. For instance, Goitom states that "the Eritrean refugees in Khartoum are determined to keep their national identity...(and) the emotional links with their home...(are) symbolized in their link with the liberation movement, and hence encourage a close identification with their historical cause of forced dislocation." This observation, although convincing, is not elucidated by a discussion of how identity is maintained in the face of pressure to conform to the norms of the host country; such a discussion would be important to our understanding of refugees in urban areas. Goitom's findings do parallel some of those in Um Gargur; however few reliable comparisons can be made when, as Stein notes, refugee camps "have received relatively little analysis". He calls for "models of the crucial elements of the camp experience" (1986:11). It is these "crucial elements" that this study investigates in detail.

Goitom argues "that people exposed to external or internal dangers (sociopolitical and economic) tend to show a high degree of community

solidarity on many levels. The refugees' level of survival is based on changing strategies, a mechanism demanding a continuous information flow" (1987:142). One strategy is that which Hansen, in his study of spontaneously-settled Angolan refugees in Zambia, terms "(re)socialization" (1979). By this he means the process through which refugees acquire the skills and norms which enable them to adapt and assimilate in a host country. In multi-ethnic settlements such as Um Gargur, assimilation and adaption are occurring between the refugees themselves, i.e. within the community, rather than between hosts and refugees. Yet to date there are no studies documenting the evolution of such processes. It is the aim of this thesis to fill this gap. It provides Refugee Studies and Social Anthropology with one of a small number of long-term anthropological investigations of refugee settlements (Hansen, 1977; Spring, 1979; Braukämper, 1982; Sendker, 1989; Daley, 1991), and attempts to enhance our understanding of some of the complex processes which structure the experience of exile.

Power is a relative concept and is something which, on the face of it, few refugees can be said to enjoy. Refugees are marginalised by their position of being both outside, and at the same time reliant upon, the host society. However even within this circle of marginalisation, power structures proliferate. There are rich refugees and poor refugees, vocal refugees and silent ones, male refugees and female refugees. Yet the dichotomy between rich and poor, vocal and silent, does not necessarily fall along gender lines; male refugees are often silent and, this thesis will show, female refugees are not necessarily without a voice. Moore's (1988:4) observation, "It is not that women are silent; it is just that they cannot be heard", seems particularly

apt with regard to Um Gargur.

It is with female refugees and the processes of power and change in Um Gargur that this thesis is concerned. This is a departure from the existing Eritrean refugee literature, most of which has not been adequately informed by questions of gender (Smock, 1982; Johnson, 1979; Goitom, 1987; Asfaha, 1990; Rogge, 1985). In fact women have been notable by their overwhelming absence in such analyses despite the fact that they constitute the majority of adult refugees in Sudan (von Vietinghoff, 1983).

For instance, in Kibreab's study of organised land settlements women are given a cursory look. He and his team of enumerators interviewed women in the absence of their husbands, and also women who headed their own households. Kibreab is surprised by the extent of the women's cooperation having been previously informed that "because the man is the sole spokesman of the household, the women in the settlement would refuse not only to answer our questions but would even prevent us from entering into their premises." He continues, "Contrary to such assertions, in conducting the survey not only were the women in the settlements willing to answer our questions, but some of them were even more lucid and less ambiguous than some of the men. In fact, many of the women we interviewed were more curious to know about many questions outside the questionnaire...the answers provided by women, especially on crop income and consumption, seemed to be more dependable" (1985:24). And yet, despite the fact that Kibreab notes the importance of women to his investigations, Moore's (1988) statement that women "cannot be heard" resounds throughout this work. What Kibreab does here (contrary to his apparent good intentions) is offer either a genderless profile of

refugee settlements, or one which, ironically, presents men as "sole spokesmen".

Such oversights are not uncommon. Indra (1989:223) notes that in refugee research, women's issues "were by default identified as essentially the same as those of men" and were ignored as a result. What my analysis attempts to do is to explore the importance of gender in the refugee context through such concepts as Honour, Identity, Health and Economics in an attempt to document, for the first time among Eritrean refugees, the crucial roles which women play in the sustaining the social, political and economic lives of their families. My analysis shows clearly that gender does define the refugee experience in Um Gargur (as, surely, in many other refugee situations), and my contribution lies partly in demonstrating that studies which omit gender from their analysis necessarily advance a very limited representation of that experience.

The prevailing concern of studies on gender and the position of women in society has been with issues such as women's subordination, rituals and major life events (Rosaldo, 1974; Delmar, 1986; Goodale, 1980). Although such themes are treated in this dissertation, it is concerned primarily with the texture of day-to-day life - an aspect which studies on gender have not adequately addressed. This thesis makes a case for the study of women's daily existence within environments where there is a breakdown of the legitimacy of male power and an increased idealisation of women's roles. Even where men attempt to reestablish formal mechanisms of authority they are confounded, for power does not necessarily reside in formal mechanisms.

According to a 1983 UNICEF report, between 50-75% of refugee

families in Sudan are headed by women (von Vietinghoff, 1983:3). In Um Gargur this number is as high as 57% during certain periods of the year. Palmer (n.d.) suggests that in families which are "normally constituted", that is, where both parents are present and contributing to the household, "refugee women assume a lower social profile than usual" while men assume greater power. I agree with her assertion that this is "partly due to the new alien environment when men assume greater mobility and social visibility relative to women", but argue that even where many families are not "normally constituted" and are headed by women, as in Um Gargur, restrictions are applied. I suggest that the codes by which people have lived in their previous societies are threatened by the presence of such a substantial number of women-headed families, and that the determination to keep such women "invisible" and under control is great.

Even though the analyses of Merryman (1976), Spring (1979) and Oyedipe (1983) suggest that the options open to poor women who have been relocated or resettled are sometimes greater than before relocation, and that at times women's status may improve in relation to men's, I believe these are exceptions rather than the norm and that in a conservative Islamic, multi-ethnic rural settlement such as Um Gargur, the dangers perceived in social assimilation are rife while the opportunities for socio-economic advancement are extremely limited. I argue that poor women refugees in Um Gargur are generally the most deprived of power, and that even the poorest refugee man still exercises a degree of control over women and children, even where they are unrelated to him. In contrast with Spring's findings among self-settled Angolan refugees in Zambia, poor refugee women in Um Gargur do not intermingle with or

marry host men, and thus cannot improve their economic condition in this way. Nevertheless Bonnerjea's (1987:10) generalisation that refugee families are dependent on the ability of women to adapt since the "cost of failure is increasing hardship and suffering for the whole family", holds true for Um Gargur where it is the ever-present women who cement their families together. In this sense women often have more "influence" upon their families than men. Occasionally this influence is parlayed into power.

All of the refugees know what constituted "ideal" behaviour in their traditional societies. They are also aware that what was ideal for one group in the pre-refugee situation might not have been appropriate behaviour for another and similarly that the refugee context demands its own modifications. Although more restrictions were placed upon women's behaviour than on men's in traditional Eritrean contexts, such restrictions constituted part of every woman's identity and values and reaffirmed her place in the society. With refugeehood this value system has been undermined. "Male" or "female" behaviour patterns or activities are cultural constructs which are jeopardised when people are unable to fulfill their social roles. When everyone is dependent upon aid subsidies and rations, and little opportunity for employment exists, men who reside in the settlement are generally idle. They no longer fulfill their roles as providers and decision-makers and their identities as resourceful and dynamic players are erased; and when men are no longer around it is women who are burdened with the responsibility for taking care of the family. Ironically, it is only by depriving their wives and children of their physical presence that men can contribute most to their families' economic well-being. Since women

continue to manage the domestic sphere, their role in the family remains pivotal. Children grow up seeing their mothers as contributors, and the few fathers who are present as increasingly redundant.

By being thrust into positions as heads of households, women in Um Gargur constantly transcend what Pezaro in her study of psychological conflicts among Eritrean refugee women calls "the bounds of their internalised norm system" (1984:2). The counter-reactions to this are extreme: social assimilation among women from different ethnic and religious groups is discouraged while behavioural assimilation - with strict guidelines - is promoted. Women's attempts to achieve any degree of economic flexibility, or engage in ritual, social, or educational activities which take them away from the domestic sphere and offer them psychological independence are inhibited. In an effort to keep women dependent upon men, whether related or not, seclusion is presented, more forcefully than ever before, as the ideal. Even in their social and ritual lives, some activities which were morally sanctioned for women by tradition have become *haram* or unacceptable. The heterogeneous nature of the settlement also provokes extreme manifestations of "ideal" behaviour which would not have been required in the traditional context and are a new development. I follow Maher's assertion that "in times of social upheaval, when economic and power relations are convulsed and ill-defined, women and their roles become doubly invested with symbolic significance for the relationships among men, but...these symbols are drawn from the moral context believed to be proper to the traditional society, which is itself an ideological abstraction. In other words...women have been forced to represent a traditional model of social reality for the purposes of men" (1980:101).

And yet as the title of this thesis suggests, women are not enfeebled by the vicissitudes of settlement life. The epithet "Mothers of Steel" arose from a riot which was instigated by women when they learned that charges were to be instituted for water. As the women revolted, the children of Um Gargur yelled "Our mothers are steel, our fathers are monkeys." This was the first time that women, and later children, openly demonstrated against men and against the settlement authorities. However, even though the phrase derives from this incident, it is clear that for the children, their mothers have always, or at least for as long as they have lived in Um Gargur, been "mothers of steel". It is the mothers who, as they clean, feed, garden, and nurture, visibly sustain the health and welfare of their families. It is also the mothers who constantly redefine accepted codes of honour and challenge circumscribed social and economic boundaries in an attempt to give their children a better life. Finally, they shape the social and political identities of their children by offering them, through their stories of Eritrea and of the liberation struggle, what James calls "an archive" which constitutes "a lasting base of past reference and future validation" (1988:6). It is such crucial but mainly non-conspicuous contributions that have earned women their prominence in the eyes of their children, and the right to be called "mothers of steel".

It is the purpose of this thesis to show how, within the refugee context, gender roles and relations have evolved. Although others have noted that the structural relationship between the sexes in long-term refugee situations is frequently altered (Bonnerjea, 1987; Spring, 1979; Hansen 1977), most of the extant literature fails to analyse the processes which bring this about. One notable exception is Kay's (1987)

study of Chilean women in Scotland. Kay draws a distinction between those she terms "privatised" women, - that is women who are essentially housewives and mothers - and "public-private" women, - those who straddle both spheres by working both in and outside the home. She argues that during the political upheavals in Chile women during the early 1970s, women struggled to "preserve the private domain from political invasion and expropriation. In exile, the privatised women experienced a different process of devaluation of their domain. Their venerated place in society had been stripped away, mothering was socially devalued and there was a profound change for the worse in the terms of their ideological representation in society. Many privatised women experienced a slippage in meaning of the private domain in exile. In their attempt to recuperate the privileged meaning of the private domain, the privatised women turned to their men to reinforce the deference, honour and respect they felt they deserved as women" (1987:197).

Despite the fact that they were largely responsible for their families' welfare, and their children saw them as "mothers of steel", women in Um Gargur also lost status. However this manifested itself mainly through the attempts to curtail the choices they made for themselves outside of the private sphere. Just as it had for the Chilean women, the private domain for women in Um Gargur became overwrought with symbolism. Yet, the emphasis in the two situations was decidedly different; whereas Chilean men wanted women to get out of their homes and become politicised, the Eritrean women were being forced to remain at home and to represent ideals of motherhood and "feminine" behaviour. Ironically, among both groups "mothering" was devalued.

However among the refugees in Um Gargur, this occurred because men had seen their own positions being undermined and were reacting to this by depreciating women's contributions and roles; among the Chileans this took place because men regarded "privatised" women as counterproductive to the "forward march of the revolution" (1987:187). Chilean women in exile were disappointed in men because they found that their positions as mothers and women were no longer venerated. Women in Um Gargur were disappointed in men because when they turned to men to protect their interests, they found them incapable of behaving honourably.

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the position of women in Um Gargur. By presenting the first in-depth study of Eritrean refugee women, it situates itself both within Eritrean and Gender studies. It is not primarily about women's resistance but about women's lives as refugees, which sometimes includes resistance. The thesis analyses the impact of refugeehood on the traditional roles, mores, and perceptions of women. It examines the ways in which women cope with the changes that their society has undergone in the absence of the extended family, and often in the absence of their husbands. It examines the stringent codes that have been applied to women's behaviour and which men imply are in place to "protect" women from all the polluting influences represented by the "strangers" who constitute their community, but which are, in reality, an attempt by men to reassert themselves and compensate for the loss of status suffered by them through refugeehood.

The thesis seeks to illustrate the means by which women, mainly through new economic and social networks, have managed to counteract their subordination by men. Women show that when they and their children feel threatened, they are prepared to react collectively by

vocalising their objections even when these are met with the greatest resistance. One main theme which runs through this thesis is the extent to which the notion of what constitutes honour has calcified, at the same time as the gulf between men and women and their spheres of power has widened. Women have managed to counteract this calcification and reinterpret shame by viewing honour as a bargain which works both ways; if men uphold their part of this bargain and behave honourably by supporting the women economically and physically, women will behave in ways approved of by men. However when men fail to conduct themselves accordingly, women interpret this as less than honourable. Women, to protect themselves and their children, respond aggressively, in ways which would in other contexts be regarded by the society as shameful, but which in the refugee context they have claimed for themselves as honourable behaviour. I suggest that precisely because it is the behaviour least expected of women, regarded generally as passive actors who wield neither social nor political power, such collective action is powerful and efficacious. Although one comes across evidence of women's collective challenges elsewhere (Ifeka-Moller, 1975), nowhere in the anthropological data on honour and shame do there appear to be parallel reconceptualisations by women (Peristiany, 1965; Campbell, 1964; Abu-Lughod, 1986; Al-Khayyat, 1990).

Um Gargur is in many ways a chaotic, heterogeneous construct in which there are many contradictions, dilemmas, and identities, all of which operate simultaneously to shape the perspective and ethos of the society. It is a society in which all the players consistently articulate their marginal status - a status which, paradoxically, has also served to reassert national identity and to encourage moral

cohesion where none might have previously existed. Although notions of "honour" and "shame" in Um Gargur are largely connected to questions of women's virginity and sexuality, this thesis presents new evidence that they are not limited to these questions, as they appear to be in many other societies (El Saadawi, 1982; Jeffery, 1979; Youssef, 1974). Even though the concept of honour is more strictly applied to women in this community of strangers, the thesis moves away from commonly held assumptions about women's powerlessness in the face of such strictures to demonstrate how in a community such as Um Gargur where values are undergoing change, it is men who are now felt by women to be in a protracted state of dishonour. In Um Gargur women have recognised their common plight and responded by struggling against the dominant forces. They have renegotiated their identity, whilst being the primary agents in the construction of their children's identities as Eritreans. The thesis demonstrates that women are, even within restrictive refugee environments, strategists in their own right whose roles and influence should neither be underestimated nor ignored.

#### **4. Layout of Chapters**

Chapter Two places us firmly within the context of Um Gargur as an example of a failed promise of self-sufficiency. Because women's roles are peripheral to the formal infrastructure of the settlement, it deals only briefly with women. However it sets the backdrop for the succeeding chapters and reveals how, despite their large numbers, women are left out of this infrastructure. The establishment of the settlement is outlined and the political and administrative layers are identified as are the conflicts which arise between various segments of

society. In Chapter Three I consider how in the past men provided the economic "cushions" upon which women would perch, comfortably guarding their honour. By providing economic support men also maintained their own honour, for it was partly through this exchange that a husband fulfilled his conjugal responsibility. The loss of economic status for men here is significant, for it deprives them of honour and fills them with shame since they no longer have a pivotal role. This has resulted in many fissures in the society which manifest themselves in various ways, including women's taking up employment (Chapter Four) and in setting up economic and social networks which have their basis in old structures. This chapter also discusses the importance of saving societies in the settlement and their role in ensuring that money is recycled in the female sphere. It touches upon the importance of children to women's economic life since without child labour women's flexibility would be severely compromised. In its portrayal of the new roles and interdependencies it shows how women's ingenuity sustains their families and how they can be called "mothers of steel".

I explore the idea of continuity and change with regard to Honour, Economics and, in Chapter Five, Health. The interaction between health workers and healers is considered as well as the role of the clinic in education and change *vis-à-vis* the perceptions about illnesses. Drama here is regarded as a catalyst for change and for giving women a voice. Chapter Six examines more closely the concept of identity maintenance and reconstruction through ideas about "Eritrea the homeland" held by women (and men) as they socialise their children who were either too young to have a memory of the country or who were born in the Sudan. It looks at the function of myths, songs and names, in forging and

preserving an Eritrean identity outside of Eritrea.

In the Conclusion (Chapter Seven) I link together the various themes from earlier chapters in my analysis of a water riot in Um Gargur which mobilised over one hundred women into action. I illustrate that although the refugees are in limbo, trapped between an idealised past and a difficult present, their society is one in which realignments of values and ideas are frequent. I suggest that notions of propriety and honour are being reconceptualised by women to allow them greater flexibility and choices in their society, particularly where their children's well-being is at risk.

## CHAPTER II - UM GARGUR: THE CONTEXT

Zaharra Ismail, Jiberti mother, aged 48:

"We came to the Sudan ten years ago from Tessenei. Jemal [son] was only one year old at this time. Before we came to Sudan we were so well. It was during the reign of the emperor. He came for the first time to our country from Gondar, from Addis Ababa. He came in a small car and many people came from all over to greet him. People killed many goats, they beat the drums for him and played the horns. He came in a small car. There were so many people. They came from all over - Asmara, Mendefera, Gondar, Tigray. First when he came everyone was happy but later things changed. Everyone, the young and the old became ill. We were all small at the time but I remember that after he entered our country people became sick. They all had eye disease, their eyes were hurting. He only stayed for a short time but as soon as he left everyone became better. Things were not too bad under Haile Selassie but when he was caught and imprisoned things became much worse under Menghistu. Before this our country was much better. Aman Andom came after Haile Selassie but when Menghistu came he killed all. What! He killed so many. They [the army] came to our homes in the night. So many people died. They cut off women's breasts, they cut women's bellies open. When Menghistu came everyone became a fighter. They burned us with fire [bombs]. People died. Everyone fled and scattered and became refugees like us. Our country is best but we are living here. Before Eritrea was so good. There was no famine or war. The war started in the 1960s'. The government betrayed the people and started killing us. Then the people took arms, different types of arms. There was war everywhere in Eritrea...We did not want to come to Sudan. First we were living in Mendefera, then Asmara. From there we moved to Alighidir in 1958. We came to Wad el Hilew in 1975 and Um Gargur two years later. During the battle, when we were fleeing during the night, it was dark and thorns were piercing us here [feet and legs]. We carried water, Jemal was very young. In the night we slept on the ground. We had only one flashlight between us. The other thing, you see, the women were dead. They killed some. They butchered oh, they burned...the fire, ai! But we were not, thank God. We saw that some of the dead women had their fingers and their ears cut off and the army took their gold. Many people were lost. In Om Hajer, when people fled from bullets they were carried away by the river. Especially children. They were carried from their mothers' backs, their mothers' arms by the river. It was happening all over Eritrea. In our country we had good food. We had thaf [grain grown in the highlands]. Our houses were good houses. Our country was cool, not hot like here. Where is our country now? Where? Where are we now? Where are we now? We are just living on grass. We left everything."

## II. UM GARGUR: THE CONTEXT

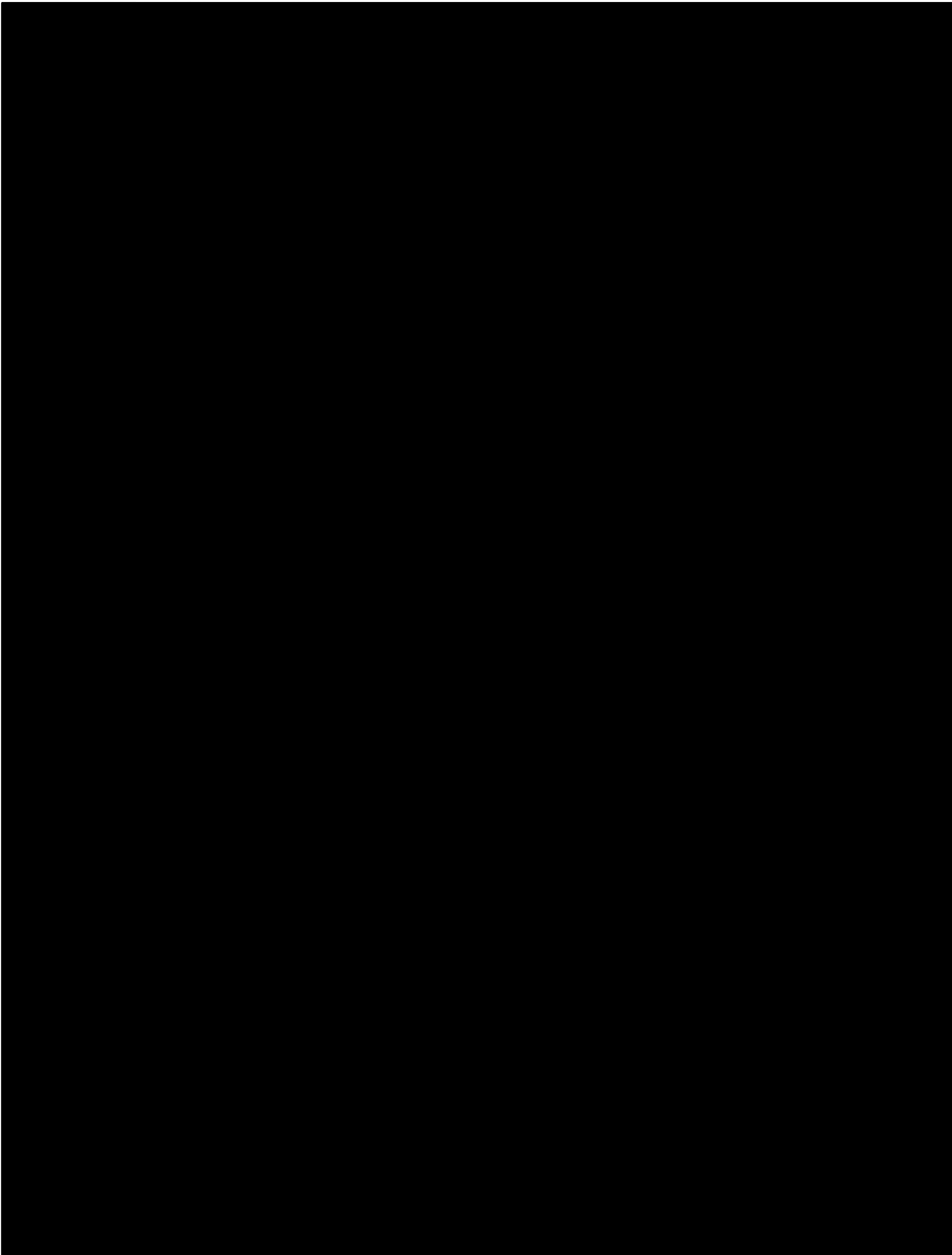
### 1. Geography

Um Gargur refugee village lies in the Kassala province of the eastern Sudan. It is approximately 60 kilometres north-east of the market town of Gedaref and 80 kilometres west of the Eritrean border. In 1985 it was one of twenty-four settlements in eastern Sudan, the nearest of which, Karkora, was established in 1978 and is located less than 10 kilometres from Um Gargur. Um Gargur is administered from the regional headquarters of the Sudan Government's Commissioner of Refugees (COR) in Es Showak, a town 25 kilometres away.

The settlement is located in a semi-arid region not a great distance away from the desert, in an area where the landscape is flat and unvaried and shows remarkable resistance to vegetation despite the fact that its soil, black-cotton, is of rich agricultural quality. The natural vegetation consists of sparse growths of various acacia shrubs and scatterings of thorn-brush surrounded on all sides by a dusty plain.

The yearly average for rainfall in the area is marginal, around 300-500 mm. This, coupled with rainstorms which are intense but of short duration, inflicts severe water stress on the crops grown in this area (Cree, 1983:2). The seasonal distribution is at best, unsteady, and during the years between 1983 and 1987 it was generally poor (CARE, 1987:1). In addition, much of the formerly arable land in the region has been subjected to overgrazing by the numerous nomads who feed their herds around Um Gargur. Trees were also cut down for local fuel and consumption purposes as well as for the shipment of charcoal to Khartoum

**MAP 3. REFUGEE CAMPS IN EASTERN SUDAN.**



while rodents and grasshoppers thwarted efforts to replant. Thus vast tracts of degraded and exhausted earth dominate the landscape. In fact it is estimated that 95% of the forest which existed 50 years ago in this region has since disappeared (de Crombrugghe, 1988:11). Because of these ecological and man-made factors, largely the only crop which has been consistently cultivated with any degree of success for sale outside the settlement is the hardy and relatively drought resistant *durra*, a variety of sorghum. Conditions would not appear to support large-scale production of other crops except through intensive farming and artificial irrigation, both of which are economically unfeasible (CARE, 1987:3).

Um Gargur has neither a well-defined "rainy season" nor a "dry season". The rains might occur anytime between June and October. Although July and August tend to be the wettest months, the rainstorms which occur during this period are intense and erratic and only hint at a rainy "season". Those months which precede and follow the rains are generally considered the dry season. December and January are the coolest months while between April and June the climate turns both extremely hot (110°-120°F) and latterly, extremely humid. Between April and June a continuous build-up of heat occurs which stirs up dust-storms of varying intensities. The dust-storms or *haboob*, generally occur shortly before it rains when the earth is parched and dry and there is little vegetation. The days in Um Gargur are generally hot and dry while the evenings are cool and still.

## 2. Structural Environment

All residential homes in the village are circular wattle and daub structures which have conically shaped thatched roofs. Each hut or *tukul* is set within homesteads and homesteads are occupied either by a nuclear family or more commonly, by an extended family. The number of huts that can be found within each homestead varies according to the number of adults and children resident there. Each family functions theoretically as an autonomous unit and has its own huts, land and livestock. Interdependence among homestead members is great however and much is shared. Homesteads are separated from each other by fences constructed either from acacia brushes or zinc depending upon the enterprise or wealth of its occupants.

Every homestead has at least one kitchen which is generally an open air one where there is a *mogogo* - an earthenware stove, for making *kisra* (T) or *injera* (Tya), flat crêpe-like breads made (in Um Gargur) from *durra* or maize and favoured by Eritreans. Many people often build a small mud hut to serve as a second kitchen and it is in this hut that food is usually fermented or dried and stored. In 1984 the number of pit latrines in the settlement stood at 400<sup>1</sup>. By 1986 that number had reached 530 and although this was still inadequate for the needs of the population, it was clearly a great improvement. Each homestead has at least one *rakoba* or sitting area. This is a shelter constructed out of thatch and wood which opens at the front and allows air to circulate. People use it as a shade during the afternoons and on very hot evenings as a sleeping room. Homesteads that have many inhabitants generally have several and it is under these *rakoba* that men and women carry out

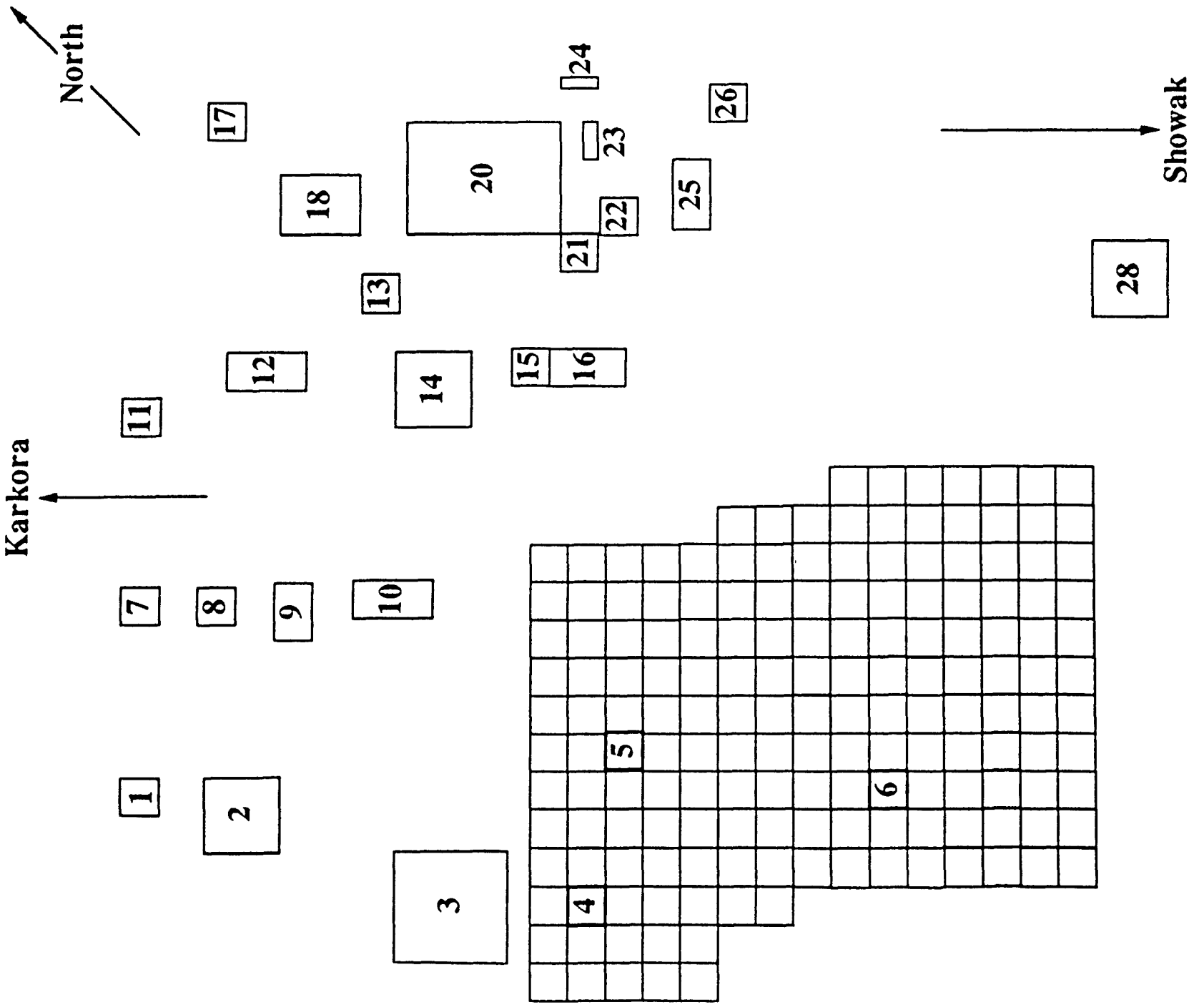
their social life.

Almost all families have some animals. Chickens and pigeons are the mainstay of poorer families who keep the chickens for their eggs and the pigeons for meat. Those families who have wage-earning members are much better off and are more likely to have livestock such as goats and sheep. Only families who are very well-to-do are likely to have cows although sometimes poor families might own cattle jointly which are then kept for their milk. The donkey is extremely important as it is used to fetch water from the wells and to bring back loads from the fields. Because of this, any family that does not own a donkey will generally cultivate contacts with a family that does, so as to have access to that family's donkey. Animals are usually kept within an enclosure in the homestead although those people who have large herds will employ a shepherd to look after the animals in another enclosure. These larger enclosures are often built and shared by friends or acquaintances who decide to hire the same shepherd. These shepherds usually take the livestock out of the village in search of pasture. According to Osman Zayed, the settlement's health and sanitation supervisor, there are approximately 453 milking cows in Um Gargur, 210 non-milking cows, 25 camels, 1300 goats, 800 sheep and 325 donkeys.<sup>2</sup>

The villagers divide the settlement into four residential areas or *hillat*. They are *hillat* Jeffe where many cow-herders live, hence the name which means cow-dung, *hillat* Baria where the Baria live, *hillat* Alighidir which refers to the area in Eritrea which most of its inhabitants stem from and *hillat* Habash or Jedid, the last area to be settled and where the highlanders live.

There are two water-pumps in the village which work continuously

**Diagram 1: Um Gargur - Infrastructure**



- 1 Borewell
- 2 *Donkii* + Vegetable garden
- 3 SCC clinic
- 4 SCC social office
- 5 Church
- 6 Mosque + Koranic school
- 7 Veterinary dispensary + battery
- 8 Police station
- 9 Rations storehouse + garage
- 10 COR office
- 11 Storekeeper's + policeman's homes
- 12 Quarters for teachers + staff
- 13 Sabbe school
- 14 Government boys' school
- 15 Headmaster's home
- 16 Project manager's home
- 17 Bakery
- 18 Football pitch
- 19 Mosque
- 20 Market
- 21 COR/SCF clinic
- 22 Mosque + Koranic school
- 23 Cooperative store
- 24 Mill
- 25 Government girls' school
- 26 SCC literacy + women's centre
- 27 Ansar mosque + Koranic school
- 28 *Donkii* + vegetable garden

throughout the day. These are known locally as "donkii" and it is from these that the villagers get their supply of water for domestic use. Children have the responsibility of providing water for their families and water is taken from these wells several times a day. There are also children who hire out their services to families too poor to own a donkey or who have no children old enough to fetch water. Although from time to time one might see men at the pump fetching water for their families, it is unusual. And even though women can be found in the environs of the water pump where there is a vegetable garden, one never sees them transporting water for their families. Because there have been numerous quarrels arising because of animals using the water spots on occasions during the dry season when water has been scarce, there are also two storage wells at opposite ends of the settlement which are used to water the villagers' animals and those of the numerous Sudanese nomads who pass through Um Gargur with their own livestock and camels.

There are four mosques, three Koranic schools, and one church in Um Gargur. There are also three elementary schools; they are the Sabbe (ELF-PLF) school, the Sudanese government girl's school and the government boy's school.<sup>3</sup> During my first period of fieldwork in 1984 the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) school was still in existence, however it was already being phased out as an elementary school and in 1985 it finally closed. The SCC does maintain an adult literacy programme and handicraft school in the women's centre on its old school plot. It is interesting to note that in 1984 there was only one mosque which served the needs of the entire settlement. The three new mosques which have been built lately reflect a recent upsurge in religious fervour in Um Gargur.

Two clinics serve the population, which means that Um Gargur, like many refugee settlements, is well catered for in terms of medical services. Although it is not a regular occurrence, the clinics do occasionally have Sudanese nomads who come seeking treatment. The two clinics have separate functions; one run by the SCC is essentially for maternal and child health although its overnight facilities are used by other adults. The other, run by the Commissioner of Refugees (COR) and Save the Children (SCF), began its life as a tuberculosis clinic and is now primarily a walk-in clinic for adults. It is much smaller than the SCC clinic and much less burdened.

There is a large market-place which sits in the centre of the settlement and in which much of Um Gargur's male social-life takes place. In it there are four tailor-shops, three tea-shops, one small restaurant which makes sandwiches, one soft-drink stall, an abattoir, ten to twelve vegetable stalls, and six miscellaneous goods shops. All of these are privately owned and managed. There is also a cooperative store, mill, and a bakery.

### **3. Demographic Profile**

One of the major problems in Um Gargur is a lack of reliable quantitative data. Although this does not necessarily undermine the findings of the anthropologist, such data would be helpful for any analysis of the long term effects of refugeehood with regards to population growth, morbidity, mortality, and migration.

In Um Gargur the registration of births and deaths is not compulsory and other than those who are born or have died within the SCC clinic, no consistent records are kept. Even the routine data that the clinic

collects on vaccinations, mother and child health and welfare session attenders (MCH) and antenatal clinic visitors are not wholly reliable although this has improved in the last five years or so. It is also necessary to keep in mind the fact that although Um Gargur is "stable" compared to other settlements which have a constant flow of people moving in and out, the population is never actually static. There are always small numbers of people who arrive from Eritrea or other refugee settlements or Sudanese cities to live with relatives already settled in Um Gargur. Men from certain ethnic groups are required, upon marriage, to move into the bride's village i.e. Um Gargur. The demographic profile of Um Gargur is also affected by a "floating" population of men (primarily) who are away earning incomes in the Sudan and the Gulf states, or fighting, as well as by the large numbers of people from outside the settlement who appear whenever there is a census or when there is a need to visit the clinic.

All the aforementioned factors are important variables in ascertaining the settlement's population, and indeed most of the health workers and others I spoke to recognised that the numbers of people registered with the COR and UNHCR does not reflect the actual population. During the 1986 census undertaken by the COR and the American-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) CARE, the problem the refugees have with the census became quite obvious. Um Gargur was surrounded by soldiers at about 4:00am to prevent anyone coming into or leaving the settlement. Once a person's name was recorded his/her thumb was stained with ink to prevent him/her from registering in another part of the settlement. Yet the refugees had heard some days before that the army would be coming in to Um Gargur for the census, and many had got in

touch with relatives and friends who were willing to travel to the settlement from elsewhere in order to inflate the population numbers. Others managed to get hold of acetone with which they removed the stains in order to re-register.

The refugees' preoccupation with keeping the population number high is entirely to do with the fact that the allocation of food and other materials in the settlements was carried out not according to needs but rather to the number of people in a family. For refugees who were particularly impoverished, ill, or unable to earn an income this was one very important way to get more food for their families. Thus by the end of the census the numbers recorded were much higher than expected. Darhaba Tesfamichael, the deputy-head of the SCC clinic in Um Gargur, told me:

People are never subtracted from the population, only added. Those who have left Um Gargur for good, those who come to the settlement only once every couple of years, even dead people, remain on the books. This is out of necessity. People have learned to be very flexible and innovative in circumstances that affect their survival and well-being. In order to get more food and stay healthy and strong, people manage to keep their numbers inflated.

When the SCC clinic made later attempts to make a more accurate count of the population through a survey, many of the refugees were afraid that this information would be passed on to the COR which would reduce the aid that came to the settlement as a whole and to each individual family. Needless to say the clinic had only limited success. As well as the practical difficulties mentioned above, it was widely felt by the refugees that the financial priorities of the COR militated against an accurate count. Many people felt that the COR also had something to gain from inflated statistics, though this did not

encourage any revelations on the part of the refugees to reduce their numbers. It was felt by some of the more educated and better-informed refugees, and not without reason, that the larger the populations recorded in all the settlements, the more foreign aid the Sudanese government was likely to receive from donor governments. They had all heard of the Band Aid concert and fund-raisers which had raised millions of pounds, and they were very suspicious that much of this aid was not filtering down to them, the refugees in the settlements whom the food and clothing was meant for. Given this situation, I imagine that statistically accurate surveys will always be extremely difficult to achieve.

Official estimates attained by the UNHCR list the population at 7,500 (UNHCR, 1984:6) while CARE gives a figure of 8,000 (Bright, 1985:78). The more accurate population count was probably that of the SCC's home visitors in 1986. They estimated the population of Um Gargur to be 5,750, with 801 families occupying homesteads, and it is this data upon which my calculations are based unless otherwise noted.

**Table 1. Demographic Profile.**

<u>Age</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Total</u>
0-4	688	675	1363
5-12	585	582	1167
13-17	397	331	728
18-35	663	461	1124
36-50	431	299	730
51-70	268	258	526
over 70	63	49	112
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3095</b>	<b>2655</b>	<b>5750</b>

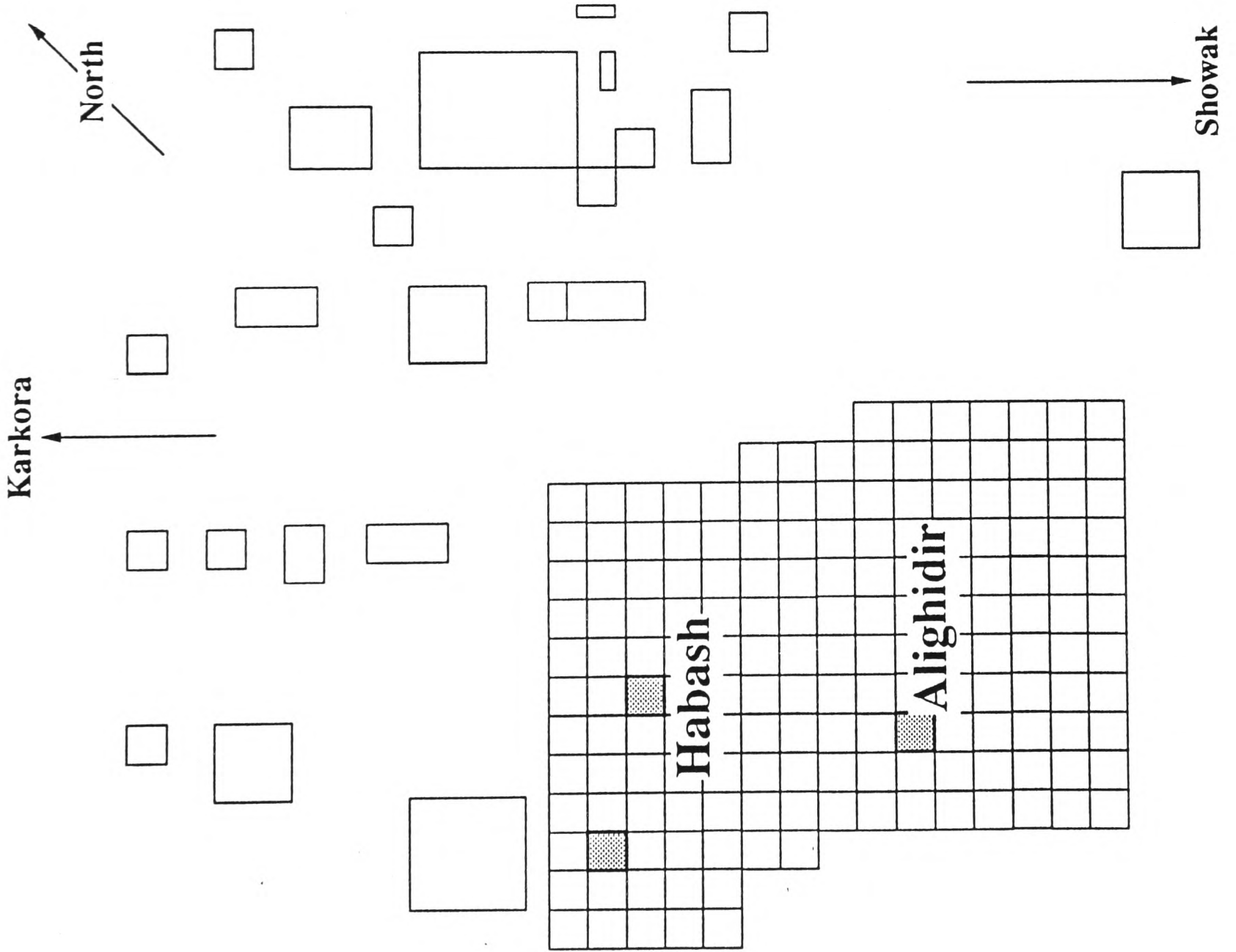
Source: 1986, SCC clinic.

There are 1,425 women and 1,067 men in the settlement over 17 years of age. This includes those normally resident in Um Gargur as well as

people who spend the majority of their time outside of the settlement. Using the data collected during the nutrition survey, Kiros Sereke and I estimated there to be about 400 men working outside of the settlement or fighting at the front which means that only 667 men (or 10.75%) remain there continuously and these are therefore outnumbered by women by more than 2:1. In Um Gargur 41.4% of the population are between 18-70 and 2% are over 70 compared with the typical developing country profile where 40% are between the age of 15-60 and 15% are over 60 (Morley, 1973).

A disproportionate number of the residents in the settlement are children under the age of 13 (2,530), constituting 44% of the population. In theory this does not differ greatly from the population profile of the typical developing country in which 45% is between the age of 0-15 (Morley, 1973). If we take into account the number of men who remain outside of Um Gargur however, then clearly many children are deprived of the influence and socio-economic support of their fathers. This has repercussions for the population not only in relation to health (e.g. being able to purchase nutritious foods) but also in terms of overall development, for if the refugees' desire to return to Eritrea is ever fulfilled then this younger generation that has been brought up in the settlements of Sudan will be a valuable component of their country's workforce. The older members of the settlement often speak about the hoped for return to Eritrea as though it is imminent and say that in Um Gargur they need to produce healthy and strong *shebab* (T), or youth, for their country. Despite the concern with health, the economic (and cultural) conditions which persist in Um Gargur have meant that a large number of children are to some extent malnourished. These children, who

Diagram 2: Um Gargur - Hillat



are most susceptible to chronic illnesses, are the main focus of the health workers' attentions.

#### **4. The Settlement's Beginnings**

The government of Sudan through the COR provides land for refugees in two basic types of organised settlements, agricultural and wage-earning. Although wage-earning settlements were generally established in areas close to agricultural irrigation schemes or large urban markets, agricultural, or land settlements were constructed in rural areas for refugees who came from mainly rural backgrounds. Organised settlements were devised by the UNHCR and government of Sudan during a period when it was realised that refugees, originally thought to be short-term visitors, were turning out to be long-term residents.

Um Gargur was established in 1976<sup>4</sup> as a "permanent" land settlement for 5000 people of Eritrean origin. The majority of refugees reported that they arrived in the settlement after 1977. As is the case with all land settlements, it was expected that Um Gargur would create sufficient produce (*durra* or sesame principally) to meet the dietary needs of its refugees as well as provide them with an extensive economic base to achieve the ideal of self-sufficiency until such a time when conditions improved sufficiently to allow them to be repatriated (Bright, 1985:13). Each family was to be allotted between five to ten *feddan* (1 *feddan* is equivalent to 1.04 acres) of arable land. As is the case with all new settlements, the World Food Programme (WFP) worked under the auspices of the UNHCR and the COR to provide food rations for the refugees in Um Gargur. Full rations were provided for one year during which period the refugees made their fields ready for cultivation. The UNHCR shouldered

the costs for housing, building of facilities, tractors, and water; management of all of these were handled by the COR settlement administrators who provided both infrastructural services and personnel. Health care and education were provided by the COR and the SCC while the WFP continued to provide partial rations on a decreasing scale for the next two years. According to Omer Yassin - the project manager (*moodir*) in 1984, between 1980 and 1982 Um Gargur appeared to be a success story in comparison to many of the other land settlements. The rains were good and many people realised profit from their *durra*. In fact there were those who found they could subsist for an entire year on the *durra* grown on their allocated plots. In 1984 however, after two consecutive years of severe drought combined with the fact that most of the seeds planted were eaten by rats, half rations had to be introduced for the entire population (except "vulnerables" i.e. elderly, children, orphans, nursing mothers, widows and divorcees who received full rations). Between 1985 and 1987 CARE took over the rations which would decrease or increase depending on the harvest of the preceding year.

Unlike the wage-earning settlements which are situated in appropriate locations in order to give refugees an opportunity to find employment, land settlements are only viable when all the variables (adequate rain, arable land and sufficient labour) are in place. They were set up to reduce the dependency on both the host government and the UNHCR. Unfortunately the environmental factors described above have all combined together to make agriculture unsustainable as a dependable long-term solution. Also the pressures placed on the land by continuous cultivation has led to a reduction of arable land and has meant that many refugees are without their expected allotment of five to ten

*feddan* of land (Cree, 1983:22). Some people also reported that even at the start they were allocated no land while others had more than their fair share and this contributes to the need for large numbers of men to leave the settlement in search of seasonal or permanent employment. Cree reports that malnutrition was high enough in January 1983 to propel some families to migrate out of the settlement in search of better conditions (*ibid.*). The irony of the situation is that although Um Gargur is an "agricultural" settlement, the people are primarily pastoralists and had to adopt to a new method of earning their livelihood. Having made attempts to become agriculturalists, within five years of their arrival it was clear that agriculture was unsustainable and that the settlement was not providing adequate food for the needs of even half of its population. For people who lost not only material wealth but the social identities which were part and parcel of that wealth, Um Gargur represents not merely a failure in "self-sufficiency", but by being mainly dependent upon external sources for their food and protection, a challenge to the refugees' sense of self-worth.

#### **4.1 The Administration**

Although the COR is based in Khartoum and comes under the umbrella of the Ministry of the Interior, it has numerous administrative branches in the refugee-affected areas of the country. These administrative branches collaborate with the UNHCR and other voluntary organisations to ensure that land, food and material aid is provided to the refugees who are, ideally (from the point of view of the Sudan government), living in settlements. At the head of each administrative branch is a general

project manager whose role is to oversee all of the settlements which come under his jurisdiction and report back to the head office in Khartoum which in turn delegates to him. In the case of Um Gargur, the office of the general project manager was in Es Showak, one of two regional offices in the Kassala province.

Under the general project manager (GPM) there is a *moodir*, or project manager, who like the GPM is Sudanese. The *moodir* lives in the settlement and functions as a kind of governor and liaison between the government and the people. Ideally he is there to assess the needs of the refugees through personal contact with them and their representatives. In practice the *moodir* in Um Gargur was far removed from the goings on in the settlement and was very rarely approached on an individual basis. The majority of refugees whom I queried on the subject seemed to feel that there was a gulf between them and the administration and were convinced that their needs would not be listened to. Many were genuinely afraid to approach the *moodir*, regarded as an absolute figure of authority representing the government of the Sudan, with their complaints.

To my knowledge the *moodir* did not ban the refugees, although he did discourage individual callers from visiting his office. There was also a more formalised system of the elder-committee through which complaints or appeals could be transmitted (Bright, 1985:54). The refugees are sub-divided into ethnic/administrative units under twenty-three sheikhs who were, according to the *moodir*, elected by the refugees to represent their needs to the administration. In reality they were a motley group each one of whom had his own motives for becoming sheikh and very few of them were actually "elected" but "appointed". In most cases it was a

process of natural selection through which those people who were the most vocal offered themselves up to the administration as being best suited to represent the people from their ethnic groups. There were also people who were recognised as religious leaders or skilled negotiators in the past and offered leadership roles, as well as three or four who were elected because they had the support of the refugees. These sheikhs then elected seven of their number to an elder-committee or *lij'na*. Ideally, no two members of the elder-committee may represent the same constituency or ethnic group. Both the elder-committee and the sheikhs have direct contact with the Sudanese authorities however when major decisions are made it is the elder-committee that the administration approaches first. The elder-committee then passes these decisions on to the sheikhs who are free to query them with the *moodir*.

#### **4.2 First-Comers**

Between 1976 and 1977 approximately 2000 people were transferred into Um Gargur from urban areas and reception centres in the eastern Sudan.<sup>5</sup> Some had lived in the Sudan for many years while others had arrived only a year or two previously. At the beginning the refugees in Um Gargur were largely a homogeneous group. They were similar to most Eritrean refugees in the Sudan before 1975 since they originated from the lowlands (mainly from Akeleguzai, Agordat, Om Hajer and Alighidir) and were all Muslims who gave unconditional political support to the ELF (Bright, 1985:83). They came from areas which were the first to be subjected to concerted military attacks because it is there that the liberation movement evolved and later armed itself during the 1960s (Kibreab, 1985:68). Yet these people had not only fled from the

assaults on their villages by the Ethiopian army, but were also escaping the first (from 1972-1974) of two bloody and protracted civil wars<sup>6</sup> between the ELF and EPLF (Erlich, 1983:32). As a result they left Eritrea hating both the Ethiopian government and the EPLF equally. They arrived in the Sudan to be taken to various reception centres, the most dismal of which, according to many, was at Jebel Maharigat. Maharigat was apparently very close to the site of what is now known as Um Gargur and no one was prepared for it, least of all the refugee agencies who had hurriedly constructed it. There was very little shelter and because it was only a reception centre, no permanent housing was available. Sanitary conditions were bleak, people rapidly became ill and there was little water to be had. Later, some of the people from Maharigat were transferred to Um Gargur. Conditions in Um Gargur at this time sounded as though they were similarly deplorable.

Um Caltoum, a Habab woman from Afabet was among that first group and she tells of her arrival in the Sudan and later in Um Gargur:

We left home in 1975 because of the war. We fled from the fire and the fighting between Ethiopia and the Front (ELF). We left in the night and travelled for two days by foot and camel and arrived in the morning. Thanks to God we were able to flee safely. We came to Abu Jemal (a Sudanese border town) and we entered Sudan. For eight days we stayed there under the care of the Sudanese government. Later they moved us from there to Wad el Hilew by the side of the river....When they brought us to Um Gargur the village was just a plain. There was nothing growing on it, there was nothing in it. When we came here first it was bitter like losing blood. We saw nothing in it. It was just a plain and we were in the sun sitting under a mat....there were no houses or anything. There were not even tents prepared for us. They did not even receive us with a cup of water. We were here by ourselves with that bitter water we had to fetch for ourselves. We were wretched.

Her story is echoed by all of the people I spoke to who arrived in the same group. In fact the 1984 UNHCR "Inventory of Facilities and

Services" clearly shows that before 1978 most of the structures which are now in Um Gargur were not in existence and that many of the office buildings and permanent structures such as the classrooms, staff houses, slaughter house, butcher shed and bakery were built only after 1981. The first group of refugees was at least fortunate in that great effort was made to keep those who left Eritrea at the same time - families, friends and neighbours - together. According to many refugees no such effort was made with the second group and although immediate relatives were generally settled together, the more extended families were often split up and resettled in other camps (Bright, 1985).

The first entry point into the Sudan for all of the refugees was in the Kassala province. Since lowland Eritreans of all ethnic derivations have historically settled along the Sudan-Ethiopia border<sup>7</sup>, some of the refugees chose to self-settle in neighbourhoods where they had relatives or acquaintances already resident or, failing that, to settle in areas where there were other Eritreans. Most refugees whom I questioned about it seemed to be divided on the subject however. Some said that had conditions permitted them to do otherwise, they would not have chosen to settle in a refugee camp while others were quite clear about their preference for the settlement since it was an area of safety and relative comfort.<sup>8</sup> (In fact many people's complaints in Um Gargur centred around the fact that rain was scarce and that they were thoroughly dependent upon the food rations). As greater numbers of refugees continued to flee across the border into Kassala the Sudanese government began to offer Eritreans in Gedaref and Kassala incentives to move into refugee settlements. Refugees reported that they had been informed by government workers that their housing and dietary needs

would be met in the settlements and that they would receive livestock and land from which they could grow produce to sell.

Many of those situated in the Kassala area were initially reluctant to leave because they felt mistrustful of the government's motives. However given their living conditions at the time, the incentives were far too favourable for most refugees to not consider seriously. In the urban areas rents were high while wages were very low and many families found themselves forced to share housing with other refugees. Not only were environmental conditions uncondusive to good health, but many people were now living in extreme poverty, barely able to provide food and clothing for their families. (Bulcha, 1987:79).

The strain on the urban areas was most evident when in Khartoum, Kassala and Gedaref refugees would be periodically attacked by Sudanese locals who saw them as a threat. When a coup d'état was attempted on July 2, 1976 the Sudanese government voiced its suspicions of Eritrean involvement publicly. More attacks on Eritrean refugees in the major cities occurred and resulted in numerous casualties before the government subsequently apologised (Palmer, 1976:3). Refugees became the perfect scapegoats for both the government and the disenfranchised Sudanese poor since they were voiceless and generally afraid to call attention to themselves for fear of repatriation. Since refugees were willing to work for much less and did not complain about the high rents, the local population found that many jobs were now going to refugees and as increasing numbers of refugees competed for local jobs, so did the grievances of the locals increase. In 1978 the government conducted a sweeping-up operation in the urban areas in which refugees who had settled there were rounded up from their homes by the police and armed

forces and thrown into trucks which carried them, frightened and possessionless to rural camp sites near Gedaref (Wright, 1980:160). When the news of these types of operations spread from settlement to settlement many people became too frightened to leave the settlements while others who had been living in the urban areas decided it was best to register with the COR and, if the possibility existed, move into settlements in which they had relatives.

### 4.3 Second-Comers

The population in Um Gargur remained fairly stable until the latter part of 1977 and the beginning of 1978 when a large influx of refugees entered the Sudan from both the lowlands and highlands of Eritrea (Wright, 1980:159). This influx coincided with periods of extreme political upheaval which were taking place in Eritrea. In 1977 the liberation fronts were making considerable military progress capturing many Eritrean cities in a relatively short space of time. Apart from Asmara, Assab, Addi Qaih, Barentu and a portion of Massawa, the EPLF and ELF had, between them, almost all of the country under their control (Erlich, 1983:110). The end of the war seemed imminent and some optimistic Eritreans even began to leave the Sudan for these liberated cities. In 1978 however the Ethiopian government began to receive considerable military and economic support from the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> Towns and cities which had recently been liberated by the Eritrean liberation fronts were soon recaptured, using napalm and cluster bombs, by the Ethiopian army with great loss of life and mass displacement. This resulted in a large-scale exodus of people in search of safehaven to eastern Sudan. According to the Red Cross this left "122,000 people

homeless, of whom some had crossed into the Sudan" (Kibreab, 1985:76).

This second group of refugees arrived between 1978 and 1979 and was considerably larger than the first. For the majority of them Um Gargur was their second or third stop. Many, particularly those who originated from the Eritrean regions of Um Hajer and Alighidir, had first been moved into Wad el Hilew, a Sudanese village about 40 km from the border with Eritrea which was being used as a temporary refugee camp and from there were being resettled in Um Gargur. Still others from the Tessenei region were taken to Wad el Hilew and a semi-urban settlement camp at Khashm el Girba before finally settling in Um Gargur. These new arrivals (about 3,500)<sup>10</sup> would ultimately constitute the bulk of Um Gargur's population. The majority of these people had much in common with the original settlers of Um Gargur. Like the first refugees, most of them were also Tigre speakers and lowlanders. Others were from various ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Yet despite their many similarities, on the whole these newcomers were not quite so uniform in terms of their political allegiances. They had spent several years longer in Eritrea and were first-hand witnesses to the in-fighting, and shortly-lived "marriages of convenience" taking place among political factions.<sup>11</sup> Many of them were ELF supporters however they had among them many who were also EPLF supporters and still others who swore allegiance to groups which had fragmented from both the ELF and the EPLF.<sup>12</sup> Almost all of the highlanders, both Muslim and Christian, were among this second refugee influx. Some highlanders were ELF supporters but the majority belonged to the EPLF. Among this group of later arrivals there were even those who had changed their political allegiances over the years and were now simply willing to give vocal

support to whomever was fighting the war on their behalf.

Among these new arrivals to Um Gargur there included a small number of people who had previously been living in the urban areas, in some cases for years. Younis Adam, a Beni Amer from the lowland village of Alighidir, was one of those.

I came first to the Sudan in 1970 and moved to Um Gargur nine years later, in 1979. I didn't come as a refugee but came to look for work in Kassala. I stayed in Kassala for two years doing various jobs as a bricklayer, a driver and working in a warehouse. After this I went to Halfa where I found some work and I stayed there for three years. At this time I heard that the Sudanese government was returning Eritreans to Ethiopia so I started to "pass" for a Sudanese. Because of my skin colour and the marks on my face it was very easy to "pass" since all the Beni Amer are one people and look the same. I returned to visit my family in Alighidir and stayed there for one month. Forty-five days after I returned to Sudan, Alighidir was evacuated because it was well known that the people there were sympathetic to the ELF. My family came to join me in 1978 in Halfa and I learned from my wife that the Ethiopian army were looking for me because they thought I was an informant for the ELF. I left my family in Halfa and returned to Kassala to work with an Italian road-building company where I was employed as a driver. I stayed there until 1979 when I came to Um Gargur. Before 1977 I had no problems with the Sudanese people. With me the Sudanese people were always very nice. After 1977 the government began to give Eritrean people a lot of trouble. It was worse when they discovered we were not Sudanese but "passing" as Sudanese, so after some problems in Kassala, I took my wife and children from my brother's house in Halfa and moved them to Um Gargur.<sup>13</sup>

Younis' experience was similar to that of many others, mainly Beni Amer or Maria men who had left Eritrea in the late 1960s. These men had moved into the Kassala province and were conducting business or working. They generally travelled freely between the borders of Eritrea and Sudan visiting their friends and relatives from time to time, however when the war escalated and their families had to flee thus becoming refugees, so too did these men. They moved into the settlement to be with their families and were refugees only in the loosest possible sense.

## 5. Ethnicity

There are six ethnolinguistic groups represented in Um Gargur. I use the term "ethnolinguistic" loosely to mean "people who base their identity upon similar culture, language and shared feelings of descent or any combination of these and other characteristics" (Bright, 1985:38). These groups are the Tigre, Tigrinya, Belin, Baria, Baza, and Saho, all of whom have diverse origins and languages. The Tigre in Um Gargur all stem from the western lowlands of Eritrea and are further sub-divided into six tribal groups; the Beni Amer, Maria, Mensa, Beijuk, Beja and Habab. The Tigrinya highlanders are, within Um Gargur, also sub-divided into two groups, the Jiberti and "Habash",<sup>14</sup> who are indistinguishable from each other<sup>15</sup> but for the fact that the latter are Christian and the former are Muslim. Of the tribes represented in Um Gargur, the largest is the Beni Amer and the smallest is the Assa'orta (Saho) who number about eleven people. Also even though there are several Baza families in Um Gargur, few of them admit to being Baza but align themselves with the Baria and identify themselves as such.

Because of the nature of the settlement this list is by no means a definitive representation of the people resident in Um Gargur. This is, however, a clear rendering of the groups which the refugees acknowledge do exist in Um Gargur. The categories are in fact relative and dynamic, constantly segmenting in different ways according to the benefit that an individual hopes can be gained from realigning himself with a specific group. Thus although one can speak of "ethnic identity" within the context of Um Gargur, it is more problematic to speak of "ethnic groups" as static categories, since the number of groups varies according to who

one addresses. Some people regard themselves as members of a large group and prefer to ignore the fact that it might consist of numerous smaller groups, while others see themselves solely as members of a smaller group to the exclusion of a larger one, unless that larger one is a national identity.<sup>16</sup> There were those who, when asked about their ethnic identity referred to themselves as Tigre or Tigrinya, however people were generally more specific about their origins and said that they were, for example, Habab rather than Tigre, or Jiberti rather than Tigrinya. For instance the Maria in Um Gargur when asked whether they were Tigre usually replied that they "spoke Tigre like the others" but that they were "Maria".

We know that the Tigre speakers in Um Gargur were mainly semi-nomadic cattle and camel herders, and that the highlanders or Tigrinya speakers came from either the urban or semi-urban areas where they had access to schools or were agriculturalists or traders; however to say that one is Tigre, rather than Mensa or Maria also suggests a lexicon of identity which is overtly political and nationalistic. While there are some cultural similarities between groups which can be identified as Tigre, in one stroke it both expands the definition of ethnicity and conversely, relegates it to a secondary dimension which includes under the "Tigre" umbrella, groups who might neither have recognised nor acknowledged shared culture, identity or history in Eritrea. It has also been suggested that the categories of Tigre and Tigrinya, although long used within academic discourse, are among the people themselves a more recent development which has gained greater currency during the last thirty years of political struggle.<sup>17</sup> There are additional developments. Highland Christians in Um Gargur now refer to themselves

as "Habasha" even though many say that in Eritrea they did not refer to themselves as such. Distinctions were made, however, between specific geographical origins of Christian highlanders, and so those who stemmed from the districts of Hamasien, Serae, and Akelliguzaytai were referred to respectively as Hamasienai, Serawitai, and Akelli Guzaiwi. In the cities and refugee camps of the Sudan the word "Habash" has now come to suggest shared religion, ideology and world-view, all concepts which could be associated with ethnicity.

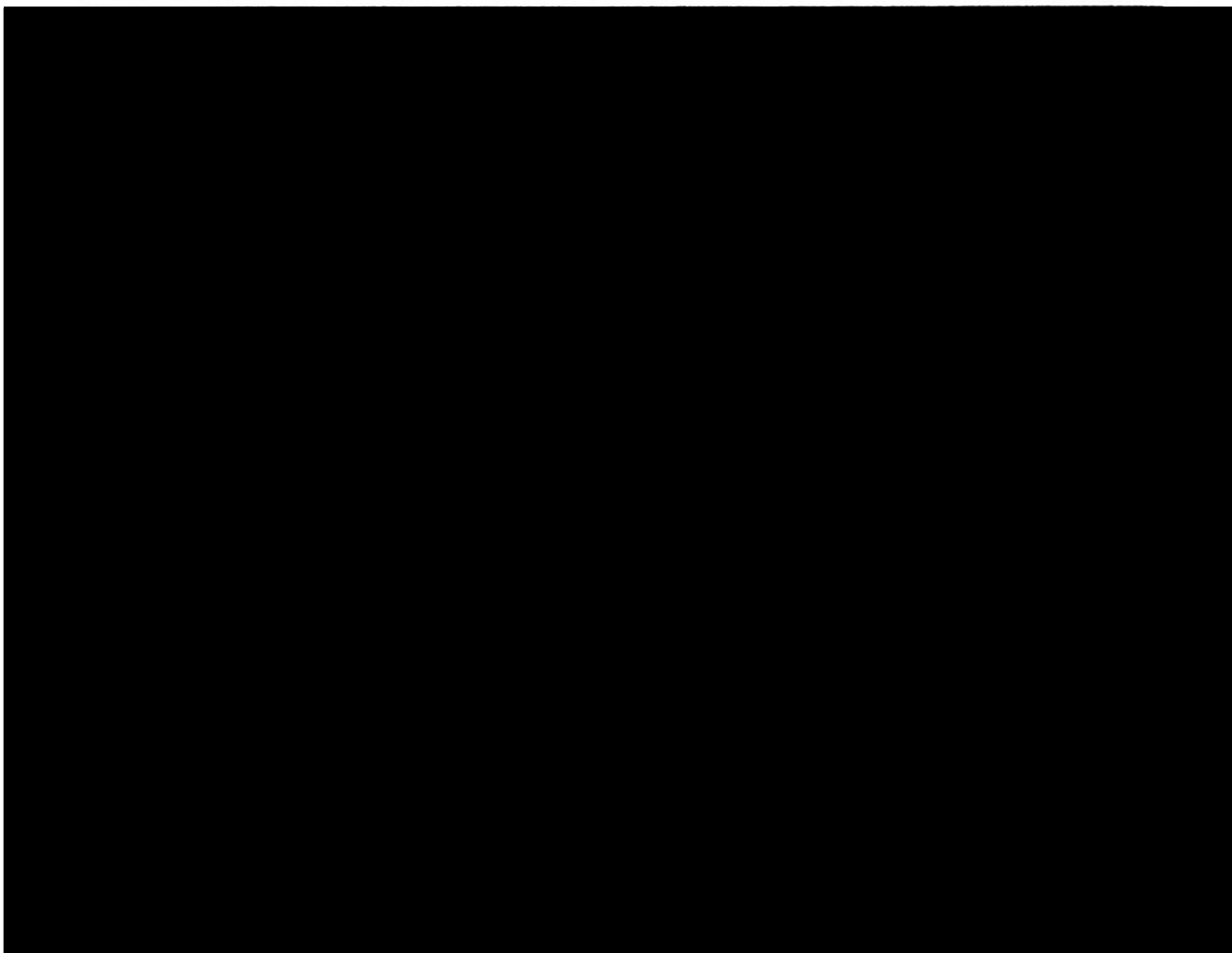
Despite its rural setting, Um Gargur has elements which are more reminiscent of an urban migrant situation than that of a rural community. For instance here there are a plethora of languages, but only one, in this case Arabic, is the *lingua franca*. It is this language which cuts across ethnic categories and is used in the marketplace, with the settlement administrators, and in all transactions which take place in the public domain. Just as the settlement is a temporary, artificial construct, so too is the use of Arabic to communicate inter-ethnically. The use of it rather than Tigre (which is spoken by the majority) does not simply reflect the fact that the refugees are in the Sudan, but also the fact that they are unified in their marginalisation and alienation from their own cultures. Despite the fact that many of the lowlanders, in particular the Beni Amer, speak it well, whereas the the highlanders, the Belin, the Baria and a few other groups learned it after they arrived in the Sudan, the use of this artificial language highlights, rather than undermines, a shared national identity. Most people now speak it, with varying degrees of ability.

Few people in Um Gargur had, before becoming refugees, experienced daily contact with people of such diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-

**Table 2. Religious and Ethnolinguistic Groups in Um Gargur.**

	Muslims	96%	Christians	4%
<b>Tigre</b>	Beni Amer Maria Mensa Beijuk Habab Beja	(lowlanders)	Mensa	
<b>Tigrinya</b>	Jiberti	(highlanders)	[Habash] Hamasielai Serawitai Akelliguzaytai	
<b>Saho</b>	Assa'orta	(highlanders)		
<b>Others</b>	Baza Baria Belin	(lowlanders) (lowlanders) (high/low)	Belin	

Source: 1986. Osman Zaki, Um Gargur project manager.

**Map 4. Geographical Origins of Eritrean Groups**

Source: R. Sherman, 1980

economic backgrounds. They were thrust from primarily homogeneous communities into a complex environment which was not a cohesive whole but the sum total of its parts. These parts are composed of "strangers" who, in most cases, experience similar degrees of cultural and psychological proximity and distance to each other. Simmel says of the stranger that he "is an element of the group itself. His position as a full fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it" (1950:403). Yet since everyone is a refugee and the role of the Sudanese host is peripheral in daily settlement life, in Um Gargur "host" and "stranger" are interchangeable notions and everyone is as much one as the other.

It is also important to note that when these disparate groups are threatened or faced with crisis, for instance when they hear that refugees elsewhere have been attacked by Sudanese, or when someone dies, then an ideology of unity rather than one of separateness and difference is articulated. In fact, to the outsider unity and homogeneity is consistently expressed using a recent, situationally-specific identity, that of *ladji'in*, or refugees. By being *ladji'in* the villagers all belong to a supra-tribe whose members support each other, at least in theory, morally, physically, and if conditions permit, economically. By accepting the fact that they are *ladji'in* it also means that they recognise the temporary nature of their condition and that they retain their sense of identity as Eritreans, an identity which has itself emerged out of oppositionalism and ambivalence.

Thus, when tensions in Um Gargur are articulated by employing ethnic or tribal stereotypes this is more of a reflection of the refugees' sense of helplessness than it is a preoccupation with ethnicity. People

often repeat old stereotypes and prejudices but even these are dissipating as a direct result of the proximity in which people live. Of course there is always the danger of the unknown in "stranger" relationships and so by way of protection people prefer to live among those with whom they have the most in common. Social relations are defined along ethnic, religious, regional and linguistic lines and intermarriage between people from different ethnolinguistic groups is unusual. Nevertheless, even though ethnicity is under-communicated and people often choose to speak of themselves as a unified group of Eritreans or *ladji'in*, the administrative system of sheikhs emphasises ethnic and tribal affiliation. Except in neighbourhoods which contain people from diverse groups, it is always possible to ascertain an individual's tribe and/or ethnicity by discovering his sheikh or his place of residence.

A strain between ethnicity and nationality is evident from time to time as in the case of two Beni Amer men in Um Gargur, one of whom passes for Sudanese and the other who constantly uses his ethnic ties with the Sudanese and is regarded by many as colluding with the administration.<sup>18</sup> The former, a storekeeper employed by the COR to oversee the distribution of rations is despised because he is extremely ambiguous about his national identity in a situation where this identity is aggressively asserted, although he readily admits that he is Beni Amer. Because they are in the majority, the Beni Amer are in a privileged and enviable position, able to call upon ethnic and kinship ties both within the settlement and outside it, constructing networks of support. In times of illness, death, weddings or circumcisions they are able to mobilise the most assistance, financial or material from each

other. Even though all the refugees are marginalised and feel themselves to be so, the Beni Amer are less marginalised than others and are also, as a rule, far more successful than the other refugees in dealing with the camp authorities.

A preoccupation with or continued expression of ethnic identity is not regarded as a positive thing in Um Gargur. People are expected to conform, and this means that whatever makes them distinct from the majority is seen as threatening and upsets the status quo. For instance all Muslim women are expected to wear the *tobe*, a long sheet of material which covers the head and body, when they leave their homes for other sections of the settlement. To wear a *tobe* is to respect the code of decorum. It is the "decent" apparel for a woman to wear. As a result, rather than risk ridicule Christian women are forced to abandon their own traditional garb and wear a garment which for them has no cultural associations with respectability. When there are weddings or other fêtes, women from groups like the Belin, Jiberti and Christian, who traditionally perform drumming are remonstrated for doing so. The Baria sheikh was often admonished by some of his fellow sheikhs for not putting an end to the drumming and singing in his area on nights when weddings or circumcisions took place. This "norm" was set mainly by a few powerful lowland sheikhs, mainly Beni Amer and mainly from the conservative groups who demand a uniformity of behaviour. Most of the refugees actually feel estranged from this but are powerless to make their positions felt. The people constitute a voiceless majority in the face of a vociferous and powerful minority. People either become increasingly apathetic or they adopt the positions of the conservatives. It is usually men who take up these new positions because they are also

marginalised and expect that adopting a conservative position aligns them with those who are most vocal, most powerful, and have, in the heterogeneous construct which is Um Gargur, a clear agenda.

We have already noted that people in Um Gargur live among those with whom they feel safest and can look to for support. In this way they minimise the distance, both spatially and psychologically with that which is most familiar to them. What we have not said is that it is women who are the main builders of links between different groups because they are in the majority, and because social conventions are such that they can only establish and conduct their relationships in a more private sphere. The scale of interaction between women appears to be far greater than men despite the injunctions placed upon their movements. New networks have been formed both in the neighbourhood along ethnic lines and among people who they meet outside of the home in the clinic or through rotating credit associations. It would be true to say that men experience a good deal of inter-ethnic contact however with women, once relationships have been established, they spend hours in each other's homes, seeing after their children and gaining each other's trust. Although there is very little inter-marriage, women help with preparation of food for weddings, circumcisions and other ritual or ceremonial occasions. Whereas for men the social engagement is far more public, carried out almost exclusively in the market-place, for women that engagement is clearly of an intimate nature. For women these new networks offer both psychological and physical support, fulfilling some of the same functions as the old networks in Eritrea. They are also losing some of their prejudices about other peoples (and perhaps developing others) and are exhibiting a dynamism and understanding that

few men in the settlement can match. Ascha Idris a young Baria woman expressed the sentiments of numerous women when she said, "We (the refugees in Um Gargur) all have the same mother and father, Eritrea."

## 6. Religion

There are two religious groups in the settlement, Muslims who constitute approximately 96% of the population, and Christians who are 4%. These may be further divided into sub-groups. The Christian contingent is composed of Roman Catholics, Protestants and Coptic Christians, while a minority of the Muslims are conservatives who mainly identify themselves as Ansar and Islamic Front. Although I categorise the Islamic Front as a religious organisation, this is a deliberate misnomer. The Islamic Front is in fact a political group (known within Um Gargur as *mujahiden*) which has as its objective the establishment of an Islamic state in Eritrea. The Ansar on the other hand are a religious and not a political group, although many of its adherents are sympathetic to the agenda of the Islamic Front. The Ansar in Um Gargur and elsewhere in Eritrea are Ansar al Suna,<sup>19</sup> rather than Ansar al Mahdi, although the two groups appear to share many of the same practices.

Following the analysis of Choueiri (1990:53) I refer to the Islamic Front as "radicalists", and the Ansar as "revivalists". Collectively I refer to them as conservatives (Watt, 1988:2). According to Choueiri "Radicalism highlighted God's sovereignty and the role of the *jihad* as the most important aspects of Islam. The act of assigning particular aspects a dominant position entailed the subordination of Quranic injunctions, or their outright abrogation for the sake of more urgent

tasks. Furthermore, these new priorities were often in direct contrast to the prevailing customs of traditionalist or official Islam" (1990:11). He describes Islamic revivalism as a movement to reinstate Islam in its pure and original state (1990:20).

It is generally agreed by the refugees that Islam has become a much more important force in their lives in Um Gargur compared to its influence in their villages in Eritrea. One reason for this has to do with the refugees' position of insecurity and their search for "moral cohesion". To deal with the significant changes which took place in their lives they had to make many adjustments. These adjustments were possible as long there was a familiar given, in this case religion, that could be relied upon. People, particularly men, began to cling to religion steadily and as things worsened or they felt more insecure, it increasingly represented stability, security and optimism. For them the rhetoric of hope always is distilled alongside the rhetoric of religion. Religion may not offer an answer to all their ills but it softens the blow of poverty and deprivation and gives people a dimension of surety which is unassailable. For them religion is not an abstract concept but manifests itself continually in their daily lives.

### **6.1 The Conservatives**

In Um Gargur the Ansar and Islamic Front conservatives regularly exploit the refugees' fear, insecurity and powerlessness. Many Muslim refugees themselves acknowledge this by saying that it is their lack of money which propels some villagers in the direction of the more conservative (and generally prosperous) elements. Trimingham is one of the few Islamicists who writes in depth about the Ansar (1965a;1965b).

Although his discussion refers mainly to the Ansar al Mahdi from Sudan, much of what he relates is relevant to the Ansar al Suna whose teachings derive from Sheikh Mohammed Abd-al Wahhab (1703-92). Trimmingham says of the Ansar that they were "easily fired to fanaticism by their misery".<sup>20</sup> Although the refugees in Um Gargur agree that there were Ansar in Eritrea, particularly in Alighidir, apparently they were less reactionary for people clearly regard certain aspects of their behaviour as a new phenomenon. In Um Gargur where conditions are characterised by economic and psychological deprivation, the environment is an ideal one from which to preach deliverance. The Ansar believe that they heed the true word of Allah and are the honourable ones. They are described as "those whose hearts are entirely consecrated to God and whose souls have become enlightened by a desire to possess the joys of the world to come, quitting the pleasures of this life and having full faith in the power of the Almighty who has created Paradise for those who are truly faithful to Him".<sup>21</sup> They were to renounce the world and expressly forbidden "intoxicants, tobacco, amulets, magic...processions, marriage and circumcision feasts, mourning...(and were instructed to) Always pray whether you are walking or riding or with your friends. Abstain from all amusements, for through prayers alone can this world be kept in peace. Abstain also from the pleasures of music, do not beat the big and small drums".<sup>22</sup>

The injunctions observed by the Ansar in Um Gargur completely parallel those listed above. Both the Ansar and the Islamic Front believe in purdah for women. For them a woman's place is in the home, permanently out of the sight of all unrelated men. The Ansar however do not shake hands with women and only barely acknowledge the existence of

unrelated women. Much of what the Ansar and the Islamic Front believe in runs contradictory to many aspects of the ritual and social life of the settlement. Their attempts to encourage cultural and religious uniformity are a perennial "thorn in the flesh" of many villagers particularly women for whom such rituals represent a way of establishing and maintaining ties in the new society. They have power precisely because, as many of the Muslims themselves say, they use religion and shame to manipulate. In comparison to the rest of the population they are extremely well educated. Both the Islamic Front and the Ansar received funds from Saudi Arabia and Syria with which to build their mosques and schools and proselytise. Some of the teachers at the schools were even educated in Saudi Arabia. They are the two groups which have microphones in the settlement and throughout the day they broadcast radicalist and revivalist messages. Those who decide to ally themselves with the Ansar or with the Islamic Front are immediately elevated in moral (and often economic) status by this association, for where there is demoralisation, the conservatives offer faith and clarity.

The Ansar prescribe clitorrectomy although they believe that infibulation or pharaonic circumcision should be forbidden; dancing and especially drumming should, they insist, cease completely in the settlement and that occasions such as Ramadan should be solemn; zar and any forms of healing which do not use the Koran as its basis are suggestive of spirit worship and are forbidden. In fact so many of the activities regarded by other Muslim villagers as part of their cultural birthright, the Ansar see as contrary to the laws of Mohammed, that it is important to understand at least one of the reasons for their

magnetism and that of the Islamic Front. Their followers are a significant minority although when people are marginalised, economically deprived and dependent on hand-outs to feed and clothe themselves, the message proffered by the well-fed conservatives is, not suprisingly, extremely attractive to many. Because they are so vocal and appear to have excellent relations with the settlement administrators, even those who do not agree with them prefer not to offend them, and are content to make token gestures of support. The proof of their influence on the social institutions in the settlement lies in the fact that for three months in 1986 drumming and dancing was forbidden by the sheikhs following the suggestion of the conservatives. This had the full approval of the *moodir*. When one family took matters into their own hands and simply had a wedding party in which the drums sounded through the night, the *moodir* later capitulated and decreed that drumming could take place, but only until 9.00pm. The Ansar and the Islamic Front were still against this although after the show of strength from one family, the tensions generated by their injunctions dissipated and people carried on as normal.

## **6.2 Relations Between Muslims and Christians**

The Christians face a harder time than other refugees in Um Gargur, a phenomenon which appears to be not uncommon in the Sudan. Bulcha notes that a major "source of refugee-host conflict is in the area of religion and culture...a degree of incompatibility over some basic values is unavoidable. Although no open conflict seems to exist on religious grounds as such, there is in some areas obvious resentment and mutual avoidance, not only between refugees and their hosts but even

between Christian and Muslim refugees in some of the settlements" (1987:88). Indeed although people from the two religious groups live side by side in Um Gargur without antagonism, there are very few real friendships which exist between individuals. The exceptions are found within the Jiberti, Mensa, and Belin ethnic groups, which contain both religious elements and whose cultural similarities far outweigh their differences. In the instances where friendships do occur among Muslims and Christians who are not from these particular ethnic groups, they are generally instigated by women rather than by men.

One gets the sense from speaking to older, mainly Tigre Muslims in Um Gargur, that historically relations between Muslims and Christians in Eritrea were strained. The literature appears to bear this out.<sup>23</sup> According to one observer, whereas the Christians believed themselves to be civilised, "to be a Moslem herder" was, in the eyes of the Christians, to be "backward" (Bauer, 1977:16). Trimingham argues that "Social prejudice...tended to make the position of Muslims...inferior to that of Christians" (1965:136). The sense that the Muslims had grievances with the Christians resurfaced time and again in fairly derogatory remarks. The Christians, or Habash according to various people in the settlement, were "like Ethiopians" and Habash women had "loose morals", all descriptions conveying mistrust and disapproval. On an individual level no one would point out who in particular these descriptions fitted, but occasionally one encountered such feelings which were not open to negotiation.

The Christians were also regarded as latecomers to the Eritrean revolution, formerly pro-Haile Selassie, who were now bent on usurping the struggle as their own. Indeed although this view does not take into

consideration certain historical facts, it is not entirely without credibility for, in the 1950s many Christians openly supported union with Ethiopia, while the Eritrean revolution came out of "an open rebellion by Muslim separatists" in 1961.<sup>24</sup> Granted it developed into a full-scale nationalist movement only in the early 1970s after those Eritreans who had hitherto allied themselves with the Ethiopians, became alienated by that government's aggressive annexation of Eritrea. Erlich (1983) argues that while "extensive areas of Eritrea, essentially the Muslim-populated areas of western and northern Eritrea, were never (with the exception of short insignificant episodes) under the political control of Ethiopian emperors", the "Christian-populated districts...have historically been more a part of Ethiopia's political framework and culture than have the provinces of southern Ethiopia".<sup>25</sup>

The Ethiopian government of Haile Selassie used the powerful Coptic church to promote unionist activities in Eritrea among the Christians who, having felt mistreated by successive colonial governments, imagined that they would be better off as part of an Ethiopia in which they had historic ties (Bright, 1985:22). It is not surprising, then, that at the beginning some Christians actively sought unification with Ethiopia. Even those who were interested in Eritrean independence found the separatist agenda of the ELF fairly unattractive. In 1967 the few Christians who joined the movement were being trained as fighters in the Sudan. Their Muslim counterparts were sent for training in Syria. Once in the Sudan the Christians "found that the use of Tigrinya was forbidden, and they were told that the aim of the ELF was to Arabize Eritrea" (Erlich 1983:24).

What is extraordinary about Um Gargur is the fact that so much of

the historical information recounted here still manifests itself in the life of the refugees. Thirty years ago Trimingham noted that among the Eritreans "nationality and religion are inextricably bound together" (ibid.). In Um Gargur little has changed except for the fact that politics is now also irrevocably intertwined with religion. Because Um Gargur's refugees have been away from Eritrea for so long, they are out of touch with the thousands of people very like themselves from the same ethnic and religious groups who are supporters of the EPLF (Firebrace, 1984). They are trapped in a time when opposition and conflict between the ELF and EPLF was articulated partly by capitalising upon more obvious differences.

Thus many of the older refugees harbour more than a few grievances. They resent at once the hesitation of the Christians in joining the movement, and the fact that the EPLF, regarded by them as primarily a Christian organisation is seeking to "revolutionise" their society. It is the EPLF's line on gender relations which really antagonizes them:

"The new marriage law unequivocally provides that the arbitrary and compulsory feudal marriage system which is based on the idea of the superiority of man over woman...shall be abolished, that child betrothal and dowry shall be abolished, that the free choice of partners, monogamy and equal rights for both sexes and protection of women and children shall be put into effect, so that husband and wife may live in harmony, participate to the fullest extent in productive labour and rear united, democratic families. Divorce will no more...depend on the unilateral decisions of the husband..." (NUEW, 1980:30).

For the Muslims in Um Gargur, in particular those who are conservative, such a line is indefensible as it undermines or nullifies all traditional precepts. This is regarded as yet another act of concerted disrespect and interference on the part of the EPLF toward their religion and values. As the Christians in Um Gargur are seen to be active

supporters of the EPLF, the general character of relationships between the two groups is entirely linked to these considerations.

The market in Um Gargur is controlled by a small group of traders, mostly Beni Amer, while the clinic is controlled by the Habash, or Christians. Many Muslims, again mainly Beni Amer, have relatives in Arab countries who send them remittances which leave them a great deal better off than the other refugees. Proportionally, the Christians in Um Gargur are generally better educated than Um Gargur's Muslims, although there are a small group of Muslims, primarily conservatives, who are well educated. This is partly because few well-educated Muslims choose to remain in the settlement, migrating instead to the urban areas of Sudan or to other countries to work, while a large proportion of Christians in Um Gargur are skilled workers who have been sent by the SCC to the settlement. However the main reason for the educational imbalance has to do with the fact that in Eritrea, highlanders of both Muslim and Christian origin had greater access to the educational facilities which the country offered, whereas in the lowland areas from where most of the refugees stem, "the nomadic population is little involved in modern urban life and rarely receives medical attention or education" (Pool, 1982:11).

All Christian families have at least one person earning an income, mainly through the clinic which has a mostly Christian staff. In fact 75% of the Christians work for the SCC. None of them have relatives in the Arab countries but a few do have relatives who have resettled in the West. The Muslims believe quite rightly that the resettlement programmes to western countries favour Christians and resent this fact. Yet although exile in Um Gargur has rendered them redundant

pastoralists, very few lowland Muslims would ever consider surrendering their dreams of return to a pastoralist lifestyle by choosing a life in the West, even though they clearly want their children to have more opportunities than they. For the lowlanders, geographical proximity to Eritrea appears to be an extremely important factor in their psychological well-being. It should be noted that most of the Muslims in Um Gargur would never think of applying to resettle in countries such as America or Germany, and, of those Christians who applied, very few were accepted for resettlement.

Many of the values of the two groups were constantly in opposition. Five prostitutes for instance worked openly in Um Gargur, three of whom also earned extra money from brewing alcohol. One non-prostitute woman also earned a living as a beer-brewer (Christians attached no stigma to this activity). These activities were thought reprehensible by many Muslims although in reality there were about eight covert prostitutes who were Muslim. (Ironically the Christian prostitutes and those selling alcohol were forced to move to Um Gargur after their homes in Khasm el Ghirba were fire-bombed by Muslim fundamentalists who resided there). The Christians had to bear this burden as they were identified in relation with these activities and Christian women in particular suffered from this negative stereotyping. Yet some people found that with time their opinions did change. Neimat, a young Habab woman whose brother had recently become an Ansar told me "Before people said the Habash (women) were *chermutta* [prostitutes] because they only had the small circumcision, but look at the Ansar - it is the same with them. People say things like this only to keep women down. They are afraid that we will know too much. Then women will say 'No, I don't go to the

house of Christian women'. In Um Gargur we see the truth."

As long as politics did not play a part in the general discourse, tensions rarely surfaced in the daily life of Um Gargur. Relations between the Muslims and Christians were characterised by scepticism rather than antagonism. The majority of the villagers seemed to respect and appreciate the skills that the Christians offered to the settlement as teachers and health-workers. Although they were the elites in Eritrea,<sup>26</sup> in Um Gargur the Christians are certainly the (religious and cultural rather than economic) underclass. Despite their decreased status, there were those Christians who felt that the majority of the Tigre in Um Gargur, with their relative lack of education, beliefs and superstitions, were "backward". This was generally attributed to the fact that they had little access to schools in the lowlands. Other Christians noted that although most of the Muslims had little or no formal education, a small number of conservative Muslims in Um Gargur were educated to a higher standard than the majority of the Christians.

## **7. Politics**

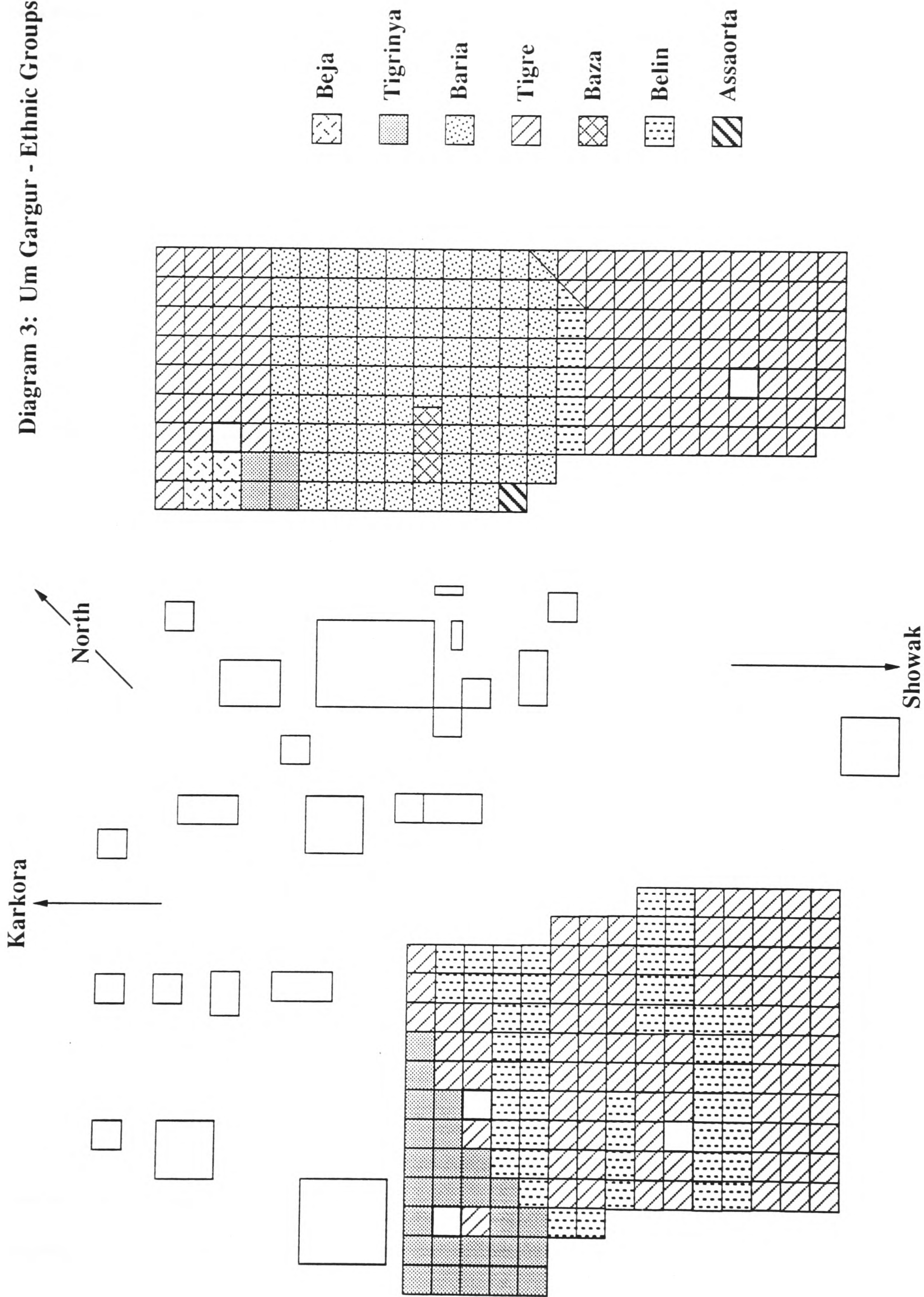
### **7.1 Factional Politics**

When Um Gargur was established it was assumed that its inhabitants were linked by a single nationalistic cause. Although this was and remains true (since everyone ultimately wants the liberation of Eritrea), the ways and means by which liberation is achieved are a matter of contention among Um Gargur's population. At the start of the settlement all of the refugees who came in the first influx supported one political faction, the ELF. There was no structure given to the political organisation and no head of the ELF in the settlement. In the

absence of any opposing political ideologies it was enough that when political affiliation was expressed, the idiom was the same. It has already been suggested that as *ladji'in* the refugees are a supra-tribe. In terms of politics then, it would also be appropriate to speak of the Muslims, and mainly Tigre speakers, as a fairly unified group in Um Gargur. The Baria who were later arrivals also pledged their allegiance to the ELF (although one year after I left the settlement there were reports that the majority of them had shifted allegiance to the EPLF).

Although most people identify themselves as pro-ELF, many admit that before they left their villages in Eritrea they were not active in ELF politics but gave support to the ELF fighters by offering them food and shelter when it was required. Many did have relations who were physically involved in the fighting and it was primarily because of this kind of support that their villages were bombed. It has also been noted that another reason for the displacement of some of the refugees was the civil war between the ELF and EPLF from 1972 to 1974. As there was still enmity between the two factions, when the first group arrived that included people who were politically allied with the EPLF, political differences were in evidence for the first time and tensions began to surface. Face to face with the "enemy" the ELF began to restructure itself in the settlement moving away from becoming an informal group to a more formal group. From what I could gather the organisation did not have one leader *per se*, but the most dynamic people became the nominal leaders of the ELF. Usually they were self-elected men whose active involvement often stemmed from the fact that they had close relatives, including children, who were fighters with the ELF. All of these leaders were sheikhs and some were also members of the Ansar sect and

Diagram 3: Um Gargur - Ethnic Groups



headed the Cooperative. They and other active ELF supporters met quite irregularly and generally no more than 50-80 people would attend at any one time. It is significant that even though the majority of the refugees would identify themselves as ELF supporters, most of them are not actively involved even now in the camp organisation. Those who were actively involved accounted for less than 2% of the number of people who would lay claim to ELF affiliation. There was little collective action taken by these supporters except when it was in opposition to the EPLF.

When people were asked why they identified themselves as ELF supporters, the reasons cited had more to do with family, ethnic or regional ties rather than to do with the ideology of the ELF. A secondary reason given was that the EPLF was "not good" for Eritrea and this was only mentioned after I asked what they felt the difference was between the two groups. Out of twenty people I questioned on the subject, only two mentioned political ideology and of those two, one, Ahmed Mohammed Erbut, was Ansar. However numerous EPLF supporters feel that the settlement administration favoured the ELF because the ELF's opposition to the EPLF is circumscribed primarily in religious terms. Cohen in his fieldwork among Hausa migrants also describes a situation in which religion and politics have become completely inter-linked and which bears some similarities to that in Um Gargur: "...after adopting the Tijaniyya (mystical order), the Hausa in effect transformed their community from a tribal polity to a ritual community. In the process, their formal political organisation...became informally articulated in terms of religious ideologies, symbols, myths, attitudes, loyalties, ceremonial, and power structure" (1969:141). What the Ansar and other conservatives are attempting to do (so far with limited success) is

convince the Muslim villagers that Eritrean politics can only be conceptualised in religious terms.

Two incidents which occurred while I was in Um Gargur serve to illustrate why this point of view is a valid one. The first incident took place at the time of my preliminary study in 1984, during a celebration held in the village to celebrate the anniversary of the liberation struggle. Although theoretically all overt political activities in refugee settlements are banned and any display of political factionalism is disallowed, the ceremony was organised by the ELF with the full support of the *moodir*. Despite the fact that members of both the ELF and EPLF regarded the day as one for celebration, the celebrations specifically excluded the EPLF supporters in the village from attending. When several of them showed up, the tensions generated by their arrival was palpable and veiled threats were made. Finally, several of them decided to leave. The political struggle was defined in no uncertain terms as a kind of *jihad* in which Islam would ultimately prove victorious.

Even though there were two Christians who were also supporters of the ELF, they later admitted that they were completely alienated from the celebrations and from their ELF compatriots that day. There were also Muslims who indicated that they were unhappy with the way the ceremony had evolved, and felt that an opportunity to articulate unity had been squandered by the organisers of the ceremony. The day had a particular significance for me because I was arrested and removed from the area by the Sudanese policeman after the organisers suggested that I might be a spy for the EPLF. One sheikh attempted to take my camera in order to confiscate my film but I protested that I had a pass from the

Sudanese government which allowed me to take photographs anywhere within the settlement. This *contretemps* lasted for less than thirty minutes. By the time I reached the home of friends in *hillat* Alighidir news had spread and many people came to offer their support and to say that the organisers did not speak for them. This marked a positive turning point in my relations with the refugees of Um Gargur. Even EPLF members who, until then had been very suspicious of my motives, warmed to me. I later became friends with the most aggressive sheikh who I occasionally reminded of his treatment of me.

Another incident occurred when the cultural unit of the EPLF which had been touring some of the other settlements decided to come to Um Gargur to show a film and to put on cultural dancing. Various leaders of the ELF got together and forbid them to come to Um Gargur. They made several threats and finally the group went to the neighbouring settlement of Karkora where they were made more welcome. At this event I noticed several of the instigators of the trouble enjoying themselves and asked why they were there and not back in Um Gargur. One of them told me that he also wanted to see the event but that it was inappropriate for the EPLF troupe to come to Um Gargur considering the history between the two groups. He was in the peculiar position of having to rally against an extravaganza which he quite wanted to see and was relieved that it could ultimately be shown in Karkora since it meant that his moral status, as a defender of ELF interests would remain intact.

Surprisingly, it appeared that the entire population of Um Gargur had travelled to Karkora for the event. For the first time many of the people from Um Gargur were prepared to discuss openly the politics of

the EPLF since they were genuinely surprised that there were people from every cultural and ethnic group representing the EPLF. It was precisely what the ELF leadership, some of whom were also members of the Islamic Front, did not want them to witness; the coming together of people from all ethnic and religious groups under one political umbrella, the EPLF. While the rhetoric at the ELF ceremony in Um Gargur was openly political and quite divisive, the EPLF troupe was forbidden to say anything overtly political at this show. However, the fact that on the stage were people very much like themselves, dressed as they were and speaking their respective languages in a unified and progressive display gave the refugees much to think and talk about for the coming weeks. As the ELF had no authority in Karkora, they were powerless to prevent the event or stem the obvious pleasure and questions which arose in those that witnessed it.

I later learned that this was the second time that an EPLF group which wanted to bring a cultural troupe to Um Gargur had been threatened. The first time was in 1981 when someone from Um Gargur who had lost a son in the civil war between the two factions mobilised a group which beat up various members of the troupe quite badly, overturned their jeep and destroyed their generator and film-projector. Apparently after the incident, Um Caltoum, a woman whose son was an ELF fighter and who was herself highly regarded, collected money mainly from other ELF supporters for those members of the troupe who had been hurt. When I asked her why she - a noted ELF supporter - had done so, she told me that though she disagreed with their politics, the EPLF was, like the ELF, fighting to liberate Eritrea so that she and others like her would not need to live as refugees in Sudan. She said that although her son

was with the ELF, the EPLF was not her enemy and that it made her ashamed to think that men in Um Gargur could beat up young Eritreans who had come all the way from Eritrea to entertain their fellow countrymen.

The ELF is essentially frozen in opposition to the EPLF. It is interesting that the ethnic composition in Karkora is almost identical to that in Um Gargur, however because the refugees in Karkora are a more recent influx, there are a significant proportion of Muslims (some people estimated as high as two-thirds) who actively support the EPLF in Karkora. For the ELF hierarchy in Um Gargur, this is dismaying. Although many ELF members realise that much has changed in Eritrea since Um Gargur was settled, they remain stuck in a time of the civil war when passions were inflamed against the EPLF and religion was as much a reason for being anti-EPLF as the notion that they were betrayers to the cause. With the war over it is difficult to imagine how the ELF leaders in Um Gargur will adapt to an Eritrea which some of them left almost two decades ago and in which the structures of society appear, judging from the Karkora Muslims, to have altered radically.

## 7.2 Support for the Two Groups

It has been noted that the ELF is supported by the majority of the settlement. This support is expressed verbally and through the actions of sending young men from the settlement to train in ELF camps along the border. Out of ten families I knew in *hillat* Alighidir, four had close relatives, either sons, nephews or brothers who were involved in the fighting. Two of the families had sons between the ages of 11 and 13 who were determined, at that young age, to be trained as fighters. Both of them, Nurredin and Ahmed, constantly threatened their parents with

running away if they were not allowed to go. Women also contributed to the liberation cause. From time to time a number of them under the lead of Um Caltoum, would make collections for young men who had come to the settlement to rest after a period at the training camps. This form of support for the ELF in Um Gargur was tangible and constructive since it actually provided the liberation movement with a strong young cadre of fighters from the settlement. But at the same time support was quite diffuse and very informal, because almost everyone claimed to be a member of the ELF and also because many of the refugees also feel that the organisation in Um Gargur has been hijacked by the same people who dominated the other facets of settlement life. As a result, most of those who claim to be members might have very little to do with the so-called leaders of the ELF in Um Gargur but might contribute to "the struggle" in less formalised ways. It is primarily because it has such a broad basis of support that the ELF in Um Gargur cannot be regarded as a tightly-knit and formal organisation.

The EPLF enjoys the active support of at least 95% of those who claim to be members (about 110)<sup>27</sup> of the organisation in Um Gargur. There are five elected representatives in the settlement and, not surprisingly in view of its size, it is a highly organised group. The majority of the EPLF supporters are Christians and Jiberti however there are also a number of Baria who are members as well. Out of the adult Christian population (80), less than 4% support the ELF although at one time in Eritrea, a significant number of the Christians also supported the ELF. Several of the men were at one time fighters in either the ELF or the EPLF. The supporters of the EPLF pay dues and raise funds for the organisation by contributing money from their monthly salaries,

making baskets, embroidery and other handicrafts which they sold both within and outside the settlement. The women are extremely active, meeting once a week as paid-up members of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEWmn), to knit sweaters and sew clothes for the fighters in Eritrea. Everyone in the settlement is generally up by 6.00am to listen to the news which is broadcast daily in Tigrinya and Tigre and gives them an up-to-date account of how the war is progressing. Because the aim of the EPLF is to permanently alter the "backward and unacceptable feudal structure"<sup>29</sup> of Eritrean society, it is just as consummate an ideology as the religion and politics of the ELF. Everything, from marriage, to health, to circumcision, and ownership of property is articulated in political terms, and the EPLF has an agenda for all of these.

### 7.3 Women and Settlement Politics

There is a hierarchy of paternalism in Um Gargur. The settlement administration is paternalistic towards the refugees; the sheikhs are essentially self-serving and paternalistic towards the men; and the men are paternalistic towards the women. Women - on the lowest rung of this scale - are the most disenfranchised of the refugees, both economically and politically. Women are only effectively administered to by their husbands, fathers and brothers who are expected to voice their demands. This is not surprising in view of the traditional limitations placed on the roles of most women by their Muslim communities. Also because neither the administration nor the UNHCR encouraged female representation, but expected families to be represented through a male head, women's views were not even reflected in Um Gargur. This is in

spite of the fact that for at least one-quarter of the calendar year approximately 57% of the 801 families in Um Gargur have women as their heads. While 146 of these women, or 18.3%, are permanent heads of households (widowed, divorced or separated), the remainder are *de facto* heads, left behind during the long periods when the majority of men in the settlement migrate in search of employment or to participate in the liberation war.

**Table 3. Female Heads of Households (FHH).**

Permanent household heads	146 - (18.3%)
Husbands absent 3-6 months yearly	254 - (31.8%)
Husbands absent over 1 year	56 - (7%)
Out of a total of 801 families	456 (57%) FHH

Source: 1986, SCC clinic.

Although during these periods (which amount to a significant portion of the year) women outnumber men 2:1, this is not reflected in their involvement in the political life of the settlement. Women acquire the responsibilities which come with being heads of families such as budgeting for food, water, clothing and household necessities, disciplining the children and educating them about traditional mores, but women do not acquire the status which generally comes from being in the majority. On the contrary, in the absence of a woman's husband the role of protector which was occupied by her husband is now transferred to the sheikh from her jurisdiction, who sees himself as responsible for her moral - although not her physical - well-being. One such sheikh - an elder - said to me, "Even if one hundred men travel, there are still men in Um Gargur. And even if one thousand men travel, as long as there is one man left, he will speak for her (women). It is *haram* (forbidden)

for a woman to speak as if she were a man. For a woman to speak is to throw away her father or brother or husband, and to say that there are no men. It is an insult to all men." This sheikh also told me that women had "no head" and were there to "cook, stay at home and bear children". When I enquired why the views of women were never sought by the sheikhs or elders, he asked me, "What do women know about what is good for them?" His was certainly not a minority point of view, nor was it an extreme one.

Thus, in neither a formal nor an informal context were the majority of women offered a modicum of power either by the administration or by their own communities. Since they were not allowed to speak in public their views were never put forward for consideration, women and their needs or priorities were completely left out of the dialogue which took place between the sheikhs and the *moodir* and between the men and the sheikhs.

Those women who most wanted to change the structure of things in the settlement were not those who were married to prominent men and who might have been able to influence their husbands; it was generally quite poor women who were interested in starting small businesses such as tea-rooms, restaurants, soap and mattress-making in the settlement, without having their honour or values questioned. They were also the ones who most wanted to attend literacy and sewing classes which were run by the SCC and which many were forbidden from attending because it was felt that these classes were EPLF-run and generally a bad thing for women who should otherwise be at home looking after their households. Such women objected to the fact that decisions made by the administration and the conservative sheikhs impinged on their ritual activities, one of the few

areas in which women exercised any real control. These women who had concrete ideas about change were probably in the minority. The principal concerns of the majority were to keep the price of water and food at affordable levels, and to receive information about changes in rules which would affect their daily lives before such changes were implemented.

Women have informal information networks through which news about events in the settlement is channeled. Weddings, circumcisions, ceremonies, general gossip, deaths are learned of through such networks. Most of the other information about the administrative affairs of the settlement is communicated to women through their husbands who might be present at meetings. Those who are without husbands, however temporarily, are dependent upon their children and other women who might be privy to such information. Women seem to feel that they are left in an increasingly subordinate position because without their men-folk to negotiate for and protect them, and provide them with food, clothing and other basic necessities, they are completely vulnerable. Fatna Senai told me, "Um Gargur is terrible to live in, and everyday I am not well...our children and our men who took care of us all went to Yemen and we do not see money for many months. If you go to the *moodir* or the cooperative and say this they tell you to go. It is not their affair. So we wait for the money from Yemen. When it comes, we are happy. If it doesn't come, *malish*. What can we do?"

Beck observes that "In societies where males form and interact in exclusive political, economic, religious, or social groups, the status of men in relation to women rises, because activities are drawn away from the domestic scene and into a realm that excludes women and

children" (1980:365). In the extreme situation which characterises Um Gargur, there are even greater tensions which exist between men and women, mainly because men have lost so much economic power and social standing as a result of being forced into refugeehood. Thus if a man's status rises in relation to women, so, conversely, does women's status fall in relation to men. As the situation worsens for men, it worsens proportionately for women. All of the refugees are marginalised, but women most of all.

Excluded from political life women have formed their own groups, mainly credit societies and other informal networks, which put their own interests first. Although the majority of them are illiterate, there are increasing numbers of women who are becoming involved in the literacy programme run by the SCC women's centre, despite the disapproval of many of the men. Women are learning how to read, write, do simple arithmetic and tell the time. Even those women who were not interested in attending literacy classes were insistent that their daughters learn how to read and write. Social cohesion exists among these women precisely because of their abnormal position in the wider society, and, although they are unable to define and articulate their needs to those who are in charge of the settlement, the unity which exists among many women appears to lessen the negative impact which refugeehood has on their lives. Though such networks are political only in so far as they go against the social system as defined by the sheikhs and elders, through them many women are confidently gaining a limited degree of economic power and flexibility for themselves while at the same time managing to feed, clothe and keep their families healthy.

#### 7.4 Sheikhs, Elder Committee, and Cooperative Leaders

The system of sheikhs and elders was created to serve the refugees in a number of respects. The sheikhs as representatives of the people are expected behave in certain ways which make it clear that their loyalties are unambiguous and lie with the refugees. They are expected to approach the *moodir* when their constituents request it of them and to negotiate so that fees for services such as water and tractor use are kept to affordable levels. They also resolve conflicts which arise between refugees. People prefer to settle disputes among themselves rather than to involve the Sudanese administration or the resident policeman. If disputes cannot be settled this way there is a progression of responsibility among the refugees before they decide to seek outside arbitrators; if the two parties in disagreement are in fact from the same tribe an attempt is first made to resolve it by the sheikhs who represent the tribe. If they are from different tribes, then there are two sheikhs who become involved. In the rare cases when this does not work, then the conflicting parties seek a decision from the elder-committee, who, as the highest refugee authority makes the final decision. All of the elders are sheikhs, however only eight of the sheikhs are elders.

The sheikhs and the elder committee also serve the *moodir*, carrying out his instructions and informing the people of any changes in settlement policies or otherwise which might affect them. They issue administrative directives and are in charge of collecting money from the refugees for tractor use and the hiring of a driver. Sheikhs are also charged with making sure that food is distributed to those whom they

represent and are responsible for informing the *moodir* when people leave the settlement permanently and of any new arrivals to the settlement. From all indications relations between the *moodir* and the sheikhs was a good one, so much so that the refugees consistently complained that the sheikhs did not have the refugees' interests at heart but rather the government of the Sudan and their own.

In theory the system, sanctioned by the COR and UNHCR, seems quite an effective means of resolving crises and encouraging integration among the refugees as well as allowing them to participate to some degree in the decision-making process. In practice, however, it is only the sheikhs who participate in the process with very little involvement from the other refugees. People find themselves caught in a system which they feel does not benefit them. Yet although some of the sheikhs were disliked, the idea of involving the Sudanese authorities in intra-refugee conflicts was not a popular one and so people would, when necessary, seek out the sheikhs. For the refugees to refer to the authorities would be to destroy any pretensions of their independence within the settlement and imply that they were incapable of resolving their own conflicts. The system puts them at a disadvantage because they have no recourse to change things. Any one of their representatives could theoretically lose their positions if their constituents organised themselves in opposition. It is however, extremely unlikely that such a change would occur because people rarely, except in cases felt to be extreme, mobilise against authority as there is always the feeling that as refugees they are in Um Gargur on sufferance and should therefore conform to the wishes of the administration. This means that even when it comes to monitoring or

demanding more from their representatives, the refugees are powerless.

Some say that the sheikhs and the *hakuma*, or administration, speak with one voice. Ascha Are Hamid illustrates the perceptions many have regarding the sheikhs:

When the *moodir* comes he talks with the sheikhs. He says he does not want to meet with a lot of people so he gets together with the sheikhs...the people are not allowed. They are chased away. The sheikhs get together among themselves and they do not call the people together for anything. If they have something to give to the people, they hide it among themselves without telling the people. The *moodir* and the sheikhs always agree and take things for themselves while the people die with their own fire. The people are always cheated. They have lost their rights. The sheikhs have their salaries, they always meet with the *moodir* and hide (steal) things for themselves. When we go to the *moodir* he says "where is your sheikh?". If we say we do not have a sheikh or that the sheikh is not good he says "Do not come here by yourselves". He does not want to speak with me or see my face. It is because I speak the truth, that is why he will not speak to us. The sheikh does not speak with the people. He speaks by himself with the *hakuma*...the evil thing is from the *moodir* himself and the sheikhs. Before we had a good *moodir* who, when you talked with him he listened to you and acted on your complaints. But those who came after are all bad. May they be cursed. Especially that Omer the dry. May Allah be upon him. He was terrible. The rain stopped when he came and we suffered from hunger.

The cooperative in Um Gargur is another "bone of contention" for the refugees. It was started in 1978 with help from the COR and the UNHCR, beginning first with a bakery, followed by a cooperative store and mill. All of the nine leaders of the cooperative were chosen from the group of twenty-three sheikhs, thus creating an elite group who were the "gatekeepers" for the refugees on every formal level. At its start the cooperative was open to all members of the settlement who were invited to join for S£3.25. After this initial contribution they contribute nothing else to the cooperative. This sum allows the refugees access to the cooperative store where goods such as sugar, rice, beans, salt and

soap are, theoretically, at a lower price than the other stores in the market. Membership also allows them to purchase bakery bread and the use of the mill. Unfortunately the mill worked only occasionally and people were often forced to use the mill at Karkora. Also there were numerous complaints that the goods in the cooperative store were rarely plentiful and that the prices for some items were the same or even higher than those sold in the other shops in the market. This was believed to be a deliberate attempt by the cooperative leaders to encourage the refugees to buy from their own stores. Also it was felt that the cooperative leaders were benefitting personally from the sales at the cooperative store when profits should otherwise have gone towards necessities such as repairing the mill which would benefit the refugees.

Not all of the refugees are involved with the cooperative and of those who are, very few admitted that real benefit accrued them as a result. According to the cooperative leaders about two-thirds of the camp are members because at the cooperative's inception there was a time limit on membership. One group that does benefit from the cooperative somewhat are the butchers whose abattoir is actually owned by the cooperative and to whom they pay a nominal rent. In Um Gargur there was often some difficulty in differentiating between the roles of the sheikhs and the cooperative leaders and this was not helped by the fact that all cooperative leaders were in fact also sheikhs. Refugees became confused about the two groups and it was not uncommon for people to refer to many of the sheikhs as cooperative leaders. When queried in detail however, people generally seemed to believe that although not all of the sheikhs were untrustworthy, the same did not hold true for the cooperative leaders. Women were especially suspicious of them.

People were aware that several of the stores in the market were owned by sheikhs or cooperative leaders and their relatives, and that while many families had very little, these men and their families were always thriving. Since the sheikhs were also in charge of food distribution for their constituents, they were in the position to keep more food for themselves while distributing less to others. None of the sheikhs or cooperative leaders were ever openly accused of this and most people continued, at least in public, to pay them deference.

The refugees had assumed that through these representatives they would be given a voice. The problem was not only that the sheikhs were never seen to challenge the authorities, but also that they rarely sought out the opinions of the refugees themselves who they were meant to represent. These sheikhs had evolved into an elite which was alienated from the majority of the population. They would often report what the authorities wanted without attempting to discover what their constituents desired. However they were also in quite a difficult position themselves and as refugees, their perceptions of their own rights are very limited. They could live harmoniously by cooperating with the authorities or create difficulties by antagonising them. Several sheikhs indicated that they felt that it was not even an option to question directives and very few are prepared to test the administration. Salih Amhirai a Bejuk sheikh told me, they were not in any position to argue with the authorities and that they were as helpless as the other refugees. "People will always talk but the office of the *moodir* is open. Why don't they go there and talk to him....they can go there themselves and complain. What are we to do? We are also refugees just like everyone else and if the *moodir* tells us we must do

something we do it. People like to complain but if we were in our country then we can say we want this, or we want that. Here we are all *ladji'in* so we say thank you and nothing more." Yet few refugees would agree with his rendering of the sheikhs' position in Um Gargur.

## CHAPTER III - HONOUR AS BARGAIN AND REINTERPRETING SHAME

Khedija, Beni Amer divorcee, aged 38:

"When there was drumming or when the girls and boys went dancing together, people saw each other as brothers and sisters. It was a safe country, Eritrea. People didn't act shamefully. This country is the country of shame and problems. Now in this country even if you go to the market they say it is shameful. If you are walking with a man they suspect you of doing something else with him. In Eritrea they wouldn't say that because people were free just to be normal with each other...The same people who say everything is shameful are the same people who run the cooperative. They say people must not do this or do that and because they are the ones who have the money and influence, the sheikhs in the cooperative, then the men listen to them. When the men listen to them then we have to stay at home. The men say if we leave the home then it is making shame for them. In Eritrea I used to go to the market. Even to distant places with our brothers and neighbours. We would buy things from the market and then return home. This country is terrible and this place is full of people who show no respect to others. This and this is forbidden. To go with your husband in the street is forbidden. You do not go. You dress like this [completely covered up], so that people may not see you. You hide yourself and walk. Why is this? Allah did not say so. Allah says don't go [sleep] with Ahmed. That is sin. Allah says that I shouldn't go with your husband, that this is sin. It is not allowed in the Book [Koran]. This we all knew. But now the men are saying that we did not know the Book. They say even dancing is sin. They say that we are allowed to eat, drink water and dress in the house. The man will work outside and the woman inside."

Ascha Idris, Baria ex-ELF fighter, aged 23:

"When I was going to the field people were saying to me 'you are a girl. What will you do there after all?' I was saying can't a woman fight? I will stand up and fight against the enemy. [In the field] women and men go through political and military training and go to the battle together. Women and men are like this [on par]. The boys and girls sleep, eat, sit, drink, side by side. When I came back to Sudan I found the girls and boys sit separately and eat separately. It looked strange to me. I didn't care at first. I would sit and eat with anybody but people started talking. They said 'She is useless'. But my mother did not say anything, she just kept quiet."

### III. HONOUR AS BARGAIN AND REINTERPRETING SHAME

Because Um Gargur's population is overwhelmingly Muslim, it is not inappropriate to refer to it as an Islamic settlement. Most Islamic societies observe some aspects of the *sharia* (Islamic law), although its interpretation varies from society to society. It can, if strictly interpreted, be an all-encompassing system of doctrines which imposes comprehensive guidelines on everything from education, politics, economics and law, to the family, morality and war (Gilsenan, 1982; Schuon, 1963). Before moving to Um Gargur, some of the groups within the settlement differed in their interpretation of *sharia*. Some people observed the strict seclusion of women, some did not. Others practised infibulation while others regarded it as being contrary to the teachings of Mohammed. Despite the differences, all practices were legitimised by each group's interpretation of Islamic law. In Um Gargur there has been a (mainly conservative) trend towards religious and cultural uniformity. Islam now pervades all facets of life and is therefore relevant to any discussion of social organization.

In this chapter we will discuss "honour", a concept which has great bearing upon all aspects of the social and economic life in this community and is at what Peristiany calls "the apex of the pyramid of temporal social value" (1965:10). In Um Gargur honour, or *sharaf*, is closely linked to religion. We will examine the meaning and evolution of honour in the refugee context.

In Chapter Two we noted that Um Gargur was created as an agricultural settlement and that its incoming population, made up primarily of pastoralists, was encouraged to adopt a new means of

subsistence. These people regarded cattle herding as the most prestigious way of life, whilst farming was, if not culturally unacceptable, something mainly women and children did in small garden plots (El-Beshir, 1982). Traditionally, the quality and quantity of a man's herd was a reflection not only of his material worth but also his intelligence, taste, and character. For the men, farming entailed a clash with their values and a loss of the prestige associated with their former livelihood. Despite this there was little resistance to farming. According to people with whom I spoke, many people began to grow vegetables for consumption and *durra* and other cash crops on the land allocated to them by the COR. The more successful farmers then sold their produce in Um Gargur and other villages.

By the time I arrived in the village in 1984 things had changed radically although some *durra* was still being grown. I learned that for two consecutive years the rains had failed and many of the seeds planted were eaten by rodents. Just as upon their arrival in Um Gargur, the villagers once again had to depend upon the various foodstuffs distributed by the WFP and later by CARE. By 1987 this situation had worsened.

Ever since those first harvests failed, self-sufficiency seems to have been out of the grasp of Um Gargur, and this has resulted in the continued demoralisation of its residents. Many of the things which they cherished they found to be of little significance in the new society and many of their old values were under threat. New roles were created - cooperative leaders, farmers, and sheikhs - all of which continue to have great bearing on their lives but which leave the majority of the refugees with little control over their situation.

In this environment which is distinguished by its limited material resources, multi-ethnicity presents additional problems which I will touch upon here. The refugees were faced with the task of organising their disparate communities into a recognisable and workable framework but found that the heterogeneous composition of the settlement stirred prejudice and suspicion. Because very few people in Um Gargur had, before their flight to the Sudan, lived in close contact with other ethnic groups, and many were sensitive to the danger that their respective cultural identities would become diluted. Many refugees indicated that for them Um Gargur is a sort of testing ground in which the different groups can explore and strengthen the ties which link them. The more politically sophisticated among them generally try to avoid presenting themselves to non-Eritreans as a heterogeneous group, dismissing ethnic origin as incidental, as they feel that this would undermine their claim of national solidarity. Despite their idealism, - and day to day relationships between people regardless of background are usually warm and relaxed - there is a deep vein of xenophobia which emerges during intra-village conflicts, political meetings, or when someone inspires jealousy by returning to the village from abroad with much money. At times like these, differences are highlighted rather than underplayed. In such situations honourable behaviour is linked entirely with ethnic or political loyalties. However when they are confronted with real crises or outside aggression - when for instance news of the Ethiopian army retaking an Eritrean city is heard, or if Eritreans in Sudan or Eritrea are killed - then internal schisms

dissolve and the ultimate solidarity which exists between the Eritreans in Um Gargur is very much evident.

## **1. The Elite**

### **1.1 The Sudanese**

In Um Gargur there is a hierarchy of positions with the settlement manager and then the village policeman, both Sudanese, at the very apex. Generally their interaction in village life is kept to a minimum, however their high status is determined by the fact that they are the two official representatives of the Sudanese government, to which all the refugees owe some gratitude. The rest of the Sudanese in the village - the head male teacher or *mualim*, and a number of young female teachers, *mualimat* - also occupy quite a high social position.

Although all these Sudanese are in a better position than the Eritreans, their high social status can be regarded as incidental, or perhaps even transcendental, since it has no real influence on village life. Aside from refugee matters, whatever the Sudanese may do in Um Gargur, and however they may choose to govern their lives, the villagers have very little say in the matter and no demonstrable means of vetoing their behaviour. Nor do they try to. Gossip, a major mechanism of social control in the settlement has no effect upon the Sudanese primarily because they are not in any position to hear it since they do not socialise with the villagers. During my stay in Um Gargur a few of the teachers were judged by the villagers to have loose morals. People thought these girls took jobs in the refugee camps only so that they could be far away from the controlling influence of their families. Neither the Eritrean men nor the women could do much about this except

talk among themselves. The men who might ordinarily have tried to seduce these girls did not even attempt to make passes since they were handicapped by their social status and their Eritrean nationality, which, whether they had more money than the girls or not, did not allow them to intermingle. As refugees these men and the other villagers could only effectively apply categories of "virtuous", [*rahmet-T/ hiyawnet-Tya*], and "loose" [*fitht-T/ kelal-Tya*] to women who were their equals (other refugees or Eritreans), and it is only these women with whom they could act upon the "assessment" of their morality. Attempting to use the same code of conduct with Sudanese girls would almost certainly be to risk offending the girl and maybe even the law.

At the same time the male head teacher who oversaw the curriculum for both the girls' and boys' schools was acknowledged to be an alcoholic who spent a great deal of his time in the homes of the village prostitutes drinking *mes* (honey or date wine), *suwah* (local beer made from fermented grain), and *aragi* (a strong gin) until the early hours of the morning. His behaviour was legendary and whenever there was talk of his drunkenness most people would agree that he had "no shame" [*farhay-T/ foquis-Tya*]. I spent a week at his home when I arrived in the village and was without lodging. Although when sober he was an agreeable man, I quickly became uncomfortable in his presence after hearing him each night return home in a stupor and once seeing him ill in the morning outside my bedroom door. At the end of the week I was so unnerved by his drunkenness that I left his home. I later learned from one of the drivers that he did not feel free around me and had also been planning to ask me to find other lodgings. After this he was extremely embarrassed around me and this marked our future relationship. Yet even

though the entire village knew that he was an alcoholic, this knowledge never affected the way he interacted among the villagers or the way he undoubtedly saw his own position in Um Gargur. Although it was obvious that neither he nor the female teachers were above suspicion, they were none of them treated any differently by the villagers and were given all the respect that their positions warranted. Clearly although social status might be linked to honour, the honour which comes from the individual's Sudanese nationality or their economic and political status [*hashm-T*] differs immensely from that which stems from an individual's moral persona [*sharaf-T*].

## **1.2 Sheikhs, Elders, and Cooperative Leaders**

The sheikhs who act as liaisons between the rest of the villagers, and the project manager who oversees all activities which take place in the village, are also high in the social order, as are the religious sheikhs. Some people were both religious and secular sheikhs as well as cooperative leaders. In Chapter Two it was observed that conflicts which arise within or among ethnic groups are usually resolved among the conflicting parties and the secular sheikhs without recourse to the Sudanese administration unless, of course, the problem is so serious that it needs the involvement of the law. The law (personified by the Sudanese policeman) was, I noted, rarely resorted to. It was also rare to call upon the elder-committee to make legal decisions. There were only two instances they were involved in while I was in Um Gargur; when a young girl had become pregnant and the sheikhs met to convince the young man to marry her, and later when a young boy was allegedly raped and the sheikhs got together to find the culprit, who it turned out, was

a Sudanese. In Um Gargur there were no disputes over land or property and I knew of no thefts. Misconduct is more social than criminal and so the main role of the sheikhs is administrative.

Some of the sheikhs are admired and liked by the people they represent whilst others are intensely disliked and perceived as being too collaborative with the Sudanese and the wealthier elements in the village, to the detriment of the poorer and more vulnerable members of the groups they represent. Villagers, whilst not exactly frightened of these men, certainly show most of them deference whether they like them or not. Most villagers (in particular the women) do not think of confronting the settlement manager about their needs and so they approach the sheikh who is appointed from their *hillat* to go to the settlement manager with their requests. Favouritism is rife and whether the sheikh does so or not depends a great deal upon whether the request comes from one of the wealthier or more influential members of his *hillat*. It also depends upon whether he regards the request as an expedient one which will not threaten his own position.

In 1984 the villagers of Um Gargur appeared to be more respectful of their sheikhs than when I returned a year later. Since my first visit several things had happened which altered their perceptions. Firstly *sharia* law had been relaxed in the Sudan and although people continued to show deference to figures of authority, they were less afraid since they did not feel constantly under threat from them. Also the American organisation, Save the Children (SCF), had set up a base in the village and they were instrumental in getting people to speak up for their rights, particularly those who felt completely marginalized by the old system or felt too insecure to voice their needs.

SCF personnel were very dynamic and created within a short time of arriving in Um Gargur, a feeling of confidence among the villagers. After a short period of misapprehension on the part of the refugees, it became clear that they were there to help them and people began to seek them out when they had problems. Everyone felt that their community was about to be rejuvenated and there was a palpable difference in peoples' attitudes. The villagers rationalised that SCF personnel, unlike the settlement sheikhs, had nothing to gain by currying favour with the authorities and thus were much less concerned about whether they would alienate the settlement head, sheikhs or cooperative leaders by confronting them with the villagers' misgivings.

SCF personnel, mostly *khawajaat*, or foreigners, certainly transcended both the social and moral codes which applied to refugees in the settlement (whereas I could not) and yet they were regarded not as neutral, but on the side of the refugees. While in some ways this undermined the sheikhs' roles as mediators, in practice people continued to go to them with their problems. Of course the sheikhs' power was potent only as long as the administration sanctioned it. This applied also to the power of the SCF (though in the case of the latter, villagers might not have thought so) since ultimately they too would be accountable to the project manager. In any case the arrival of SCF signified a change of attitude on the part of the refugees in terms of what they expected the sheikhs to accomplish for them and they appeared less apathetic. Um Caltoum told me:

Before when we came first the sheikhs used to give us rations as families. The sheikhs were created to represent the families. They used to go to the storeroom and bring the rations to their homes and distribute to the families, sometimes keeping things for themselves. That is how they came into existence. Now the expatriates have stopped the

sheikhs. We are grateful that they stopped them for it is better if they do not distribute them. The expatriates saw the injustice [referring to rumours of corruption among sheikhs] and stopped them.

Unfortunately SCF did not remain very long in the settlement and transferred their operations to Karkora where there was a cholera epidemic which affected large numbers of incoming refugees.

Although the system of cooperative leaders, sheikhs and the elder-committee should have allowed the COR/UNHCR administration to reach important decisions concerning the settlement with the input of the refugees, in practice this did not happen. In part this was because the men were too fearful to demand anything of the administration but more importantly it was because women, who formed the majority of the villagers, were completely excluded from this process and never asked their viewpoints although they resided in the village at all times and needed its facilities.

As a result of this most of the families resorted to deceit in order to get items such as food and clothing from the authorities. Families would divide themselves up on paper so that a mother could be reclassified as a female head of household (FHH) and her children taken as her dependants, while the father remained listed as a head of household in his own right with his own dependants. Also when the censuses were taken, people increased their family members in order to be able to sign up for more food by getting children from other parts of the homestead to make the rounds. They requested their relatives and friends in other settlements to visit them at this time. The administration finally became wise to their ruses and decided to try a more radical approach to census-taking which resulted in the army being

brought in during the early hours of the morning to surround the village so that no one could leave or enter at this time. The climate in the village then and for a long time afterwards was very tense since the villagers resented their treatment at the hands of the administration. Had the men been confident enough about airing their views in order to establish an honest dialogue about their situation it is unlikely that the situation would have deteriorated to this extent, although by this time sending in the army for census purposes had become uniform in the other settlements as well. Unfortunately the sheikhs did not relay this information to the inhabitants of Um Gargur in such a way that it could lessen their grievances and in some parts of the settlement people felt they had been singled out. The refugees had also been frightened at the idea of the Sudanese army embarking on Um Gargur because they had a reputation for harrasing Eritrean refugees in the urban areas. Many people, (of whom the women were the most vociferous,) became incensed that whilst the administration could clearly expect all its demands to be met by the refugees, the reverse was impossible.

Before the sheikhs acted as representatives for the people in Um Gargur it is clear that most of them were believed to be honourable men [*amin-T/ umum-Tya*] who would stand up for the people of their *hillat*. The incident over census taking was one of the precursors to the water riot which would mobilize the settlement and which will be discussed in the Conclusion. It was however, incidents such as the census taking along with the arrival of the SCF, which undermined the influence of the sheikhs and called into question their ability to act for the good of the people. Also since the majority of the refugees were poor whilst a disproportionate number of the sheikhs or their family members and

associates were rich or relatively well-off (they were merchants or had trucks or buses), people saw them less and less as members of the same social group with the same pressing problems and motivations.

Nine sheikhs were also big cooperative leaders and the impression I received from an overwhelming number of people I spoke to, especially women, was that many of the cooperative leaders were quite corrupt.

**Table 4. Administrative Sheikhs in Um Gargur.**

<u>SHEIKH</u>	<u>"ETHNICITY"</u>	<u>ELDER</u>	<u>COOPERATIVE</u>	<u>PROFESSION</u>	<u>RELIGIOSITY</u>
Osman Mohd. El Amin	Habab	x	x	Shop/bus owner	
Derma Idris Derma	Mensa				
Salih Ali Amhirai	Beijuk	x	x		Ansar
Hamid Nur Dergi	Beni Amer	x	x	COR worker	
Yubbattit Mohd. Adam	Beijuk				
Ismail Hamid Fikak	Mensa	x			Ansar
Haroun Lebab	Baria				
Mohd. Nur Musa	Beni Amer	x	x		
Osman Nurai	Beni Amer			Social-worker	
Berhane Ferizgi	Tigrinya/Habash				Christian
Ali Bakhit	Baria			Butcher	
Adam Mohd. Tai	Beni Amer				
Mohd. Osman Hadj Idris	Tigrinya/Jiberti				
Ali Idris Ali	Habab		x	School-teacher	
Idris Osman Dermal	Belin				
Aboud Adam	Baria		x		
Mohd. Nur Maibatot	Beijuk	x	x	Shop owner	
Mintai Jimah	Belin				
Osman Arouf	Baria				
Mohd. Nur Abu Hawa	Beni Amer		x		Islamic Front
Yacoub Ismail	Beni Amer			Shop owner	Islamic Front
Mahmoud Nur Adam	Maria	x			
Musa Adam Hamid	Beni Amer		x		Ansar

People said that they ran the cooperative in such a way that mainly their own families would benefit from the cooperative which sold soap, oil, flour and other household goods. They were said to buy things at a low price and sell them at inflated prices, all the time skimming off the profits which, in theory, should have been put back into the cooperative account for the benefit of the refugees. The cooperative leaders strenuously deny this accusation and claim that they are only involved in the cooperative "for the people" and that all profits ultimately go back into the cooperative itself. Although these leaders were obviously richer than the other refugees, it was also evident from speaking to most of them that they were people who in Eritrea had owned shops and businesses and clearly had a knack for it. Even in Eritrea they had been relatively affluent. Like many of the refugees, they had also managed to bring gold with them from Eritrea, although probably in larger quantities. The extent to which they may have been corrupt was never actually clear but public opinion branded them thus, and even though on a day to day basis they appeared to enjoy cordial relations with their fellow villagers, generally they were mistrusted.

The sheikhs, whether through cunning or not, often invoked the collective label of *ladji'in*, or refugees, in describing themselves and their relations with the villagers. The identity *ladji'in* (sing.: *ladji'*) is distinct from ethnicity or nationality but equally important since it defines the villagers as members of a homogeneous unit characterised by its alien character, and their marginalisation in the Sudan. All villagers will use this term to describe themselves practically but often it is also used symbolically. In this symbolic sense we can say that as *ladji'in*, the villagers support each other

morally, physically, and if they can, economically. This is considered truly honourable action. When an individual falls ill and needs medical treatment which is only available outside of the settlement or at great expense, the common practice is for a male member of his or her immediate family to make the rounds of the market-place and the homesteads collecting money. The sick person is seen as belonging to the village, being an Eritrean and a *ladji'*, who must be helped. Villagers reason, "We are all *ladji'in* and must help each other."

To help your fellow refugee without self-approbation or expectation of reward is thought to be one of the most honourable things that anyone can do. Several, although by no means all of the shiekhs, whose honour actually derived initially from the fact that people thought them to be generous and full of integrity but who were now thought to be rather mean-spirited, were perhaps hoping that by always throwing their hands in the air and saying when asked questions about the census or other delicate community related issues "We are all *ladji'in*" - in other words, "we are all in the same boat together", they were identifying with the others. They might have hoped they could reverse public opinion and revert their authority-linked honour or *hashm*, into the altogether more precious quality, *sharaf*, or esteem. It is unlikely that they were blind to the fact that according to the moral order of the settlement, they had "status" without being considered "honourable".

Yet etiquette in Um Gargur demanded that even the most despised individuals, whether sheikhs or not, were never shunned in public, although there was much discussion about them behind their backs. In fact in one case which I knew of that involved incest between a father and his daughter I never actually saw anyone turn away from the father

although his home was regarded as off-limits by most people. The refugees disapproval always manifested itself in more subtle ways and social interaction with these men was limited and strained rather than cut off. Although it wasn't unusual to see them drinking tea or coffee in the market-place, the warmth and joviality which characterised most encounters among men was missing. Some non-religious sheikhs could not always be sure of being invited into the homesteads of many of their neighbours. This is not to say that they were pariahs, but even when they were listened to and their views considered, (which was often), by the beginning of 1987 respect for them had dwindled.

## 2. Men and Honour

In Um Gargur honour is clearly a dynamic quality as opposed to a static one. Peristiany notes that "Honour and shame are the constant preoccupation of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies where face to face personal, as opposed to anonymous, relations are of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actor is as significant as his office...What is significant...is the insecurity and instability of the honour-shame ranking" (1965:11). This holds true for Um Gargur however, when a man is recognised as honourable, or *amin* by his associates, his reputation protects him unless he or (one of his relatives) does something which is felt to be distinctly dishonourable. Someone who is a drunkard, a braggart, a relentless wife beater, rapes, steals, cheats, borrows without repaying, or lies to enhance his status, immediately loses status in Um Gargur. In fact, a good reputation is more easily lost than gained.

Yet, although stealing is not looked upon at all favourably, acts

such as cheating and lying to the Sudanese administrators do not affect a person's reputation adversely because this is seen by many people as necessary to their survival. In fact if a man is very adept at deceiving the authorities and this enables him to get more food or clothing for his family, his reputation for being a resourceful provider is enhanced greatly. A person who was perceived as lacking integrity in his dealings with his fellow refugees would lose whatever good name he had. A person who made an honest mistake even if it was costly to his fellow refugees was less likely to be vilified than someone who deliberately misled his associates.

In one instance which achieved some notoriety, Osman Nurrai, a young sheikh who was well-liked and respected by Muslims and Christians alike, had a small poultry concern and was supplying eggs to many of the people in his own *hillat* and the surrounding ones. He learned from someone at one of the main batteries in the neighbouring town that there was a vaccine available which could prevent his chickens from getting the diseases which often decimated the poultry population in the settlement. He decided to get some of this vaccine for his own chickens and in a fit of good will ordered more of the vaccine for the chickens of other villagers. When he arrived back in Um Gargur there was incredible squawking and a great hub of activity going on around his house and I inquired as to what was happening. I walked over and saw huge crowds of people with their chickens in their arms all milling around waiting for their birds to be vaccinated.

Everyone expressed eternal gratitude to Osman and later when I went to another section of the village people were saying how angry they were that they had not been able to get their chickens vaccinated as well

since Osman had run out of the serum. People sang his praises and said that he was always looking out for their interest. Within the space of a week however there was again a large crowd milling around his home, this time with lifeless chickens in their hands. It turned out that the majority of the vaccinated chickens, including Osman's, had died. Everyone was angry and voices were raised as they kept asking him where he found the serum and whether they could get compensation from the main battery. They were angry at Osman for encouraging them to take their chickens along, but later, when I went to their homes, people were quite philosophical about the whole incident and were surprisingly charitable about him. Not one person I spoke to actually had a derogatory word to say about Osman's character or his intentions. Much later when people were able to laugh at the whole incident they would speak about the expression on Osman's face when they all showed up bearing their dead chickens and would say regretfully how they might have lost only three or five chickens but poor Osman, he lost one hundred! He was regarded as a modest man who was also intelligent and industrious, and took his religion seriously without being intrusive or sententious. Many felt he was quite unlike most of the others, particularly the conservative sheikhs who were always intruding on the lives of the refugees.

Men's honour is linked in crucial ways to women's behaviour and women's honour. A man who has a close female relative who is believed, rightly or wrongly to be unchaste, suffers from her reputation. Traditionally, men's honour is also linked to economic concerns; a man should be able to feed, clothe and provide for his family. With the administration providing many of these basic needs for men and for their families, the contribution that husbands and fathers make is necessarily

less than in the pre-refugee situation, unless of course they are employed and receiving a good income. In Eritrea, a man who did not provide for his family, and by extension did not protect his family's honour, was thought to be unmanly or weak. As many men who remain in Um Gargur do not work, the notion that their honour is linked to their economic roles is a problematic one. Ideally the entire community has to reconceptualise its notions of the prescribed ways in which men are perceived. This might not have posed a dilemma but for the fact that women are being forced to represent traditional ideals of femininity, while men clearly no longer represent traditional ideals of masculinity.

### **3. Old People**

People would often say that in Um Gargur the old people's "heads were always hurting" or that they were "thinking too much", since in Um Gargur they had little to do and many had lost their function as a unifying force in the absence of the extended family unit. This contrasted sharply with the notion that in Eritrea the elderly were "steel" or as some men would say, "like a book" in which many things were written. In some homesteads it was not uncommon to find two elderly people who were dependent on the younger, more able members of the *hosh* to support them. All too often these younger members would be women who were themselves characterised as vulnerable by the SCC by virtue of the fact that the majority of them did not or could not undertake wage labour. Most of them were economically and politically dependent upon men outside of the settlement or on the settlement rations.

There were, of course, some old people who lived reasonably well

with their children, particularly when the children were relatively affluent. The elderly people whose relatives were poor or who had not relations were the most pitiable. They lived entirely off the CARE rations and hand-outs from the SCC. Old men spent much of their time in the mosques or in the market-place where they would gather to drink tea and chat about the old days or the war. Most of the old men in Um Gargur had lived in Italian Eritrea and would tell stories about the reign of the Italians and later the British and the Ethiopians who occupied their country. The old people were the strongest links with the past and would lament the fact that the children who were now born in Um Gargur would grow up without the memories that they were fortunate to have.

Surprisingly, many old women were, potentially at least, much more mobile than their younger counterparts. After a woman had reached a certain age she was not bound by the same restrictions and her virtue ceased to be jeopardised or suspect. A woman who in her youth and middle-age was regarded as a virtuous woman [*rahima-T/ hiyaweyti-Tya*] does not lose her reputation in old age. Yet, except for weddings, naming ceremonies and other festivities, some older women chose to remain in their neighbourhoods or *hillat* not taking great advantage of their status since they regarded it as shameful to travel too much around the village. These women said that in Eritrea older women had greater flexibility to visit friends because everyone was familiar with everyone else, but that in Um Gargur everyone is watching to see where they are going and talking behind their backs. They said that the farthest and most frequent trips they took were to the clinic to visit friends and relatives who were patients. Other women said although

"people would talk", they knew that they were not doing anything wrong and so they were not ashamed. One woman, Nasserit Ramadan told me that as she had raised six children who were decent and polite, no one had any right to criticise her. "Look at the useless children of the people who spend their time at home and gossiping. They are all good-for-nothings, just like their parents." In practice, many women (even some of those who insisted that they did not) chose to visit friends in other neighbourhoods and joined social and economic networks which were based in their *hilla*.

I rarely heard anyone speak ill of old women just because they travelled around the village although one occasionally heard them being teased. Once I overheard a young boy gossiping to his friends about one old lady, "She doesn't have teeth and she is moving around like a bus", by this implying that she was too old to be so spry. The older women who would go to the rationing were always the ones who were the poorest, either widowed or divorced and with no young children or other relatives to run errands, go to the market or collect rations for them. Rezan Ghebrenegus who headed the women's centre told me:

In our country the elderly women rested while their children worked for them. Because old people have worked for us when we were children we work for them when they grow old. If they do not have children or have useless children they have to work for themselves, otherwise in Eritrea the elderly do not work. We do everything for them. They are respected. An old woman may help with the work of the house if she wishes, otherwise we provide her with food, shelter and clothing. This is the same with the Tigrinya, Tigre and Baria. If she has no-one, she has to take care of herself, cooking and making *kisra*. If she has a field her neighbours will take care of it. They will plough, sow and weed for her to make sure she has enough food for the year.

Elderly poor women always seemed to be the ones hardest hit by their displacement since they had no money coming to them from outside the

settlement (as a great number of refugees with relatives in the Gulf countries or agricultural schemes had) and were incapable of planting even small gardens to supplement their food rations and too poor to hire anyone to plant or do chores for them.

#### 4. Women

The poorest women are also generally at the bottom of the hierarchical scale of esteem. They are seen as constantly begging or demanding some form of assistance from their neighbours who are often reluctant to give it. This means that their very presence embarrasses their neighbours who have cosy perceptions of themselves as honourable people. The women are often laughed at and gently derided by the more well-off villagers who are conscious of not fulfilling their "neighbourly duties" or *hak al' jeran* (T). Some old women from this group manage to survive by doing midwifery, circumcision, conducting zar ceremonies and healing with herbs or fire. For their services they either receive money or are paid with food, clothing or other household items. These women occupy an ambiguous position in the society because although their skills are highly regarded, aside from midwifery, much of this work appears to be considered a little "special" or unsavoury. Yet they are appreciated and almost everyone seeks out their services at some stage.

The women who did not work were the ones who were eager for changes to be made *vis-à-vis* the rations and the payment for water and they were very active during the riot. Their sisters who worked as healers and midwives also wanted these structural changes but were most resistant to changes regarding circumcision and birth control. From the reactions of

people I spoke to, it would seem that these women (healers and midwives) are also valued because they represent an important link with past traditions which people feared might be lost in the new society. Both groups of women are discovering a new degree of power in their new situation. Both are marginalised to a certain extent but are finding their voices; the poor non-working women are more inclined to challenge authority since they feel they have nothing to lose - and the poor working women are finding their positions slightly reappraised.

In comparison to women, all men in Um Gargur in the past occupied quite a high position in the "scale of dignity" (Peristiany, 1965). Men still see themselves as being at the top of the hierarchy, which, in terms of their representation rather than their moral strength, is true. With little economic power to assist their families, the scale of dignity has altered somewhat. In reality few men have much control over how the settlement is administered, or over which facilities (for instance the wells, the bakery, the battery, the communal gardens etc.,) are offered to them, but they are the ones who are placed in effective control of those facilities. When meetings are called by the settlement administration and the sheikhs, men are summoned to listen and comment, though few of them feel confident enough to make demands or even suggestions. Basically they are the recipients of information which concerns them and their families, and they pass on to the women whatever they see fit.

Thus they control women's access to power although their own power outside of the domestic and social spheres is extremely limited. Eritrean society is strongly patriarchal and traditionally men bore all the economic responsibility for their families. Whereas in Eritrea men

and women had their clearly defined roles and most men were able to take care of their families, being a refugee throws up an entirely new dimension of problems which constantly undermine the traditional role structure, weakening the position of men. It could be said that in Um Gargur the settlement manager and then the village sheikhs have taken on the "masculine" role of providers and protectors whilst the other men in the village are, along with their families, in a passive or "feminine" role as receivers.

## **5. Notions of Honour**

Cultural notions of honour are, in this atypical situation in which the villagers find themselves, very much at odds with the reality of refugee life. Most men who remain in the settlement are jobless and voiceless. People often have long discussions about losing the ability to lead productive lives by the time they return home to Eritrea. A large number of them are seasonal labourers but the refugee laws of the Sudan discourage refugees from leaving the settlement to take employment in Sudan. Money is very scarce and for a society which has so many of its members subsisting on food rations of flour, oil, and beans it is a struggle for a father to feed, clothe, and even educate his children past the age of 13 when they have to leave the settlement for school in one of the neighbouring towns. In terms of employment there are very few options in Um Gargur and this means that those who are engaged in waged labour are competing for the very few jobs in the settlement, working outside the settlement in Sudan or the Gulf countries and seeing their families very infrequently, or they are unemployed or doing odd jobs to survive with their families. The majority of the refugees were

pastoralists before coming to Um Gargur and according to most people I spoke to, lived full working lives. For these people who are very proud of their history and culture, being in Um Gargur dependent on food rations and on the whims of the Sudanese government fuels their determination to leave Sudan and either join the war effort or work outside of the village. Some men (and women) said that their dependency on food rations made them feel like beggars but the majority of men do not expect to remain in the settlement for long periods at a time.

If a man's honour is also linked to being able to feed, clothe and protect his family then many of the men in the settlement, necessarily come up short. The pressures that men in the village feel because of their inadequacy to care for their families are great and the reaction of many men to their own frustrations and increasing marginalisation is aggression. In many instances this has expressed itself in terms of the growing trend towards religious conservatism in the village. This is counterbalanced by the increase in women who are now prepared to challenge popular male opinion by selling items (like peanuts, small cakes and cooked food) in the market or from their homes, and also by the small number of young women who are signing up for literacy and handicraft courses, and beginning to work in the clinics. By accumulating economic capital, women are learning to empower themselves even from within their marginal sphere.

If it is possible also to speak of honour as a tacit bargain between men and women - by which men are to support their families morally and economically whilst women are to remain virtuous, obedient and show no trace of aggressiveness, (since that is associated with masculinity), - then we can say that what constitutes honour between men and women has

undergone profound changes due to the complexity of the refugee situation. In a number of cases where it is evident to women that their traditional roles restrict their progress and that of their children, they are prepared to flout tradition, which, in theory, suggest that they jeopardise their reputations.

Since work is so closely connected to honour - if a woman works then it implies that her husband is not capable of providing for her - and money is a pressing concern, the changes often relate to the woman earning a small income through her own initiative whether it is making *kisra*, selling eggs, baking small cakes or working in the clinic. Women are also more vocal now about their needs (this is less on a personal level and more in relation to the economic pressures they and their children face), speaking out when they feel that they are being treated unfairly. What they are doing essentially is redefining the notion of shame and suggesting that when men cannot make good their side of the bargain (economically and morally), the real shame is in poverty and having to pay for basics like water, and in having to fight with the Cooperative to get what they feel is due them. If the men do not fulfill their functions then, women appear to be saying from their words and actions, it is necessary for them (women) to find new ways of coping despite the restrictive social attitudes.

Although there are cases where ideas about behavior which reflect upon women's "honour" have been temporarily modified (Peteet, 1991), many women of Um Gargur have taken the unique step of spontaneously reinterpreting honour in defiance of men. Sayigh and Peteet have shown how among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, "Women's entry into the world of work was legitimised under the Resistance by its relation to the

national struggle...Some men continued to oppose women's employment outside the home, but such opposition was weakened by the need for additional income and by the feeling that such ideas were old-fashioned and an obstacle to national struggle. Intent on mobilising women, the Resistance campaigned against traditional notions of honour and fostered new symbols of a culture of resistance. The slogan...land before honour...became a part of everyday speech and had the strong effect of putting two sacred values in opposition, thus forcing people to choose between them" (1986:117).

Here we see organised political action by "the Resistance" which was composed of both men and women. Men supported the Palestinian refugee women in their action and saw them as a vital link in the struggle. In Um Gargur however, women create honour for themselves with neither the approval nor the support of men. In fact, while the Palestinians had a concrete enemy and therefore a consistent agenda, Eritrean women were only displeased with the apathy they saw in the men, and the fact that their concerns were ignored by the administration. The men were clearly not their enemy; the desperate economic situation and the restrictions which men attempted to impose upon them did, however, constitute a threat to their children's welfare, and to the women's feeling of self-worth. So essentially for reasons which are as compelling as those of the Palestinians, many women in Um Gargur defy the status quo.

Most of Um Gargur's residents recognise the Islamic laws which govern marriage, inheritance, child custody and divorce and which impose upon men and women completely different rules of assessment. Yet even among those who are not Muslim it is recognised that in Um Gargur the status of women is inextricably linked with the concept of honour, and

it is largely this notion which informs the way women are perceived and the way in which they perceive themselves. Traversing all ethnic, religious and geographical spheres in the settlement, this concept may, as I mentioned earlier, also be regarded as a bargain between men and women which, if the society is to function along its orthodox lines, should be strictly respected.

In a society in which the distinct groups maintain and express their identity by utilising moral codes such as stereotyping and xenophobia to define what is ideal behaviour and ideal values as opposed to other models of behaviour, members of the group who are regarded as being the most vulnerable or impressionable, (women and girls), find themselves "protected" from the polluting influences of other groups. Consequently men became more repressive with each new stream of refugees or foreigners who entered the settlement. Women find that their freedoms are curtailed and ever greater limitations are placed upon their movements, their time and their social interactions. They resent what they maintain is a concerted effort on the part of the men to enforce codes which they feel have lost their relevance in the refugee situation. Ideally, men and women have distinct roles which in theory should not overlap, occupy different spatial categories, and are expected to follow separate moral codes. As we can see, however, within the context of refugee life where the traditional order in which their roles were clearly defined is in disarray, there is a plethora of problems people face when attempting to observe certain customs.

Honour for women in Um Gargur, as for women in most Islamic societies, also has a great deal to do with virginity (Abou-Zeid, 1965; Saadawi, 1982; Beck and Keddie, 1980; Youssef, 1974; Jeffery, 1979). It

extends upwards and outwards forming an invisible, but manifest bubble over the lives of the women it affects. In Um Gargur a girl's virginity has to be preserved at all costs and it is the family, principally the males, who must safeguard it. From an early age girls are informally segregated from boys. Later they will attend single-sex schools, have female-specific chores which will prepare them for futures as wives, which is essentially the culmination of their lives as women. A girl will learn to wear a *tobe* which covers her arms, legs and most of her face, she will marry since celibacy is culturally regarded as a deformity, obey her father and later her husband, have children, work at home. From an early age she will be separated from the dangers of the outside world, for it is there that she could lose her honour and disgrace her family or husband. Should girls follow these guidelines and others set by their fathers and husbands they will be recognised as respectable and honourable by the society. To lose one's virginity or be seen fraternising with members of the opposite sex or to ignore any of those aforementioned strictures, is shameful and carries great stigma. Abou-Zeid writing about the Bedouins of Egypt notes the difference between *sharaf*, honour which "can be acquired and augmented through the right behaviour and great achievements" and *'ird*, which "can only be lost by the misconduct of the woman" (1965:256). Once *'ird* is lost, it is gone forever.

A woman's behaviour reflects upon her family, in particular its male members. Peristiany notes that among Cypriot highland villagers, "Immodesty marks woman's abdication of her femininity, the betrayal of her nature and therefore of her divinely prescribed role, of her family of origin or marriage which, of necessity, entrusted her with its

honour, that is with its most precious possession...It matters not when or where she acted immodestly; the stigma, when known, will mark and diminish her in all social relations through time and space" (1965:184). This holds true for women in Um Gargur. Among both the lowland Muslim and highland Christian communities a woman's male relatives are held to be financially, morally and legally responsible for her. The men in the settlement see themselves as moral policemen who must maintain a vigilant watch over the sexual honour of their women, whom they hold to be creatures incapable of defending themselves against foreign influences or male sexual aggression. For a woman to fulfill her part of the bargain she must remain submissive, obedient, and ignorant of every thing which has to do with sex. She should be *berri* (T) (innocent), suppressing all her sexual needs, and show no inconsistencies or ambivalence in regard to her role as childbearer and sex partner. Above all a woman should not be *memaresetba* (T) (experienced) for that would mean, to all villagers male and female, that she was *tereket* (T) (damaged goods) and the social penalties are high for transgressors.

"Experience", however, is often defined arbitrarily. In a number of cases girls have been returned to their families when their husbands discover on their wedding nights that they are not behaving as naively as the man imagines a virgin should. One man who some years before had sent his new bride back to her parents told me that he could tell that his wife's "eyes were open", that, in fact, she was knowledgeable in the ways of sex. When I asked him how he knew he said that she had not protested strongly enough. Later, when we became friends, I again questioned him about this marriage and asked if his suspicions stemmed

from the fact that she did not bleed. He said that there wasn't much blood but that it didn't matter since he was convinced by her actions that she was not a virgin. If a girl is unfortunate enough not to bleed then she will almost certainly bring dishonour onto her family, for it will immediately be assumed that she has lost her virginity.

Although among both Muslim and Christian Eritreans premarital sex is prohibited, women expect men, if not to have been profligate, at least to have lost their virginity before marriage. For this they are rewarded with the respect of their peers. On the other hand, the young women in Um Gargur are very aware that premarital intercourse could determine the course and quality of their lives and most of them are very cautious about intermingling publicly with the opposite sex because of this. Once she reaches a certain age, a girl will hesitate to engage in conversation, laugh, or even smile with young men, since this might set tongues wagging and thus compromise her reputation. In Um Gargur there were a number of instances of young unmarried girls becoming pregnant, and in only one of the instances which I was aware of did the man marry the girl. In that case it was said that he did so only after she had given birth to a boy, and after two sheikhs from their respective *hillat* had, upon the insistence of the girl's family, gone to speak to the boy and his family. Generally the man would refuse to marry the girl and say that he was not the first, that she had not in fact been a virgin. Since the fact of having had sexual intercourse meant that they could never be trusted, these girls were usually condemned to a life of celibacy, a disastrous state by the villagers' reckoning. Many of the older women said that in Eritrea it was not uncommon for unmarried girls to be killed by their male relatives when

it was discovered that they were pregnant, for it was a dishonour for their families.

There were no reports of similar incidents occurring in Um Gargur although, in another refugee village called Khasm el Girba, I heard of two cases since the establishment of the settlement. Neither of the men were punished for these murders, nor, I learned, were they in any way ostracised. From speaking to different people I surmised that the actions of these men were considered justified both by the villagers of Khasm el Girba and by the Sudanese police although when I asked people in Um Gargur what they thought, they were very angry that nothing had happened to the men. What did happen in Um Gargur (and the neighbouring village Karkora) with distressing frequency was the discovery of babies' bodies in latrines or in bushes, clearly the result of pregnancies of unmarried girls. The village was always rife with gossip at these times, with everyone trying to decide which young girl it was they had noticed behaving strangely or gaining weight around the midriff. They were also sad occasions and many people seemed to feel ashamed that cultural notions of propriety meant that another child had been killed. Everyone with whom I spoke agreed that this was terrible. Although the police and the various sheikhs would become involved, cross-examining families and questioning midwives, in all the time I was there none of the mysteries were solved.

Although the prostitutes in Um Gargur are the focus of most of the unmarried men's sexual energy, all unrelated women are thought to be potential sexual partners and men operate a kind of bush network which informs them which women are "loose" [*fihht-T/ kelal-Tya*] and which are "modest" [*berri-T/ nitshti-Tya*]. All men are acutely aware of the power

of this labelling, so they take extra precautions to protect their female relatives from the attentions of other males since any suggestive talk about a girl, whether she warrants it or not, reflects badly upon her and diminishes her status. Men are also deeply suspicious of women in general, but especially of those who they feel might influence their wives, and they watch these women in particular almost more closely than they do their wives.

When I discussed with them the widespread practice of partial infibulation (an extreme form of female circumcision in which the clitoris and the *labia minora* are excised and the *labia majora* is cut into and closed allowing only for the passage of menstrual blood and urine) some men who approved of it told me that it was to control women for their own good. Others said simply that it was tradition, and I was left with the general impression that some men felt women were inherently untrustworthy and would, if left to their own devices, be promiscuous. Female circumcision became a contentious issue in Um Gargur partly because of the health workers' insistence that any female genital mutilation is a bad thing but also because some religious sects are less in favour of it than others (e.g. Ansar who regard infibulation - also known as pharaonic circumcision - as a terrible wrong which was condemned by the prophet Mohammed). Women were very good humoured in discussions about circumcision and those who were infibulated often asked, with hoots of laughter, whether or not the genitalia of non-infibulated women did not hang down, flapping against their thighs when they walked.

Women complain consistently that their husbands will not allow them to go out and visit friends of theirs whom they knew when they were back

in Eritrea, in some cases longer than they have known their husbands. The husbands say that it is not that they do not approve of their wives' friends, but that some of these friends live too far from their own *hilla* and as such it is improper for their wives to visit them. There are also cases in which the friends are now involved in activities (literacy courses, hospital work, small-scale trading) which their husbands consider improper. In what amounts to a monopoly of control over the women, men in Um Gargur duly inform their sisters, wives, and even their mothers whom they can visit and which women are fit to be in their company. Many women find themselves restricted to the confines of their homesteads and to the company of either their own female relatives or the female relatives of their husbands.

However women are also effective enforcers, and most of them have internalised all of their society's disdain for their sisters who transgress certain of its laws of morality. Two unmarried girls who were always together and the best of friends immediately ceased to see each other when one of them became pregnant. Judging from the questions they both asked me about circumcision and sex, and the way they flirted using their *tobes* to gesture, I gained the impression that each was probably as sexually active as the other. Yet Rasheeda, the one who was still considered a "good" girl, refused to visit her friend after her pregnancy became public for fear that they would be lumped together as two of a kind. She told me that if she lived in another village without her family then she would never dream of shunning her friend, but that as it was Um Gargur it would be impossible for them to continue their friendship for the time being. "Suad is now a woman and I am still a girl," she informed me. Her parents and the rest of her family

supported her entirely in this decision. Her mother was very proud of the fact that her daughter was going to marry one of her cousins, a young driver who lived in the oasis town of Kassala and said that if this man got wind of the fact that the two girls were going together he might think that Rasheeda was "spoilt" as well, and it might threaten her chance of marriage.

Even if a girl in Um Gargur loses her virginity and later does marry, whether or not the man she marries was her only lover she will always be tainted and her shame upheld, for it is believed that she has failed in the crucial test of guarding her virginity before her marriage. According to a teacher friend of mine, the woman is often blamed even in rape cases because people assume she must have behaved in a way to seduce the man and therefore have deserved it. My closest friend in the village, Halti Ascha, informed me that when she was a young newly married woman in her village near Alighidir in Eritrea, her husband was often away working. One night a man from the village entered their home as she was sleeping. She immediately awakened and asked him what he was doing in their home and he replied that he had come to stay the night with her. According to her she told him to take down his trousers and come closer which he did, quite certain that he had succeeded in seducing her. When he got next to the bed she grabbed hold of his testicles and screamed until seconds later people appeared. This man was beaten by the other men and completely ostracised and he left days later, never to return. She said that if she had not screamed but rather asked him to leave the house there is no telling what he might have told people about her, and also he might have been seen entering or leaving her home and people would have assumed that this was

with her complicity. By publicly expressing her indignation she succeeded in ensuring that her virtue and reputation was firmly intact.

In another instance Fetihah, a young woman from the Assoarta tribe who had been married to a liberation fighter for five years and was widowed, later remarried a man much older than herself. She told me that her new husband was extremely jealous and mistrustful of her, even to the point of asking her neighbour to go with her to the clinic if she took her children. She bitterly regretted her marriage and looked nostalgically to her previous marriage where fewer restrictions were placed on her movements. She constantly spoke of bettering herself and often asked me about the courses offered at the women's centre. Later when her husband found a job working on an agricultural scheme she was overjoyed. When he left she began taking a literacy course and learning how to sew. He returned to the settlement after about six months for a short holiday and discovered from one of the sheikhs that his wife was "shaming" him. He was enraged and humiliated and threatened to divorce her.

For Fetihah's husband, her desire to improve her life meant that she was seeking freedoms she had no right to. He was fully aware that she would not actually have any degree of economic independence, but her acting upon her own wants without his sanction undermined him and his role in the family as decision-maker and provider. Later he sent for his mother who was at another refugee settlement to come and stay in the village to "mind" his wife in his absence. All the Muslim men in the settlement I asked about this were certainly in sympathy with his views, and most of them approved of his actions. By contrast, most of the women sympathised with Fetihah but were adamant that she should not have

gone behind her husband's back since by doing this "she was behaving as though she were a man." In reality most of these same women consistently utilised their cunning to keep things from their husbands, such as taking trips to various towns to visit relatives whilst their husbands were away and even using birth control pills without the knowledge of their husbands. Fetihah's problem was really that she was not careful enough and was therefore caught out.

Traditional logic for most people in Um Gargur has it that women are the most important of all the property men have to protect. Before marriage a woman is regarded as her father's property and it is he, his brothers and her older male siblings who protect her. Her right to membership within the community is through her father, and when she reaches a marriageable age it is he who decides, at least theoretically, whom she will marry, and he who negotiates her bridewealth. Although she never ceases to belong to her agnatic group, when a woman marries all the rights hitherto held by her father are immediately transferred to her husband, and both she and the children she bears are identified by their link to him. Her obligation to remain honourable is also transmitted to him, although not entirely since it is possible that she can still dishonour her father and the rest of her family. An honourable woman must stay out of the social milieu of unrelated men, and if in their presence she should not gaze directly into their eyes but lower her eyes and keep her head and body, including her arms and legs, swathed in her *tobe* at all times so the man cannot be left with the impression that she is flirting with him. Should a girl be stern and treat men with a certain coolness and disdain to discourage their attentions, she will be considered by all to be a virtuous girl who is

wife material. Young girls in Um Gargur rarely walk side by side with their fathers and it is also rare to see women, particularly the older ones, in public with their husbands unless they are travelling or going to the clinic. Younger women did however often walk alongside their husbands whilst the older ones would walk in groups or alone behind their husbands. Women rarely run as it is thought too unseemly. Although people seemed to feel that my morals were intact, I was occasionally criticised by women for spending too much time with the men, and if ever I ran there was certain be laughter and comment. When I bought a motorcycle this was thought to be the last straw, a sign that I had most certainly "become" a man.

Indeed female honour is a crucial element underpinning male honour for it is a women's purity and virtue which provides a man with the respect of the settlement that is so necessary to his self-esteem. If men protect them and attend to their physical and economic needs then women have an obligation to fulfill their part of the bargain by making sure their virginity remains intact before marriage and, once married, by remaining honourable and virtuous throughout. Should a woman transgress and her reputation become sullied, it is the males in her family (her father, brother, or husband) who will be seen to have failed in their manly duties of guarding her virtue. Thus he safeguards her sexual reputation in order to protect his own honour within Um Gargur.

Whilst honour was the major mechanism of social control, the family was traditionally its main custodian. In Um Gargur there are many conflicting views among the women as to how their lives should be governed. Among older women, for instance, we find both those individuals most vocal about their rights as well as those most

resistant to change. The poorest women, who used to be the least vocal, were now almost always vocal and did not hesitate to make demands on their community and on the sheikhs. But for both these groups of women the honour concept was not a major hindrance since they had passed the stage of caring whether their nonconformity called into question their own morals or posed a threat to the men. What was threatening to the men was the fact that a number of younger women had begun to question their submission to the existing order, and it seemed like only a matter of time before such challenges became widespread.

Many of these young women were brought up in Um Gargur having spent only a fraction of their childhoods in Eritrea. From what they say it is apparent that in Eritrea men were capable of providing financially for their families, and interdependency was valued rather feared. There was less need to veto the actions of women since for the most part they accepted their place in the social order, rarely challenging their allotted roles. But, in Eritrea at least, they were all members of the same ethnic and political groupings, they knew their neighbours and were protected by a familiar environment. In short they had all the security of home. In Um Gargur they feel that they are manipulated by men and made to bear the brunt of a situation over which they have no control. Many say that although they cannot help the fact that they are refugees, they are prepared to risk embarrassment and the wrath of the men in the settlement if they can make life more bearable by earning an honest income.

Earlier I mentioned that spatial taboos differed quite radically for males and females. By perpetuating negative stereotypes, the men in the village encourage women to dissociate themselves from groups they do not

hold in high esteem. They will say of one group "those people are filthy" of another "they eat pork" of another, "they are lazy", and so on, invoking cultural differences in order to interpret the individual's place within the society. Yet men are quite willing to share public space with many different people, as is clear from spending any length of time in the village souk. Though they entertain very different ideas about their wives or sisters doing the same, in practice they work alongside, have political meetings with, and play cards and drink tea with the same people who within the privacy of their homes they might refer to as "Other". In reality the majority of the people of Um Gargur all share the same religion, Islam, and speak the same language, Tigre. Thus the ethnic diversity in the settlement is actually combined with a striking uniformity of custom, social organisation and means of livelihood.

From observation it is clear that women are also willing to interact with people from other ethnic, religious and political groups and willing to learn about the norms and mores of others. Simmel's (1950) concept of the "stranger" which is usually applied in contraposition to "host" is in fact applicable within the context of Um Gargur as well, despite the fact that in real terms all the refugees are "strangers" in relation to each other as well as being "hosts" in the sense of being static and non-opportunistic. (see Simmel). Nearness and distance characterise their interrelations. But although stereotypes continue to exist, with time they are diminishing, demonstrating that women are more flexible in practice and more interdependent than would at first seem from talking to them about their lives. This almost certainly has to do with the fact that women are the ones who are resident in the settlement

at all times, while the men are mostly transients who spend only enough time in the village to rest and ensure that their wives and families are coping. (One woman whose husband returned much more frequently to the village than the other husbands used to joke that the reason he came often was in order to spy on her. Actually she was far better off financially than the other women because her husband always brought her food, clothes and money).

Many people left behind or lost relatives and friends who formed an integral part of their social networks and kinship structure. For men and women who were unfortunate enough to have left their parents and grandparents behind, the implications this severing of relations had for themselves and their younger children who were born in Um Gargur filled them with despair. Yet one of the things that struck me whilst I lived in the settlement was that the villagers were extraordinarily resilient. They faced the vicissitudes of life in Um Gargur with, if not gusto, at least a determination which was firmly linked to nationalism. This meant that an important aspect of the children's socialisation included learning about Eritrea's history, its myths, and its songs, ensuring that Eritrea was the home to which they would all someday return, unlike Um Gargur which would always remain a place of temporary asylum.

Within a short space of time the women had formed new social networks and support groups. Like many of the old networks these fresh ones were formed principally although not exclusively, along intra-ethnic lines. Of course the settlement evolved along lines which were familiar to many, as the first people who fled Eritrea together were, by choice, housed very near each other. Some parts of the settlement were even named after the towns and villages from which the majority of its

inhabitants stemmed, such as *hillat* Alighidir which was also known as *hillat* Beni Amer. The first wave of refugees was largely homogenous. Those who later entered the settlement and found themselves sharing an immediate environment were also from disparate groups - political, religious, and ethnic - and had to make do with living where they were allotted land. Partly as a result of this many of the old stereotypes are losing their relevance.

Some of these new relationships formed by women have begun to show, in the absence of a kinship network, signs of such closeness and strength, that many of them now resemble kinship units. Although I know of no marriages between neighbouring families in the settlement, in almost every other way some of these new groupings are like family. Women often find that their new loyalties conflict with their husbands' expectations, and that what are judged by their husbands to be possible friendships often differ from the actual friendships that have grown from their settlement experience. In reality, though their husbands might try to put a stop to these friendships, some women are showing themselves to be resistant to their influence, perhaps because their husbands, who necessarily leave the settlement in search of employment, etc., are rarely there when the wives are in need of their support.

It is not uncommon to find these women accompanying their pregnant friends to the clinic for deliveries, remaining in the delivery room through the night, performing duties that in Eritrea under normal circumstances only a mother or another female relative would perform. They take care of each other's children, sometimes cook and help with housework if their friend is ill, and a number of women who head their own households because they are widowed or divorced will share a *hosh* or

homestead. The degree of interdependency is extensive: often when you ask how close a woman is to a friend she has met in the settlement she will hold two fingers up rubbing them together as if to say that they are sisters. This is significant because it is the same gesture a woman will make if she is asked about, for instance, her mother's sister's daughter and it demonstrates that despite the problems people face in their daily existence, many have managed to form warm and lasting friendships in Um Gargur.

Women who are divorced or widowed are not as restricted as those who are married, although the sheikhs of their *hillat* try their best to keep these women in line in the absence of their husbands or other family members. Yet there are contradictions. A woman who is independent from kinship ties is as vulnerable as she is powerful. On the one hand, should she be abused in any way by her husband or other males, she has no relations to defend her interests or to draw upon for psychological, economic or moral support. On the other hand, for a woman to be free of her kin allows her a certain degree of flexibility which she might not have had in Eritrea since in practice the family unit functions as an extremely effective mechanism of social control. For men who are afraid that their wives might come under the influence of other men (or women) who remain in the settlement, the fact that a woman has no family in the village to place injunctions upon her movements is also perceived as something to fear. In the past it was desirable for a woman to have many children, thereby increasing her stature within the society, but now more and more women are requesting that the staff at the clinic furnish them with contraceptives which they want to take without their husbands' knowledge. Very realistically, many women are viewing great

fecundity as an economic burden.

Two women whose curiosity and sense of humour in the face of adversity attracted me to them were Khadija from the Beni Amer tribe, twice-divorced and in her early forties, and her best friend Zaharra from the Belin tribe, who was married but with a husband who spent years at a time out of the settlement. Khadija had three children, two under the age of 11 and one who was about 19. Though they were approximately the same age, Zaharra had six children who ranged from about six to twenty-five years of age. Khadija had no immediate family in Um Gargur and came to the settlement to be with her husband and in-laws (who were also her relatives). When she and her husband began having problems she consulted with her in-laws, hoping that they would help her to save her marriage. Her husband had begun to treat her very badly, restricting her movements and even hitting her occasionally. When she protested he told her that she could return to her family in Eritrea if she was so unhappy with him, which of course would have been impossible for Khadija. He continued to mistreat her and finally she decided to leave the settlement for about a month to go and visit some relatives she had in Kassala. When she returned she discovered that her husband had taken another wife, a very young girl who, like Khadija, was from the Beni Amer tribe. She also discovered that in her absence he had divorced her, something which everyone who learned of it thought scandalous. Her husband, by way of explanation told her that he assumed she had left for good. I subsequently learned that he had been planning to marry all along and almost certainly to divorce Khadija. By walking out on him she simply gave him a convenient excuse.

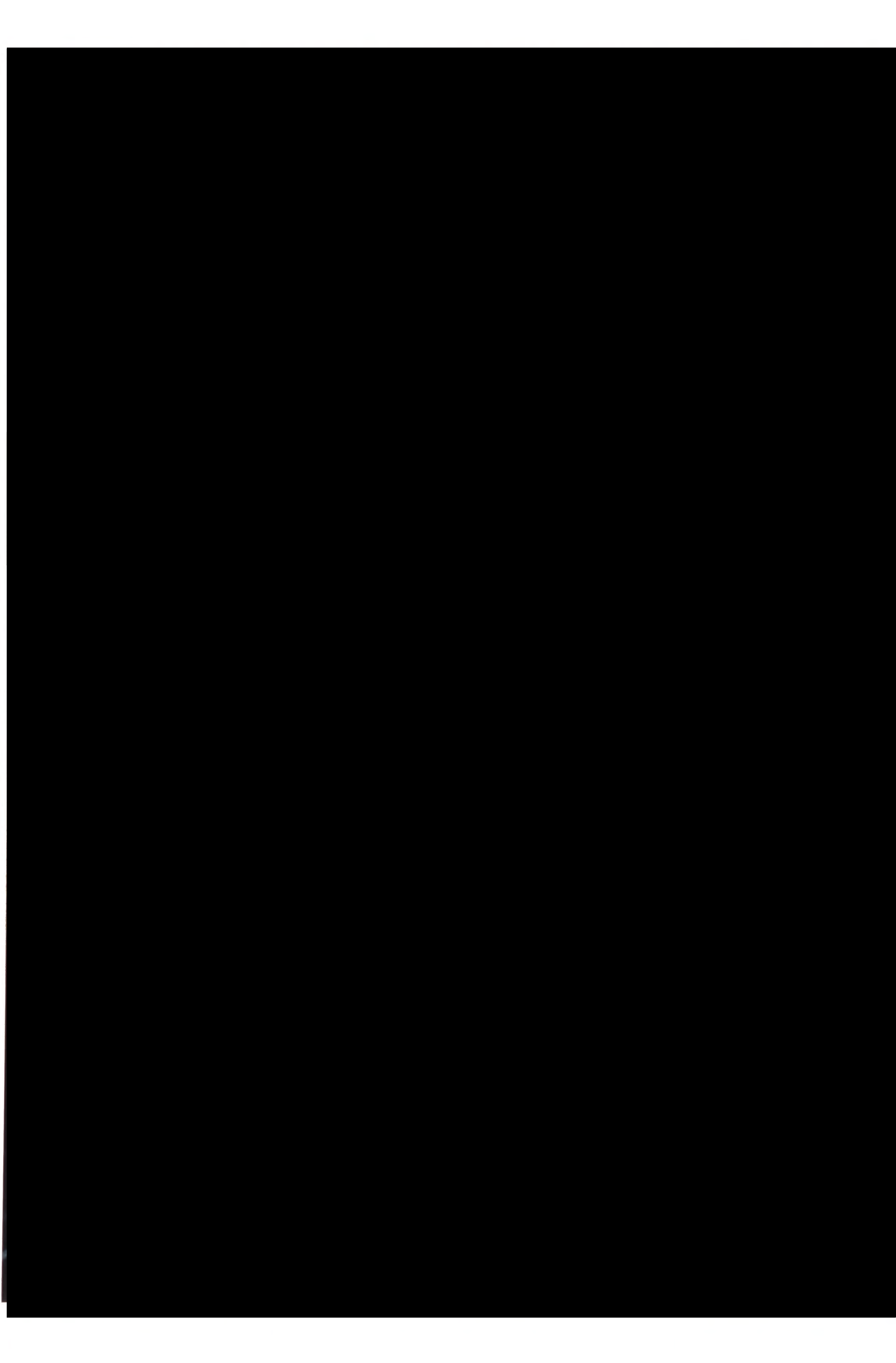
Khadija's problems had only just begun. Not only had she lost the

prestige that was concomitant with the state of marriage, but she was also deprived of a place to live since the home she shared with her husband now contained his new wife. According to her his family had never been supportive of her, but with the divorce they were now positively antagonistic. The day Khadija returned from Kassala she had to find another place to stay in the settlement. Zaharra, who was until then her dependable neighbour rather than her close friend was outraged when she heard about this. She went to the home of Khadija's in-laws and offered her a place to stay for a while along with her children. Later that day Zaharra returned to their homestead and told both Khadija's husband and his family that they had brought dishonour upon their heads. This sealed the friendship between the two women.

Everyone agreed that Khadija's husband was wrong, and apparently before his new marriage he was advised by the sheikh of his *hillat* and some of the other men that he should simply take the younger woman on as his second wife. Yet the women and men had entirely opposed opinions about whether Zaharra should have expressed her anger so strongly or have become so involved in her friend's misfortune. The women felt that even though Zaharra had overstepped the boundaries of accepted behaviour, both she and Khadija were being betrayed. The men however disagreed and reacted more strongly against what Zaharra had done than against the husband of Khadija. Zaharra's twenty-five year old Ansar son, Ahmed, condemned his mother's behaviour outright and was clearly embarrassed by it. Given the structure of male-female relationships, by stating clear opinions about issues not connected to her personally, Zaharra had taken on a "masculine" role, one not allotted to her by custom.

Zaharra and Khadija responded differently to the charges directed by the villagers as well. Zaharra was in no way apologetic and would say so to anyone, even Ahmed who was always trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to confine her to the home. Khadija, on the other hand, was very despondent. Overnight her reputation and status had been radically altered. To have been divorced once was to be stigmatised, for divorced women are not simply regarded as "second-hand goods" but are also eyed with suspicion. As marriage is thought to be the culmination of a young woman's life, people feel that there must be something inherently wrong with a woman who is incapable of keeping her husband. The fact that this was Khadija's second divorce and in this instance she had been abandoned by her husband's family was disastrous for her self-esteem. It did not matter that her first husband chose to divorce her because he assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that she was barren. Khadija soon began to internalise what she perceived as the community's contempt for her. Torn between anger and embarrassment, she felt that she was disgraced and had lost her "honour". What Zaharra said openly and through her deeds was that Khadija had done nothing to be ashamed of and that it was her husband who had failed to fulfill his obligation to her and as such was without "honour". Clearly Khadija's marriage to a relative of hers was no protection against being mistreated or, for that matter, a safeguard against divorce.

The actions of Zaharra are important in understanding the changes that are taking place in Um Gargur with regard to male-female relations. Her behaviour and the response of most of the women signified that for many, continued submission to the existing order without questioning its effects on their lives was untenable. The formidable Um Caltoum



articulated the thoughts of many when she told me, "The men feel no shame when they behave like this, but they are wrong because what they are doing is shameful and also what they aren't doing is shameful. If they were ashamed for not standing by the women, then the settlement would not stay like this and everyone in Um Gargur would be better off."

As a counter-reaction against male repression, women in Um Gargur are turning the concept of honour on its head by suggesting that as men have failed to provide their families with all their physical needs, it is the men who should feel ashamed. This is not to suggest that women blame the general state of affairs on the men. They recognise that the men all face certain economic constraints which propel them out of the settlement, and that they are also having a difficult time away from their families. They always say that they are helpless as *ladji'in*, and this they recognise as the cause of most of their problems. But many of them also question the social structure which gives men, who are not capable of fighting alongside them for basic priorities like free water, rights and power over them. The men visit Um Gargur when they can, though the majority of them are away fighting in the liberation struggle, working on agricultural schemes, in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere. Thus, most of the women in the settlement are on their own for the greater part of the year and undertake all the responsibility for feeding themselves and their children with little or no help from their husbands or the sheikhs. Women are dismayed by the fact that they can be brought all the way to Sudan, leaving their families either in Eritrea or in other refugee camps, and find that they can be divorced for little or no reason. Obligation, they maintain, has two sides, and the men's interpretation of honour has no bearing on the reality they

are living daily. The shame, the women say, is to be refugees with the *khawaajat* giving them food and clothes, although no one, quite realistically, blames men for this.

As Halima Rahouda, a very poor old widow, said to me:

"The men sit doing nothing while people like me who have no husband or grown sons have to work all day in the hot sun. No one comes to say Halima Rahouda can I bring you water? Can I help you cut *durra*? Never. So then what should I do? Should I call them men if I have to fight with them at the *serafiya* (rations) to feed my children? Even the sheikhs who are always saying I talk too much, are they men even? They were men in Eritrea, but in Um Gargur, No."

Not every woman in the settlement would agree with her sentiments, but as more and more women were feeling themselves to be disenfranchised there was also a unifying empathy apparent in the settlement, the culmination of which was a riot over the price of water. The older men in particular find this reprehensible. They believe that any solidarity among these women of such diverse social groups is akin to rebellion and the strict stance adopted by them towards the women indicates that they are very threatened by this.

Economic and political pressures call for a reconsideration of the roles women can be expected to play in settlement life. Although I saw little evidence of it, according to many of the people I spoke to there are a substantial number of divorces which occur in Um Gargur, relative to Eritrea. The pressures placed upon men who are themselves completely marginalized is undoubtedly great. The vast majority of the men who remained in the settlement were unemployed cattle herders who could not afford to buy cattle with the little they had. Often they were also the most tyrannical with regards to their wives and daughters. There was one sheikh whom I liked a great deal. He was very paternal towards me,

extremely kind and generally willing to talk about life in Eritrea and what it meant for him to be living in Um Gargur. He spoke with great sadness of having to leave home and of having lost a son in the liberation war. He had a pretty young granddaughter who was apparently a very good student but at the age of thirteen he took her out of school because he was afraid that she might come under "bad influences". He was adamant that she should be protected at all costs from these influences and he seemed particularly worried about the presence of the few young Sudanese men in the village. As a result the young girl spent all her time at home taking care of her aunts and grandmother.

## **6. Minority Groups and Honour**

### **6.1 The Maria**

As I mentioned earlier, women who are either divorced or widowed have more overall flexibility than their married sisters although they are not exempt from the moral litmus test. There are other groups of women in the village who are less bound by the rules and they are prostitutes and Christian women. There are also ethnic groups who share with the rest of the settlement a belief in Islam but the women from these groups are less rigidly controlled and their cultural expectations differ from the more conservative and powerful groups in the settlement. These less powerful groups were finding that they were being restricted, both males and females, by the growing tendency towards religious conservatism in the settlement.

The lowland Maria were among the most tolerant groups in Um Gargur. Originally Muslims who later became Coptic Christians and then reconverted to Islam in the early 19th century, they were cattle herders

who migrated seasonally but left the women at home where they cultivated on a small scale (Longrigg, 1974). In traditional Maria society, a woman's power was symbolically and physically expressed in her owning the hut in which she lived with her husband. Traditionally the huts were wattle and daub but reinforced with woven mats. Made by the women in beautiful colours and designs and carrying their own individual stamp, these mats also formed the hut's inner and outer covering. If a couple were to divorce, the wife would take these with her, and to a Maria man this was cause for great embarrassment. Among the Maria, marriage confers wisdom upon a man, and the mats of his wife commemorated his new, wise and respectable status. For a man to lose his mats without very obvious justification suggested that he was incompetent. Some Maria friends used to joke that it was so shameful for a man to lose his mats that it was better to be a widower who kept his mats than a divorced man without them. Apparently only wealthy men could afford to lose their mats since no one would openly scorn them. However a man who was rich enough to afford to ignore public opinion was also rich enough to have more than one wife and he would simply take other wives rather than divorcing the one who no longer pleased him. Thus mats served as a very effective mechanism for controlling the state of marriage, both protecting women, and forcing men to think carefully about getting divorced.

If cultural precepts in traditional Maria society meant a married man who "lost his mats" was deprived of honour, in Um Gargur Maria men were certainly not governed by the same laws. In the settlement, Maria women took no part in building the huts and were thus deprived of the special social status conferred upon them by being mat providers. Maria

women have often said that now they were like orphans for they bring very little to their marriages. They felt that if they were mistreated by their husbands in Um Gargur they had very little recourse, unlike in Eritrea where threatening to take their mats and leave was often sufficient to ward off further abuse. Within the context of the refugee camp the threat had lost its sting. The Maria men with whom I spoke were all quite sympathetic to the problems as perceived by Maria women. Yet they were generally unwilling to side publicly with the women and incur the anger or disapproval of their sheikhs or be seen as non-conformists by others. (In fact one of the most reactionary sheikhs in the village was a Maria and his influence upon the residents of his *hillat* was great.) For Maria women, living in Um Gargur represented not only the loss of precious traditions which were important to their psychological well-being but also a challenge to their system of values.

## 6.2 The Baria

The Baria also belong to this group of people who are being made to conform to norms which are not their own. Muslims as well, the Baria are also primarily agriculturalists although many of them keep cattle and other livestock. The Baria are considered hard workers by some and extremely lazy by others, but all the evidence from observation suggests that there are very few differences between them and the other villagers in the settlement. The only noticeable difference was that Baria women were relatively free from the restrictions faced by their other sisters in the village. It was not unusual to see young Baria women engaging in conversation, laughing and dancing with young men of their age group at weddings or other festive occasions. Young girls seemed surer about

their sexuality and more open than their sisters in the village. They often posed the same questions as other girls about circumcision, sex, and birth control but were more direct. Whenever I spent the night in *hillat* Baria I would stay up late talking to the women who always made me the butt of their jokes about circumcision, often saying that all it took was one snip of the razor and when I woke up in the next morning I would get a surprise. When there was a wedding in *hillat* Baria one could always expect the drums to beat way into the night and the dancing to continue unabated. They were among the most relaxed people in the village and spending time in their *hillat* was always pleasant.

Like the Maria, Baria women also aided in the construction of houses, making mats and shaping the interior of the huts. In addition to doing all the housework required of them, young girls would, along with the boys, milk cows and assist with general farm-work. Many of the women said that at home in Eritrea they had worked on their husbands' farms often growing produce for themselves and selling it in the market. The Baria came under an enormous amount of criticism from some of the village sheikhs particularly because Baria women were among the first to take up positions in the *souk* selling peanuts, doughnuts and utensils. Fortunately for them, the head of their *hillat* was a benign butcher named Ali Bakhit who paid little attention to the gripings of the other sheikhs.

One of the major complaints that the more conservative villagers had with *hillat* Baria was that the drumming that went on during festivities went against the accepted codes of decorum. On any given morning after the Baria had had a party you would hear some of the old men remarking to one another, "How can Muslims do this?", implying by this that they

were far too hedonistic. All the young people enjoyed going to the Baria parties because they were without question the best in the village. Young men from the other *hillat* flocked there and this angered the conservatives who thought that these young men might become influenced by the frenzy of the drums. Because there was neither a clinic nor a mosque in the area, young women from the other *hillat* rarely visited this part of the village except to attend wedding parties in the company of their older female relatives who had gone to pay their respects. Some villagers would make moral judgements about the Baria women based on the fact that they were more open and comfortable around non-related males and because they, like the Belin and Christians, indulged in male-female dancing which the more conservative villagers regarded as taboo.

When I first visited Um Gargur in 1984 some sheikhs were already complaining that the Baria were disturbing the peace of the village with their "unruly" parties. At the time, other families in the village would also have parties at which it was not unusual to have drumming and dancing but it was generally the Baria who were singled out. Many of the Baria I spoke to complained that little had changed since then. They, like many others, felt that the conservative sheikhs were trying to impose their interpretation of what it was to be a good Muslim on the other villagers and many of the Baria were now determined to resist this.

### **6.3 The Christians**

This conservatism had a knock-on effect on the Christians and there was also an attempt made in 1984 to prevent them from having any

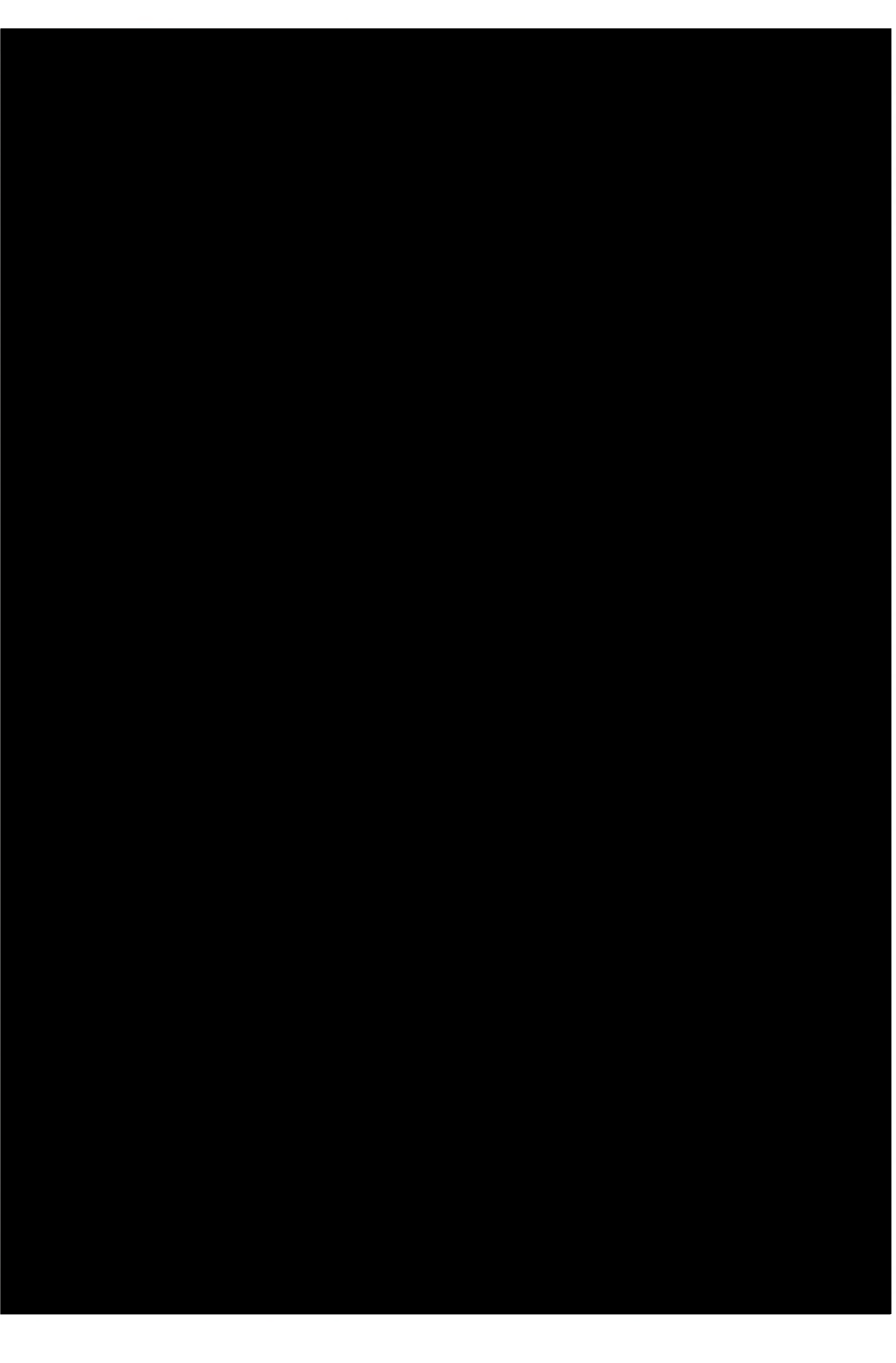
drumming at their parties. This was at a time when there was extensive repression from the Sudanese government who were using soldiers and policemen to enforce *sharia* law both in the villages and the towns of Sudan (Rogge, 1985). There were several attacks and jailings of refugees in the urban areas as every individual policeman or member of the army had the authority to decide arbitrarily who was breaking the law. As word got around, people were clearly worried that this would affect the settlements. Soon news spread within the settlement that *sharia* law was being applied to residents of the urban settlements such as Tawawa, only ninety minutes away, which was mainly filled with Ethiopians, and also in the neighbouring towns like Gedaref where, for economic reasons, many young people who were unrelated lived together.

There were many cases reported of young girls, both Muslims and Christians, who were arrested on suspicion of prostitution merely because they were seen walking together or sitting with unrelated men. The Christians were extremely angry since they believed that Islamic law should not have applied to them, but they were, not surprisingly, very frightened about voicing their opinions. At this time a great number of Eritreans in the urban areas also felt that they were being singled out by angry and resentful Sudanese because they had pushed housing prices up and, since they were willing to work for much less, pushed wages down. Um Gargur was essentially self-governing, and both its Sudanese settlement manager and its resident policeman were heavy drinkers who were on extremely good terms with the prostitutes, and therefore consistently in breach of *sharia* law. Nevertheless life in the settlement at this time was very tense and many people regarded each other with fear and suspicion, reflecting the tensions of the greater

society. The few conservative sheikhs and their followers determined the rules of conduct among the refugees in the settlement in 1984, and at that time there was very little resistance to them.

When I returned to Um Gargur in late 1985 certain aspects of this religious conservatism had vanished both in the cities of Sudan and in the settlement. The Ansar and Islamic Front still continued to exert a major influence on some of the villagers, but because the political climate in Sudan was less fraught there was less anxiety about adhering to the views of these sheikhs. Their opinions still had great currency of course, although it was mostly the women who experienced the effects of their censure. There was however still a great deal of talk about banning dancing and drumming from the settlement altogether, and even though there was much resistance to this idea, within a few months, with the aid of the Sudanese authorities, they had succeeded in ensuring that there was no drumming after 9pm. Yet for the most part, as long as it didn't infringe upon their liberties, men in the settlement were only too willing to side with the conservative sheikhs when it came to curtailing the freedoms of the women .

Although the Christian population has its own notions of honour which defines their behaviour among their own immediate community, there are numerous similarities between them and their Muslim neighbours. Like the Muslims, the Christians also practice circumcision of girls although it differs in degree. Whereas the majority of the Muslims practise infibulation, the preferred form of circumcision among the Christians and Jiberti, clitorrectomy, is much less radical. When I asked people about the purpose of circumcision I heard conflicting opinions. The majority of people said that it was a traditional



practice which had been done to them and would thus be done to their daughters. Women would often say that as a woman aged her genitalia would grow and hang between her legs like a penis. Some of the health workers said that the purpose of circumcision was also to ensure that the organ which is believed to stimulate sexual desire was excised so that a woman restrained her passion. I also heard from women that if a woman was not circumcised she would be too aggressive and forward sexually. It was felt that such a woman would soon tire her husband out and begin looking elsewhere, disgracing both herself and her husband. Both Muslims and Christians believed that men who were uncircumcised were unclean and girls who were uncircumcised were probably going to be "loose".

Even those who were liberal and felt generally unhappy about circumcision assumed that it was necessary if their daughters were to be found suitable for marriage later in life. Even among the health workers who were very anti-circumcision it was not uncommon to find those who would contradict themselves once their wives had given birth to girl children. One particular health worker who became a good friend of mine, a Christian who prided himself on his great sophistication and was always disparaging about people who practiced circumcision, often said that he thought that it was only a product of ignorance. He was very embarrassed when his daughter was circumcised and pretended that his wife had pressured him into allowing it. His excuse was that his wife was with her mother in Kassala who was a great deal more conservative than either of them, and the mother had insisted on her grandchild being circumcised. His wife told me that in fact he was very keen on their daughter being circumcised and that she had joked with him

that he would be too embarrassed to tell any of his colleagues about this. He finally admitted to me that if the child had not been circumcised, people would learn about it sooner or later and she would be forever stigmatised. According to him, her honour would be compromised whether or not she had done anything to warrant it. Christians thought that infibulation was brutal and inhumane whereas many Muslims maintained that the Christian women had loose morals and would point to the fact that all the known prostitutes in the village were Christian. In fact there were Muslim women who sold sex in other *hillat* but the refugees who were prepared to acknowledge their existence insisted that as they were practising secretly, they had to be distinguished from the Christian prostitutes who were "overt".

Arranged marriages were common among the Christians although parallel-cousin marriages are not an aspect of Tigrinya society. In fact marriage between two related people is strongly disapproved of and thought to be tantamount to incest. Unfortunately for them, the Christian women in Um Gargur were also bound by the codes of honour of the Islamic society. Although the Christian community had its own codes of honour, modesty was defined differently in the two communities. Christian men were never bound by the same moral codes as the women, whose behaviour reflected on the males of their families in much the same way that their Muslim sisters' behaviour reflected on their male relatives. In the Christian section of the village known as *hillat* Habash, there were no taboos on women freely associating with members of the opposite sex. They would joke, play cards and walk together, activities which were prohibited by notions of shame on the other side of the village among Muslims. Once they were outside of their general

area of *hillat* Habash, around the market or visiting friends who lived elsewhere, women would put on *tobes* and comport themselves accordingly.

## 7. Work and Honour

The villagers accepted the fact that among the Christian families quite a large percentage of women were employed outside of the home, and alongside the men, either in the clinic or in the schools. They were respected for their special contribution to village life but there was still the pervading attitude that it was shameful for women to be working, and that if a woman needed to work then her husband was obviously not capable of providing her with her needs and she was taking on a masculine role. This was evidenced by the fact that both men and women would remark to me independently that the women who worked in the clinic were like men. The reasons for this view was never articulated other than in terms of the way they carried themselves or the manner in which they spoke. It should be stressed that in no way did the villagers try to prevent the Christian women from carrying out their work; the disapproval was more in their attitudes towards women and work in general. In fact they would often remark that they were happy with the work that these women did but that in no way would they ever encourage their daughters to do so.

Such attitudes were gradually changing and by the time I completed my research there were four young Muslim girls who were being trained as health workers by the SCC, and fifteen girls who were employed as home visitors, in charge of visiting the sick in their respective *hillat* and reporting back to the clinic. The mother of one of the girls told me that she had thought a great deal about whether it was a good thing and

that a number of people had cautioned her against it, although there were others who were very approving as well. Finally she decided that her daughter's future would be more secure if she had some sort of skill. She said that perhaps her daughter would be able to earn money from this and bring badly needed income into the family.

Since men in Um Gargur are very concerned about the dangers they face from the heterogeneous nature of the settlement, women find that they are being more effectively policed than ever before. A few women find this insulting whilst others simply accept it as just another aspect of life. As the notion of honour is tied to the division of work within the family unit, and status within the family, women are not surprised that they have been prevented from participating in the public sphere. "Shame" prevents some from even looking for opportunities which might improve their lives. When they hear of income-generating projects in the other refugee settlements in the eastern Sudan they are disappointed that such projects seem to by-pass Um Gargur.

In 1984 a small minority of women indicated that if they could earn an income in Um Gargur they would do so regardless of the opinions of their husbands and other villagers. By 1987 much had changed and although employment possibilities were limited, many women were now participating informally in the economic sphere, selling cooked foods, handicrafts, and other goods. They had also extended their social networks and were now gaining small economic rewards through them. These developments are covered in greater detail in Chapter Four, however, as they relate to notions of honour, it should be noted that there are differences of opinion regarding work even among those women who do earn small incomes. Some of these women say that if they were

rich or living in Eritrea and things were going well, they would not think of making money because ultimately they recognise that when all is well, this is really the man's place. This indicates that their views are more linked to economics than to a desire for overall financial "independence". Other Muslim women disagree and say that even in Eritrea there were Muslim women who worked and that there is nothing wrong with earning money.

Thus the women of Um Gargur find themselves in a dilemma, dissatisfied with the fact that they are treated as marginal both by the settlement personnel and by the men, and yet always being made to feel ashamed for trying to get their husbands to speak out. They are very frustrated at the fact that men are so resistant to any changes, social or otherwise, and try to preserve the status quo even when it brings nothing positive into their lives. In Um Gargur women are invested with symbolic significance which they might not have had in Eritrea. They are to be protected at all costs from seeking economic or psychological independence, since, for the men who leave them in the hands of the settlement, any freedoms granted them would be too threatening to their own positions. In circumstances which might not in the pre-refugee communities have warranted it, men do not hesitate to call into play the notion of sexual and social shame. They know that there are still women who will continue to accept their perception of what constitutes "honour". What is worrying for them is the fact there are now women in Um Gargur who are slowly challenging these notions and attempting to show that, in the absence of full moral and economic support, "honour" and "shame" are less static categories than either the sheikhs or many of the men would have them believe. In fact, these women demonstrate

that in contexts of severe economic constraint, such notions are entirely redefinable.

## CHAPTER IV - WOMEN AND ECONOMICS

Martha Tesfamichael, Mensa nurse, aged 38:

*"My mother was not really very educated but she could read and write Tigre. She wanted us all to go to school. I remember when I was a child and I would skip school and she would beat me and say 'what do you think, that I am going to work for you forever? I will not be with you always and so you must go to school so one day you will get a job'. Up until the fifth grade I was careless. After that I came to understand the use of education."*

Zaharra Ismail, Jiberti mother, aged 48:

*"Here it is difficult to make any money. In Alighidir I used to make baskets and things. It was very good. I used to make things and sell them for one dollar or two. In Eritrea there are a lot of women selling in the markets. Not like here where only one or two Baria women are selling peanuts. At home there are many who sell injera, kolo [roasted wheat and peas] and hinbasha [bread cake]. They sit in the shade and sell sauce, deluc and awaze [two types of moist seasoned pepper]. In Um Gargur women are not doing it. It has become shame. People are ignorant. The Sudanese women work. If you go to Kassala and other towns you see women making business. Here there is nothing. Except for Mariam selling coffee and some Baria no one works in the market. Ade Amina makes injera in her house but she will not sell in the market, only from her home. According to Islamic law a woman should not go out of her house. If she does men will see her. It is accepted in Islam. Who knows why. The Sudanese are Muslim yet their women sell in the markets. I think it is ignorance. Especially the Ansar. They forbid us to cry when someone dies or to ululate and play drums during weddings and other festivities. People such as Salih Amhirai and Mohammed Nur Maibatot are the biggest. In Eritrea our women work. There is nothing forbidden. It is only here in this Sudan. They worked as they liked and had plenty of money. Money! They were happy. Here I don't know if people don't like this rule. I think they do not. But somehow everyone seems to have become one. There are people who do whatever they like and they don't talk about it but most people just follow even though they do not like it. What can we do? May God take us back to our country in peace."*

#### IV. WOMEN AND ECONOMICS

##### 1. Work and Women in Um Gargur

Several scholars have suggested that Islam has sometimes been interpreted in such a way as to endorse and encourage women's status as dependants, placing the responsibility for the Muslim family's economic well-being in the hands of its men. (Youssef, 1974; Coulson & Hinchcliffe, 1980; El Saadawi, 1982). Likewise, in Um Gargur paid labour is regarded as the exclusive territory of men and remains something which most Muslim women are strongly dissuaded from undertaking. However because by its very nature the refugee situation is an extreme one, the responses to it are also extreme. Very strong injunctions are placed on women in Um Gargur partly, it seems, because men fear that women are bound to become corrupted by the very diversity of people and belief systems at work in the settlement, and partly because it is one of the few ways in which men, bereft of the range of power and privileges enjoyed in the traditional setting, can assert any direct authority in the refugee context.

Thus even among those Muslims who, reputedly, were traditionally tolerant of women working<sup>1</sup> and among whom relations between the sexes were characterised as warm and relaxed, patriarchy has intensified and women are encouraged to remain at home. (Palmer, n.d.) These women who faced no traditional injunctions on wage labour tend, in their changed situation, towards ambivalence. On the one hand they want to earn money, but on the other hand they realise that in this new situation it is something shameful and therefore feel embarrassed. Their predicament is a slightly confusing one.

The majority of groups within the settlement define women's ideal roles primarily in terms of marriage, housework and reproduction; all relevant to the private domain. This does not mean that women and men are not equal as human beings, merely that their roles are seen to be markedly different (Jeffery, 1979:19). A woman's place is in the home, taking care of her family and raising her children, while it is the responsibility of the man to take care of the family's economic needs. A healthy man who fails to support his family is said to be "shameless" (*Tya-hifret/kijilet-T*), and the same terms are used to describe a wife who fails to honour her domestic responsibilities of cooking and cleaning for her family. If a man's female dependants care to safeguard his reputation (and by extension their own) in the community, any economic activities they engage in must be seen to be the secondary, rather than the principal source of their family's sustenance (whether or not this is the case). A woman often will not complain about her husband's lack of support but will contribute money quietly, for it is great cause for embarrassment.

Yet as we have indicated in Chapter Three, the limited prospects for employment in Um Gargur have meant that most adult men spend the majority of their time outside of settlement undertaking waged labour in order to fulfill their economic obligations to their families. The women who remain in Um Gargur also have an obligation to protect the honour and good name of their families by behaving in ways deemed appropriate by the community. Thus even when their male relatives are not in the village, the control which men exercise over women is embodied through the greater society. In a multi-ethnic environment in which specific values may differ from group to group this sometimes

presents women with difficulties which would not have been experienced in the traditional setting. What one group might regard as an entirely appropriate facet of their cultural expression another might place strong moral prohibitions upon. Women are particularly affected because their behaviour may be challenged from all directions by people whose criteria and traditions differ from their own.

A Muslim woman's marital and economic circumstances are the major determinants in whether she investigates and pursues alternative options for support. There are, for instance, great differences between the working lives of those women who are married to prosperous men, and the working lives of the married poor, elderly or widowed women. The economic advantages that the prosperous-dependent-women in Um Gargur have means that their activities are generally confined to the culturally acceptable - that is, the domestic sphere. Thus their status is rarely undermined by the work that they do. They are the elite women of Um Gargur not only because they have attained the cultural ideal of never having to engage in non-domestic labour to feed their families, who rely entirely on their husbands' (or other male relatives') incomes, but also by virtue of their marriages (or kinship) to the elite men - the sheikhs, shopkeepers and cooperative leaders of the settlement. Although a number of the Christian women who are teachers and health-workers earn, with their husbands, excellent incomes, they cannot really be considered as elite, for Christians, as we have shown, are a marginalised minority. And while it is true that some of the restrictions Christian women face are similar to those faced by their Muslim sisters, (see Chapter Three) with regard to employment another moral code applies, and no one seems to call into question the right of

Christian women to undertake paid labour.

On the other hand poor Muslim women who often badly need to earn money are at a distinct disadvantage since working outside of the home results in their social status being called into question. If circumstances compel a woman to work, then there are certain economic activities (anything to do with alcohol, prostitution) she must avoid if she intends to remain within the bounds of what is considered acceptable behaviour and retain the respect of her fellow villagers. In her research on Islamic Middle Eastern societies Youssef notes that even among those families who entertain relatively liberal views about the right of women to be employed, "appropriate jobs are circumscribed" (1974:117). The same holds true for Muslim women in Um Gargur and activities which bring them into contact with unrelated men are off limits. In fact the prohibition seems to have been extended so that even female outsiders are often perceived as a danger. Those who move even slightly outside of the norms or behave "unorthodoxly" may be accused of being *fitht*, or unchaste. A woman's obligation, that is her *hak / wajib* (T) or *gubue* (Tya), is first to her kin. Thus a woman must choose her work very carefully, for her honour and that of her family is also assessed in relation to this.

In this chapter I examine these ideas more closely. I illustrate how although both the moral codes and lack of employment opportunities in the settlement have served to obstruct women who might otherwise endeavour to supplement their family earnings or become self-sufficient, many women have found ways around these restrictions, utilizing traditional skills, the assistance of their children, the cooperation of other women, and concrete social networks in such a way as to give

themselves some degree of economic freedom and social flexibility. Thus it is the challenges they face whilst attempting to ensure the economic well-being of their families and their responses to these challenges which have earned them the right to be called "mothers of steel" by their children. This is not surprising considering that it is primarily children who benefit from their mothers' resilience.

The position of the elite woman is distinct from that of her non-elite counterparts. For instance, all the women in Um Gargur have been socialised to believe that one of the requirements of an ideal husband is that he be sufficiently wealthy to provide for all the economic needs of his wife and family. Besides ideas about virtuous behaviour, for most of these women, cultural notions of femininity are completely linked with ideas about beauty and the feminine toilette. To be properly feminine a woman should own at least one elegant *tobe* which she wears on special occasions, take regular smoke-baths [*tennet* (T)/ *tish* (Tya)/ *dukhan* (A)] which leave her skin tinted slightly orange and smelling of sandalwood, and have a few choice pieces of gold [*dahab*] given her by her husband. All of these are essential components which make up the ideal feminine image. Within the context of the settlement, the few women whose husbands are capable of providing them with these signs of privilege are envied because they need not work outside of their homes or engage in any petty trade. They have succeeded in attaining the cultural ideal and in the settlement, where few women have the wherewithal, such things matter. Many of the Muslim women have had to sell their gold in order to buy necessities and certainly cannot afford the luxury of beautiful a *tobe*. But whereas it is possible to get by without gold, the vast majority of them try to take occasional

smoke-baths, with friends or female relatives often sharing the expense for the incense, and dressing each other with *henna*. Since most have been socialised to believe that these are among the basic requirements of true femininity, it follows that the woman who has to do without feels herself to be in a state of cultural undress. In this respect, then, the elite women are particularly fortunate.

Yet it is also an irony of the situation that the majority of elite women are in fact confined to their homes more than their less well-off counterparts. Simply because they are the wives of prestigious men, their movements are more restricted. A prominent social position brings increased pressure on a woman to exemplify the notion that distance between "strangers" should be maintained. It is in fact mainly poorer, disenfranchised women who, unhappy with their circumstances, have attempted to redefine certain aspects of the relationships between men and women in Um Gargur. If we regard the family as an economic unit then in many of those Eritrean societies which are represented in Um Gargur, women are not considered producers, except in the realm of childbirth and the preparation of food. They are thought to be consumers and it is clear that for many, Muslim women working and earning incomes signifies the breakdown of the society and its failure to control its women. Men seem particularly fearful that this is what refugeehood ultimately represents. Faced with the prospect of women becoming "men" as they undergo a transformation from being publicly silent to articulating their disenchantment with the way things are, the men in Um Gargur attempt to close ranks, claiming moral superiority for themselves and those women who do not earn incomes. Yet those women who are reluctant pioneers also end up claiming moral superiority both over

their female counterparts, and over the society as a whole, which they regard as hypocritical.

It was clear from questioning women that there are two contradictory notions at work here. On the one hand, because the cultural ideal is seclusion every woman dreams of *not* having to work outside and wants the status that derives from being secluded. Clearly poor women would much rather be in the position of the elite women, and essentially they are reluctant pioneers, thrust into their positions through circumstance rather than choice. All women would prefer to be *sitt al' beit*, that is, a "woman of the house". On the other hand women do not like the injunctions *vis à vis* going to the market or visiting friends that are concomitant with such a status. They also wish for the kind of capital that would ensure a better existence for their children and themselves, and they wish for small luxuries and for money to buy special foods that they like. Some of these poor women who manage to make an income find that the amount of money realised is often so paltry that their dreams are only very marginally fulfilled. Yet other women make more. For instance, several women reported profits of S£5.00 a week which they considered to be quite good since that amount enabled them to contribute to their credit societies (see below), to buy meat occasionally, and to buy coffee for themselves and small savouries for their children. From time to time enough money would be made to be able to purchase a *tobe*, dress material, or if a woman was very successful, perhaps even gold (which was thought to be a good way of investing money). Even though most women had some gold, more often than not they had sold or exchanged (for food and transport) some of their more valuable pieces *en route* to the Sudan and were now buying pieces which they claimed were of

considerably lesser quality. Poor women are the vanguard of change in the settlement since they are obliged to earn money to help support their families, and they have little to lose by challenging moral attitudes which were far more easily sustained in Eritrea than in the strained economic climate of the settlement.

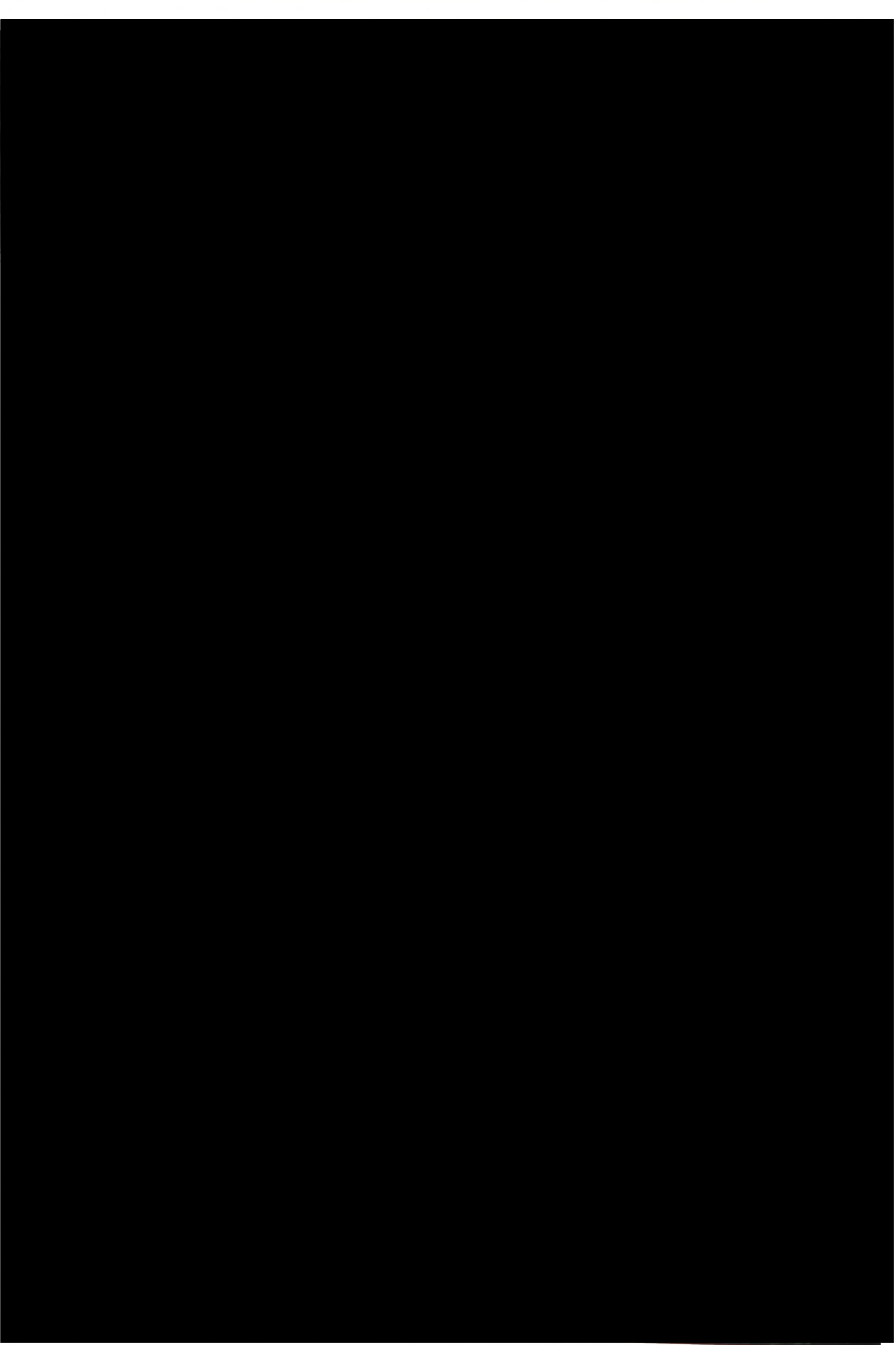
### **1.1 The Work All Women Do**

Although it would be imprecise to speak of women as though they are a homogeneous group, there are enough similarities between women to allow for some generalisations about their positions in Um Gargur. What links all women together is the fact that traditional Eritrean society perceives their primary duties as being connected to the domestic sphere, and their rights and obligations are defined in these terms. It does not matter whether or not a woman has a salaried job or earns money as a washer-woman or food-seller, the home is her traditional domain and it is she who bears all the responsibility for its upkeep. This is true for the elite women, the salaried Christians, as it is for the poor and widowed women.

From a very early age girls are socialised into their roles, helping their mothers with cleaning the home, cooking and washing clothes. If a mother has no young sons she will send her daughter to perform chores normally preserved for boys, such as collecting water from the well or going to the market. The same is true for the mother who has no young daughters, she will use her sons to perform tasks such as grinding grain, cleaning and sometimes even cooking, all of which are considered specifically female chores. If she has some money but no children a woman can always pay children from her *hilla* to do chores for her, as

children are only too willing to get a little change for sweets or soft-drinks. It would seem that female children really do a great deal more work than male children, although the amount of work any child does depends on whether s/he has sisters or brothers of a similar age who share the work load. After their daughters reach the age of twelve or thirteen parents are very reluctant to send them to the market or for them to do any chores which might bring them into contact with men so they are, ideally, restricted to going to school and returning home, while their brothers have the freedom to roam the settlement. Of course in situations where a girl has no other siblings such restrictions cannot be easily enforced, because her labour both within and outside of the home is depended upon.

Both men and women agree that the norm in Eritrea was for girls under the age of eight to perform only minor chores, but that circumstances in Um Gargur have forced many families to depend on younger children. In Eritrea the extended family provided a whole network of children of varying ages all of whom could be called upon to provide necessary services for their adult relations. In Um Gargur many women do not have the same extended family network and live instead either in nuclear family situations, or as temporary or permanent heads of households, relying mainly upon their own children or those of their friends. This is clearly not atypical in the context of displacement (Laman, 1984:7; Weaver, 1984:9). Because of the relative dearth of adult males in Um Gargur, on a practical level children appear to be much more important in the refugee context than they were in Eritrea. For although women often complain about how burdensome children can be, women recognise that when children reach an age at which they are both



highly mobile and responsible with money, they are capable of relieving their mothers of some of their responsibilities and offering them a degree of freedom and economic flexibility. A number of the ways in which they do so will be discussed later.

Up until now we have discussed the fact that once they leave the confines of their homesteads women face many restraints. We have indicated that the level of restrictions imposed on them may vary according to their marital or economic status, or their ethnic affiliation or religious sect. These restrictions go into effect immediately a woman steps outside the bounds of her homestead. However in the absence of most male heads of household, women *within* their homesteads lead a life which is free from the constraints placed upon them by men. Granted, women are just as likely to censure each other, but the level of understanding among women who regard themselves as all in the same situation is quite great, and of course the women one allows to visit one's homestead are sympathetic friends rather than censorious busybodies. Thus, women whose husbands are away for much of the time have relative "choice", unlike other women who are bound both within their homes and outside by the dictates of the larger society.

## **1.2 The Daily Routine**

The typical day of a woman with a resident husband usually begins much earlier than that of her husband, regardless of whether he is working or not. On the other hand the woman who heads her own household, however temporarily, does not at least have to contend with the demands of her husband. Women sometimes say that men are like children, and by this they mean that men, like children, need looking

after. Men mean extra clothes to wash, extra restrictions, less time with friends. Yet if there was employment in or around Um Gargur very few women, I believe, would choose for their husbands to go away. Ideally men, of course, also mean stability, protection, role models and disciplinarians for their children.

A woman with a resident husband usually rises about an hour before him and their children (occasionally as early as 4.00am) in order to prepare a light pre-breakfast snack of tea or coffee, and bread, both of which are thought to be essential to the start of the day. After the husband leaves she may either decide to sleep for another hour or so, or she might decide to begin cooking the meals for the day. These women very rarely cook all through the day but usually will prepare the different meals simultaneously so that by early afternoon they have completed all their cooking and can dedicate some time to their own chores. Working women on the other hand either prepare meals very early in the morning or quite late at night in order to leave the larger part of the day free for work. Poorer women do not prepare more than one cooked meal (if that) which is eaten for lunch and dinner. In fact many poor families subsist on salads or bread and milk. People are very partial to salads although a common complaint is that salad and beans comprise a rather excessive part of their diet because meat is so expensive.

If women have children (preferably daughters) who are old enough (seven upwards) to assist them with housework, these daughters will also awaken early and begin to clean up. This means dusting the hut, sweeping the floor and sprinkling water about it liberally in order to allow the dust to settle and the earthen floor to cake into a hard

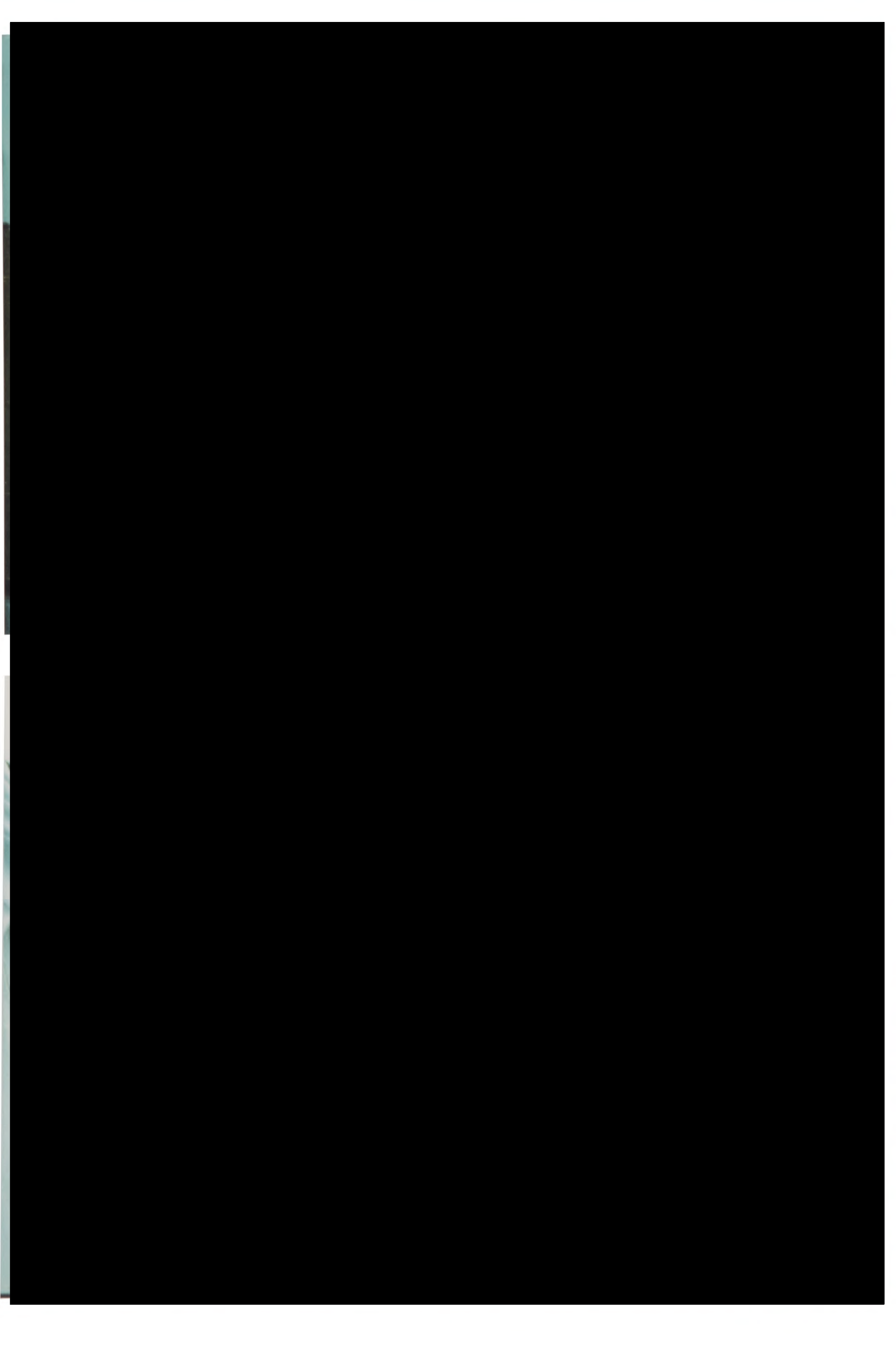
surface as girls stomp on it. It also means making sure that clothes are washed and hung, cooking utensils are washed and made ready to use, and that food such as salad and potatoes is cleaned and cut. Since it is not thought appropriate for women to go to the well to collect water, to take care of animals, or go to *serafiya* to collect the rations, children have this responsibility. Of course a woman who has no dependants, or only small children, and no adult male relatives, might be forced to do work which in the traditional context she would regard as taboo. It is unusual but not altogether rare to find women doing all these things out of necessity.

The woman who is the head of her own household, however temporarily, usually begins her day much later than other women. If she prepares her family meals in the morning then she might awaken at 6.00am. If she is someone who prepares meals in the evening for the next day then she might start at 7.00am, although rarely later than that. Every family that is able to afford a radio has one. And since Um Gargur is close enough to Eritrea to be able to receive the news in Tigre and Tigrinya, most people try to catch the broadcast between 6.00am and 8.00am on *Dimtzi Hafash*, the "Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea". Children undertake chores around the home in much the same way as with women who live in a nuclear or extended family. Once early morning chores are completed and they have had milk and bread, the children leave home in order to arrive at school by 8.00am. At 10.00am practically everyone in the settlement takes a break for breakfast or *fatuur*, which can be anything from salad to meats or *lugma*, a stiff porridge. Husbands who work in the settlement usually return to their homes at this time and practically every activity not connected with eating stops at this time.

The shopkeepers and butchers in the market close their stalls, the teachers and their students go home, and the whole village retires. This lasts for a hour or so and is thought to be a very important break of the day.

If a woman works outside of her home either washing clothes for others or growing her own vegetables she will leave her home much earlier in order to get most of this work out of the way before the sun is at its most intense, that is before 2.00pm to 5.00pm. Many working women who are long-term heads of households often skip *fatuur* but take fried doughnuts [*ligimat*] and other snacks along with them to eat. A woman always makes sure that her children and dependants eat at this time. When women return home they rest for a little while until, say 3.00pm, when they begin to pay each other visits which may continue until the early evening, around 6.00pm. Although they do not visit every day, when they do, this time is quite important for them generally, not merely because it is when they socialise drinking *bunn* and *shaay*, coffee and tea, and keeping up to date with their news and the village gossip, but also because this is when they work for and with each other. Women whose husbands remain in the settlement and who do not work outside their homes join in, and friends can now exchange and experiment with new ideas. This is the time women braid each other's hair, help each other with their smoke-baths, and *henna* their hands and feet. If they make extra money by selling their woven prayer mats or their beaded leather wedding pillows they might take these things along with them when they visit their friends' homes and work on them there.

Some women work planting and harvesting *durra* on land allocated to their families by the COR/UNHCR in 1983 (10,000 *feddan* in total although



most late arrivals did not get the specified land) (Macauley & Karadawi, 1984). Ideally, each *feddan* is expected to yield between 4-6 twenty-pound sacks of *durra*. Poor rainfall coupled with the fact that many women find that they cannot manage to work long, strenuous hours in the fields, meant that in 1985 yield was down to about 2 sacks per *feddan* for many female-headed families. Some women would hire young men in the settlement to work for them in exchange for half of their yield. Women would complain that where in Eritrea any work that required the assistance of young men would be done on a basis of reciprocation, in Um Gargur the basis for most exchanges was economic. So a few of the young able-bodied men who stayed did well out of remaining in the settlement because they could profit out of working for women, while the women found that what they reaped from the land was generally only enough to feed their families and not enough to sell and make a profit out of. This would lead more and more families, particularly those with older members to thwart the authorities. Um Saadia, an older woman who with her husband had five children, decided that she would list herself as a female headed household who was responsible for four children, while her husband was listed as a widower with three children. Since their children were all between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, they managed to harvest a good bit of their land and were able to sell most of their *durra*. Because they were also getting double their rations they were quite well-off.

Everyone who managed to do this benefited. One woman who was quite poor, Halima Rahouda, lived with her young son and daughter and her daughter's baby. Both mother and daughter worked in the communal garden planting aubergines and green vegetables which they sold occasionally

but were grown primarily for their own consumption. She was a strong woman who also grew her own *durra* (splitting what she reaped with the young man who assisted her) and took in washing from time to time. Despite this, Halima Rahouda seemed only barely to make a living. According to her, some months were much better than others, but judging by her frugal existence it always appeared that she was more impoverished than many of her counterparts. She insisted that her only luxuries were coffee and, on rare occasions, meat. Some people said that she made a business out of poverty and begging, and could not believe that she had not saved any money. Other women often joked that she must have gold hidden somewhere since she never wore any, unlike most of the other women who tried to save at least one or two pieces of gold for personal use or for their daughters' marriages.

Halima Rahouda took an active role in a riot over water which mobilised the women of Um Gargur (and which will be discussed in the Conclusion). As a result of what they regarded as her bravery, most women began to feel less inclined to scorn her and instead gave her advice on how to improve her situation within the settlement. At first Halima Rahouda was listed as a female head of household with several dependants. After the riot she was advised by other women to alter this in order that both she and her daughter could each claim this status independently. By doing this they would both receive assistance from the SCC social services programme for vulnerable groups (e.g. elderly, orphans, disabled, widows) as well as the *serafiya*. What Halima Rahouda did was to retain her listing as a widow with three young dependants whilst at the same time getting her daughter to list herself as a young mother with both a baby and a brother to take care of. This meant that

as a unit they were receiving twice the rations which were allowed them. Her situation improved because she now had other assets to barter with. Instead of giving a portion of her *durra* to the man who helped her harvest it in exchange for his labour, she now exchanged her rations instead and could herself sell the *durra* which her family did not consume.

Almost everyone who had this option regarded it as a reasonable and justified method of making money. Fortunately for Halima Rahouda she also had two children who helped her. Many of the women who were most needy had young children who were not able to help them in the fields and though this did not stop them from selling rations they did not like the taste of (e.g. sometimes they received oil or flour which they felt left a bitter aftertaste and these they would sell to a shop in the settlement), it did mean that unless they were getting money regularly from their husbands, or had other skills to fall back on, they were the most vulnerable.

While men might visit with each other very late into the night, the visiting day ends for women at around 6.00pm, when they return to their homesteads. At this time they will warm up food for dinner which has been cooked earlier in the morning or the evening before. They might also begin cooking food for the next day. The family gathers together at this time, eating by candle-light and discussing the events of the day. If a woman shares her homestead with other women (as is often the case) they will eat together and take turns to prepare meals. When one of their respective husbands returns to the settlement, however temporarily, women begin to visit each other less often and, unless

related, even those within the same homestead generally cease to cook communally.

## 2. Informal Savings Associations

In Um Gargur there are two significant institutions through which women are able to generate savings for themselves. The most widespread is the *sanduug*<sup>2</sup>, a rotating credit association through which capital and (often) goods are accumulated. The capital is also held in a *sanduug*, which literally means box in both Arabic and Tigre. The second type of savings association is the *'idda*, which means dish or pan in Arabic. Although related to the *sanduug*, the funds involved are smaller and the associations have a more specific short-term purpose. Women throughout the settlement participate in these two associations<sup>3</sup>. A third organisation, *Mahaberra Medhine Alem*, was started by two Christian women, one a highlander and the other from the lowlands. Although it shares similarities with both the *sanduug* and the *'idda*, it was conceived along the lines of a social club in which women from different backgrounds might meet to discuss the tensions and factions which existed among the various groups in Um Gargur.

### 2.1 Sanduug

The *sanduug* is formed when a group of women (generally ranging from six to twelve) join together and agree to pay a fixed sum on a monthly, bi-monthly or weekly basis. This sum, which is agreed upon in advance but usually ranges anywhere from S£1.00 to S£4.00, is put into a kitty which is then used by each woman in turn. There are no hard and fast rules which determine the lines among which the *sanduug* is run. In fact

the size of the group, the amount contributed and the interval between each rotation varies from group to group and all depend upon a prior fixed arrangement. The general idea is that by the end of each complete cycle, every member has taken out of the kitty, or *sanduug*, precisely what she has put in over the entire period. What Bascom has said of the Yoruba saving society, the *esusu*<sup>4</sup>, holds true for the *sanduug*: "There is neither gain nor loss, but the advantage to the members is that they have available a large sum of money with which to make expensive purchases or to meet debts of considerable size" (1952:64).

Any woman can start an association by approaching women in her neighbourhood who are her friends or perhaps only acquaintances but whom she knows by reputation to be respectable and dependable. She asks them to participate and gives them the names of the other women she intends to approach. If they like her or find her trustworthy they may agree. If they like her but think that someone she intends to ask is not going to make a positive contribution to the group or might lapse on her contribution, they will tell her their objection and suggest an alternative. Similarly, someone who requests admission into the group might be refused. Once a group is chosen, their names are put into a box and shuffled whereupon the first recipient is picked. This continues at specific intervals until all have had their turn. If a woman has enough money she may wish to take out more than one "share" in the same *sanduug*, putting membership in her name or, to avoid confusion, that of her absent daughter or sister. This means that she has to make as many contributions as she has memberships and will therefore receive the *sanduug* correspondingly. At the same time if someone wants to join but is too poor to afford to pay the contribution on her own, she may be

allowed to join with a friend(s) with whom she will apportion the contribution in fixed allotments. So, for instance, if the membership contribution is set at S£4.00 per month and they want to split it 50/50, each will contribute S£2.00 to the pool when required. When it is their turn to receive the *sanduug* and the amount totals say (with 10 membership shares) S£40.00, the two women will split it so that each receives S£20.00.

When it works, the *sanduug* is one of the most salient social experiences which women participate in. The networks which are formed are initially economically motivated, but those that last very often become strong support networks, particularly enjoyable because the entire society places positive social valuation on it. Some people have said that in Eritrea these networks often lasted for many years since people knew who they were setting up the *sanduug* with, and that in many cases, their own mothers had formed similar associations with the mothers of their own *sanduug* members. Other women were not so sure and said that they refused to participate in the *sanduug* anymore because both in Eritrea and in Um Gargur they had had experiences which led to bad feelings in the group.

I learned of one woman living in Abuda (another settlement) who had profited from a *sanduug* whilst living in Um Gargur, and although many attempts were made to encourage her to pay her proper share, she did not for over a year, long after the *sanduug* had dissolved. From all accounts she was fairly shameless and it appeared that her case was an unusual one. Various women suggested that the reason these associations might potentially break down in Um Gargur is because everyone is a stranger and it is therefore hard to know who to trust. I understood

that a few of them do indeed break down in Um Gargur although I cannot produce quantitative data to show whether the chance of such networks succeeding is greater or lesser than in Eritrea. From my experience it would seem that the smaller the groups are, the greater the chance the association has of being a viable one which survives until every one who contributes is given the opportunity to take out their share. Also it must be said that generally when groups did break down the catalysts usually seemed to be as a result of arguments arising among one or two members, or because someone legitimately didn't have the ability to pay at the required time rather than because people absconded with the money.

The *sanduug* automatically breaks down when someone who has taken her share of money out does not return to make contributions to it, thus reneging on her loan, since this is essentially what the money she receives is. If a woman who has had her turn does not make payments into each successive *sanduug* until it has done a complete rotation, then the system fails completely. Although I was told of this happening, it did seem that people were very reluctant to default on payments because they might gain the reputation of being unreliable and untrustworthy in a community where social networks were exceedingly important. I also believe conversely, that in some cases it is primarily because people are "strangers", that the association is in fact strengthened. This is because everyone in Um Gargur is so careful to guard their reputations, proceeding with the sort of caution which would be unusual if they were old friends or had more in common. Perhaps if a person transgressed in Eritrea it would not necessarily damage his/her relationships irreparably, but in Um Gargur word would spread among people who were

not merely idle and relished gossip, but also who had no vested interests in defending the honour of those they did not know. It was very important to women that they reassert their "credentials" by maintaining their good names, and that others saw them favourably when it came to the *sanduug*. As a result there are associations which have lasted for several years often stopping for a time after the *sanduug* has made a complete rotation and starting up again when people have more money, or when women need to generate some money for the weddings of their daughters, naming ceremonies, circumcisions, or feasts.

#### 2.1.1 *Sitt al' Sanduug*

The woman who starts up the *sanduug* (or *'idda*) is usually referred to as the *sitt al' sanduug*, (literally: the lady of the *sanduug*). She "guards" the box, and plays a crucial role in its operation. Sometimes the position of *sitt al' sanduug* passes from one woman to the next, rotating like the kitty, but this varies with each group. Ideally she is an older woman who has proven ability and the qualities of honesty and integrity which allow her to mediate between the women, ensuring that the association lasts. What motivates her to take on such a role is the authority and prestige which she enjoys through the position. A woman who is an effective *sitt al' sanduug* commands the respect of the women she is associated with.

The *sitt al' sanduug* has certain duties and obligations to the members of the association. If someone should lapse in their payments, it is she who quietly approaches them, finding out whether the reasons for this is genuine and whether the woman actually needs the help of the

other women. She dispenses with advice as well, suggesting ways in which the women might spend their money in order to build upon their capital. She has the authority to decide whether or not the names should be raffled, thereby ensuring that someone who has a real, pressing need for the funds from the *sanduug* and who has not had her turn at it gets precedence over someone who can wait for some time before receiving it. Her role also extends into further more personal areas, and she is often present at occasions such as the circumcisions of the women's daughters, wedding preparations etc., playing a key role in the celebrations. It is not unusual for a *sitt al' sanduug* to accompany an ill woman from her association to the clinic or even in cases where the woman has no relations and is very ill, to the clinic in Gedaref or Kassala. She might rally around those in the group, encouraging them to make a special contribution to pay both fares. In times of need or crisis she is expected to be an ally.

## 2.2 'Idda

The *'idda* is primarily a "furnishing" society. In this type of association a larger group of women (between 10 and 20) pays Sf.05 (5 piastres) each day into a box. At the end of the month they put the names of every woman who has not previously been chosen into another box. One name is picked out of this box and this woman is then accompanied very early in the morning by several of her co-members to the *souk*. (They often send their children out the previous evening to ask the shopkeeper to open up his store before normal trading begins so as to give them the chance to come and go unseen.) Everything the group purchases has a practical long-term use. They might buy for instance, a

very large cake pan or a large cooking pot (which can serve up to 40 people) or a meat grinder. The items they buy are almost always implements which can be used for weddings and feasts. Such items are also referred to as the *'idda*, and they are considered to be the property of the entire group. Each is then used in alternation by each woman whenever there is a special occasion.

All of the women of the *'idda* have certain responsibilities towards their co-associates which are realised at the occasions when the *'idda* is used. The *sitt al' sanduug* is responsible for keeping only the box of money; however the *'idda*, that is the item itself, rests with the person whose name was selected except for occasions when it is needed by one of her associates. Here her duties are very limited since the *'idda* is much more of a cooperative society with jointly owned property than in the case of the *sanduug*. The funds given by each individual are much smaller than the *sanduug* since one woman does not give much more than S£1.55 in any given month so that the funds total between S£15.00 and S£31.00. Its strict guidelines declare that if two members should fall out, the *'idda* which are in their safekeeping should be returned to the group until their differences are resolved. Should they prove irreconcilable, both women are penalised and expelled from the group. The *'idda* is in many ways more practical than the *sanduug* (not its size) because the sums are so much more affordable for the majority of women and it only calls for a limited commitment to the group.

### 2.3 Mahaberra Medhine Alem

In 1987 two women from *hillat* Habash, Alganesh Awatay, a Belin, and Kordusan Habte, a Tigrinya speaker, became concerned about what they saw

as divisions which were creating splits within their community. They believed that such divisions were occurring among the women along regional (lowland-highland) and political (EPLF-ELF) lines and producing a climate of mistrust and suspicion. They decided that they had to take positive steps to attempt to bridge the gaps. The opportunity to present this idea to other women occurred when a friend of theirs gave birth. Among the Tigrinya a child's birth is celebrated on the third day and traditionally a party, *ghaat salisti*, is held, and porridge, which symbolises luck and friendship, is eaten. The women did not have a very clear idea of what sort of organisation they would form but decided that it should be one which benefited all of them in some way and improved the quality of their lives in the settlement. The organisation was given the title *Mahaberra Medhine Alem* or the Saviour's Association. Thirty-eight women joined at this time, all but three were Christians.

The organisers found that resistance came from a number of the men and a few women who had decided not to join. The women were belittled by men who suggested that as many of them were illiterate, they were not capable of setting up an organisation on their own. At the group's first general meeting the women decided to meet monthly and to pay five pounds each month as membership dues. One committee was elected to lead the group and the other to take control of its finances. By throwing lots they set a timetable so that each member knew when the monthly meeting would be held at her home. They began to discuss issues which affected their lives and came up with suggestions for improvements.

During the first six months they had accumulated enough capital to buy large pans and other items which, like the *'idda*, could be used on

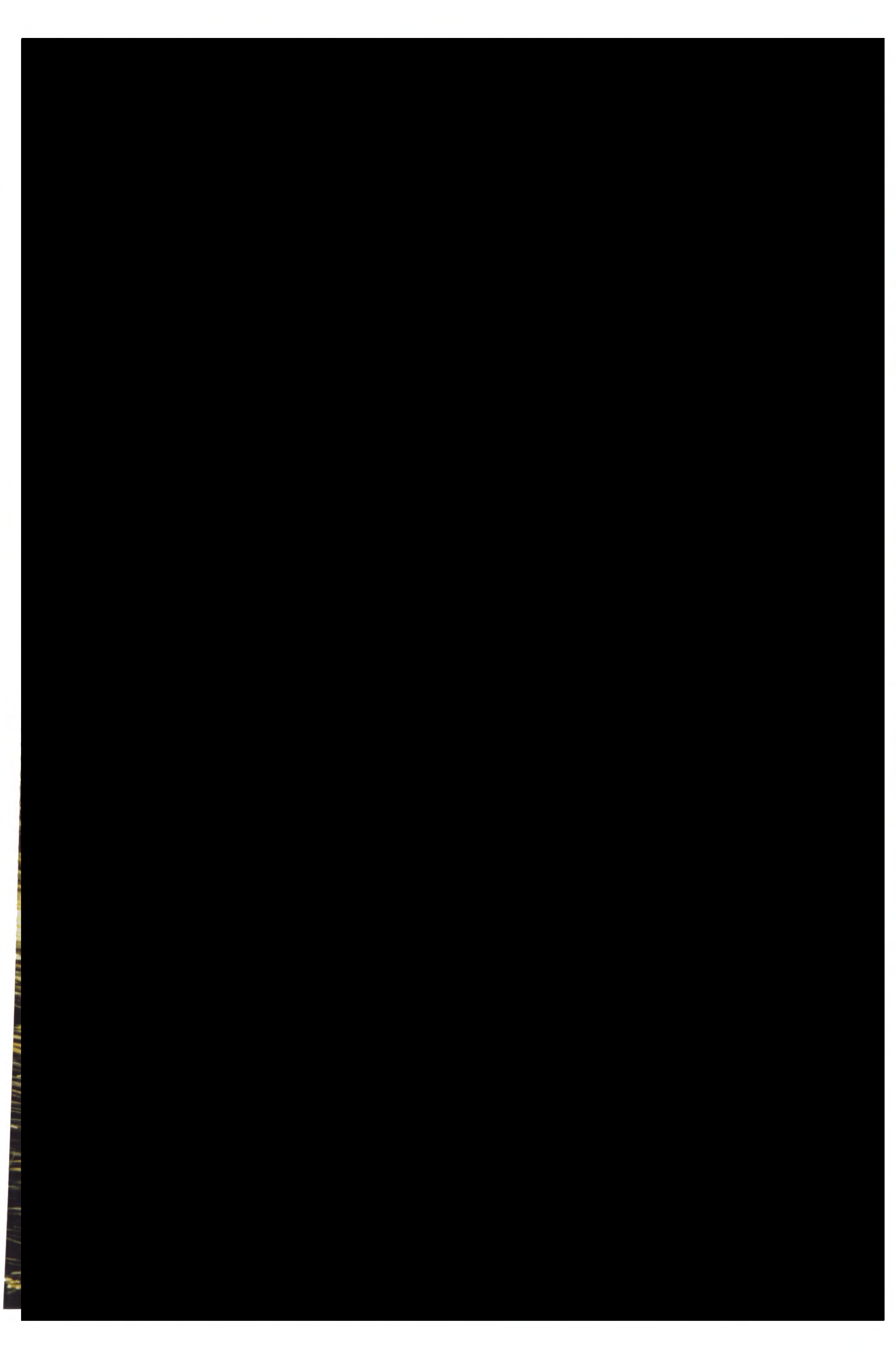
occasions such as weddings, circumcisions and funerals. The meetings had a party like atmosphere as women drank coffee, tea, and brewed local beer. They used some of the money to help any member who married, became ill or was in dire need of some assistance. The group flourished, offering each other moral support and creating a situation of ease where there had been tension. Although the basis for the organisation was not primarily economic, the women did benefit economically and spiritually from it. One of their concerns was that their children were being taught with a Sudanese curriculum which would not prepare them for lives as Eritreans. After some discussion the women decided to elicit the help of church organisations and UNESCO and were requested by UNESCO to write a proposal which outlined what they saw as the educational needs of their children, particularly their daughters. Although ultimately no aid was forthcoming for their project, the fact that they felt confident enough to approach such organisations marked a positive change. When later some of the same men who had derided their efforts congratulated them and suggested that they too would like to get involved, the women realised that they had it within them to effect change.

#### **2.4 Refugeehood and the *Sanduug***

Although the institution of the *sanduug* existed in Eritrea, its presence in the refugee situation has dimensions which, even where they existed previously, were probably not quite so magnified. As a result, in the absence of many kinship networks the *sanduug* takes on a great and compelling importance. Gestures of mutual support are quite prevalent among women from the same *sanduug* association since the institution at

its best creates a climate of ease, trust and cooperation. From various personal accounts, I gather that this was the same in Eritrea, with one difference. Where in Eritrea these women had often grown up with their association members and certainly knew most of their families from childhood, in Um Gargur most of them share no common history (although there are in fact women who belonged to the same *sanduug* both in Eritrea and in Um Gargur). The new networks which develop around the institution compensate for this difference, retaining aspects of the traditional sharing and interdependence which was important in the society back home.

Clearly the criteria on which people based their choices had as much relevance in the old society as they have in the settlement. In Eritrea, I gathered that association members were often related or from the same neighbourhood which, by extension, suggested that they were also from the same ethnic groups and social classes. In most respects very little has changed and where possible, associations are still formed roughly along these lines in Um Gargur. With the social stigma attached to women when moving from *hilla* to *hilla*, the neighbourhood likewise seemed to be the most common basis for the *sanduug* in Um Gargur. However where in Eritrea neighbourhoods were pretty much homogeneous, in Um Gargur this is not necessarily the case. As a result several associations spanned different ethnic, economic and religious groups. A few of the older women belonged to different associations simultaneously, extending their social networks across various parts of the village. Because these women had passed an age where their actions and movements were queried by the suspicious, they were generally free to travel from one section of the village to the next. Younger women



tended to stick to their immediate neighbourhoods and usually joined groups in which either they or their husbands had a close friend or relation who could vouch for their whereabouts.

The loyalties which are formed through these associations cannot be underestimated. Many of these women share large parts of their lives together, particularly those who are widowed, divorced or simply on their own in the settlement. Although the society places injunctions on its women spending much time away from their own homes, compared to those Muslim women whose husbands remain in the settlement, the woman alone is relatively free. However little can be said when these women move around in groups, as they so often do. They sometimes meet to eat together, gossip, commiserate, share problems and discuss ways of coping with them. Often they make baskets and mats from *zaf*, fiber of the raffia plant, which they dye. They compare designs and colours and quite commonly exchange pieces with each other. Association members who become close friends will even, on special occasions, borrow nice *tobes* from each other. On a regular basis they will plait each other's hair, and go to the mosque together. Meetings between such friends might occur daily, for instance when one needs to go to the clinic or visiting and has to leave her small children with another, or perhaps one needs to travel outside of the settlement and cannot manage to take her children with her. It would seem that there is great emphasis placed on bonds between friends, and that friendships are regarded as serious investments. This is understandable as women with few relations rely, both socially and psychologically on their friends, and one heard many stories which illustrated the strength of these bonds.

Zeinab Abdel-Aziz, Rariya Hamid and Fahima Saad-el-din are three

young women who belong to the same *sanduug*. Rariya and Fahima are both Maria and were born in the same village near Keren in Eritrea. Their mothers knew each other in Eritrea and in fact belonged to the same *sanduug* at times. Also Rariya's mother's half-brother had married a relation of Fahima's and they still lived in Eritrea. The women do not think of themselves as relations but good friends and live in neighbouring homesteads. Zeinab is a Belin woman who is around the same age as the others (about 25) and although quite friendly with Fahima, is best of friends with Rariya. She also lives in the same neighbourhood. All three women are married but Fahima is the only one whose husband is not away from the settlement for protracted periods. Rariya's husband worked on an agricultural scheme for half the year and during the other half lived in Kassala and made a living from driving a truck. At the time of this research she had not seen her husband for over six months. Zeinab, whose family lived in Abuda but who had married a man from Um Gargur, had not seen her husband for two years because he was working in Saudi Arabia. She had two children of 1½ and 3 years. Although Zeinab and Rariya knew each other casually, it was only when they joined the *sanduug* that they became firm friends. Zeinab told me a little about their friendship and the role of the *sanduug* in cementing it:

Long ago when I was a newly-wed I used to glimpse Rariya at our neighbour's home. Also her small sister used to come to our house to sell eggs and I would buy from her. Among our people the bride must stay at home for one year before she sees any strangers but this was not possible because there were no children to help in the house. When I first came to Um Gargur I couldn't believe it. It was terrible and I cried every day because I was away from my family. Then my husband decided to leave to look for work and he managed to get enough money to go to Saudi Arabia. He left me here with his brother and his wife, but now his brother has also gone to find work and his wife stays in Kassala with her mother. It would have been better if she stayed in Um Gargur like me but she did not like it so she left very quickly. She is not a

good woman. She did not think about me at all, how I would live, what I would eat, nothing. I stayed all alone with one baby like this [in her arms] and the other like this [gesturing towards her stomach]. I had little money and even to get water was a problem because I had to ask my neighbours to send their son with our donkey. Anyhow Ammouna, the wife of Salah Ismael and Zaharra the wife of Mohammed Erbut came to visit me as they are both Belin. They asked me how I was, if I had enough to eat and many things. Zaharra sent her son and daughter to help me when I wanted something from the souk and to go to the *serafiya*. My husband still had not sent me any money so I was very sad and wanted to return to Abuda. The women said no, that I should stay for a few months and if he had still not sent money then to go to Abuda. So I said good, I will stay and see. Now my husband sent me money and gold when his brother came so I am fine. He sent many things so Zaharra was correct. After this Ammouna asked me to join the *sanduug* and I said yes. At this time I began to talk to Rariya and Fahima and we would walk home together. Rariya's husband was also away so we spent much time together, drinking tea and coffee, not like if our husbands were here. She often used to leave her children with me because she knew that I would treat them well and not let them eat dirt. When I asked her where she was going she said to the SCC. I asked if this was the clinic and she said that it was a place for women to learn to read. Every day she was there so I asked if I could come. When we went I liked it very much. Now we go together, Rariya and I, and we leave the children with her mother, or with Fahima. We can sew and embroider and we spend much time together...God be praised. Now I am happy. I can sew so I don't feel useless. Sometimes I sew bedsheets, pillowcases and nightdresses, and I take them to my mother in Abuda to sell. If there was no *sanduug* maybe I would not know Rariya, Zaharra, and Ammouna, but God is good.

**Table 5. Informal Savings Associations (1986).**

<u>Hilla</u>	<u>Associations</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Members</u>
Alighidir	8	2 'idda, 6 <i>sanduug</i>	80
Baria	2	2 <i>sanduug</i>	14
Habash	1	<i>Mahaberra medhine alem</i>	38
Jeffe	2	<i>sanduug</i>	18
SCC	1	<i>sanduug</i>	30
COR/SCF	1	<i>sanduug</i>	22

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Associations</u>	<u>Members</u>
Women	13	150
Mixed	2	52 (27 female, 25 male)

## 2.5 The *Sanduug* vs. the Cooperative

Although there are many formal and informal institutions in Um Gargur which are exclusively male preserves, the *sanduug* is the only one which is, if not exclusively female, regarded as the domain of women. Because it is women who control and regulate it, it is also, not surprisingly, the only institution which has their interests entirely at heart. We have shown that in Um Gargur the *sanduug* is a supportive institution which, although informal, has rules and codes which serve to reinforce the traditional values of interdependence and cooperation. It works on the principle of reciprocity in both the financial and personal spheres and as each individual contributes equally, each has an equally dynamic role to play in its success. The needs of its members are recognised, among themselves, as similar yet distinct. It is also clearly egalitarian since there are no qualifications but trustworthiness required for anyone wishing to start their own *sanduug*.

The strained economic situation and the heterogeneous nature of the settlement makes the position of women a very problematic one. This is compounded by the fact that all women are perceived by the settlement administration, the sheikhs and other men as having identical needs, aspirations and expectations. In such a situation the marginalised and disenfranchised have no means of articulating their needs. This is not only because those in control feel that they are well aware of their problems, and by extension of what is good for them, but also because they are formally excluded from participating in institutions such as the cooperative which theoretically are there to assist them.

Because the *sanduug* in Um Gargur is organised along spatial, rather

than ethnic, religious or socio-economic lines, and the neighbourhoods are themselves multi-ethnic, the *sanduug* also serves as a communications network through which women are given some insight into the goings-on in the rest of the settlement. The structure of the settlement means that the women who belong to the various *sanduug* necessarily have friends and occasionally relations living in other areas. Every woman who belongs to these associations is armed with a wealth of information that she receives from her association mates. When each woman goes visiting, she not only carries with her the news and gossip of her homestead and her immediate neighbourhood but also the news she receives from other sources such as the *sanduug* and the clinic. Her children are also a valuable source of intelligence since they play with children from their own and other *hillat* and are just as, if not even more likely than their parents to repeat what they have overheard from adults. Thus there is a circuitous flow of information that reaches sections of the village where many of these women do not venture. This often means that the women of one *hilla* know the affairs and concerns of another *hilla* even though they might only have passing acquaintances residing there. In this respect women are generally more well-informed than men.

A husband who is cognisant of the workings, or plans of the settlement administration might speak to his wife in confidence about what he has heard. She in turn might inform her associates in the *sanduug* who have no access to such information. Usually the gossip is benign, or has no import outside of the context of the story. In other words if news gets around that a man or woman has committed adultery people may be shocked, angry or amused, but at its worst this knowledge can only alter the relationships between individuals. Occasionally

however, they receive information about decisions that are being taken which will affect their lives in Um Gargur<sup>5</sup>. The women who are involved in the *sanduug* may not be able to seize any political power through these associations, but they are certainly able to claim a degree of political awareness which would be inconceivable were it not for their involvement in the *sanduug*. The extended functions of the *sanduug* then, are a healthy and positive counteraction to the restraints women encounter in their daily lives in the settlement.

It is possible to draw interesting contrasts between the institution of the *sanduug* and the cooperative association. The cooperative is male-controlled and male-centred although it purports to represent the needs and priorities of the settlement's majority, who happen to be women. In reality this association is very exclusive and membership to it limited and formalised. Because the men who run it are a small number of the settlement's few elites - shopkeepers, religious and secular sheikhs, and teachers, they are the "vocalists" to whom every expatriate or government official will turn either when information about the settlement is required, or when they are considering implementing new programmes and need to feel out the potential response. It is a formal association which is sanctioned not only by the Sudanese administration, but also by the UNHCR.

In the absence of any other legitimate heads, the heads of the cooperative are, along with the elder-committee, considered by the administration to be the legitimate decision makers and leaders of the settlement (Bright, 1985). The elder-committee is more representative of the population than the cooperative committee although a number of people belong to both simultaneously. The difference is that the

cooperative leaders control finances and are seen on the whole as corrupt opportunists who are far more likely to help themselves than the people who the cooperative was planned to benefit, while the elder-committee is regarded as reasonably beneficial when problems arise between families or *hillat*. Yet the cooperative leaders appear to be despised by the majority of the refugees and cannot realistically be seen as representing or articulating the refugees' needs and interests. In fact the refugees see the cooperative as a sham which, at its worst, can actively hurt the greater population.

For instance goods at the cooperative store, or *dukhan al-ta'own*, are meant to be sold more cheaply than goods elsewhere in the market because the store is subsidised by the administration. Everything for sale there should be priced at the official (rather than the black market) rate. Thus, while the black market price of sugar varied during the time I was in Sudan from S£3.00 - S£10.00, the price of sugar in Um Gargur's *dukhan al-ta'own* should have remained stationary at 36 *piastres* (100 *piastre* = S£1.00) per kilo. Occasionally it was possible to get sugar and other goods at the official prices but it was rare. Because a number of the men who are sheikhs are not only cooperative leaders but are also the same men who happen to own, or whose relations own shops in the *souk*, there is a conflict of interest which, not surprisingly, means that supplies at the cooperative store are always depleted. Items which fill up the other stores are nowhere to be found and the excuse from the cooperative shopkeeper is always the same - "We have run out." Villagers say that where the other stores are filled monthly or bi-monthly, the cooperative store is never ever filled and supplies when they do arrive, are generally not cheaper than those at other stores.

People have no inclination to buy from the cooperative store as opposed to elsewhere because they feel that the money goes to the same people regardless. The tractor owned by the cooperative seemed to work on the land of the cooperative leaders and their relatives and friends before it was made available to the other villagers. Kordusan Habte who oversaw the nutrition programme at the clinic, expressed the frustration many feel with the cooperative.

The people from the cooperative are afraid of us Tigrinya. We have studied them and know that they are good-for-nothing. All the money, don't you see them? The sheikhs and the cooperative, they are one, as well as that last man, the *moodir*. They are all one and the same. We will see with this new one [*moodir*] whether he is with the cooperative or with us. When they have their meetings do you see one of us there? No, because they know that we know them. All of them have shops and look how one of them has recently brought a generator to the *souk* to sell cold drinks. Look at them. They put the money in their pockets. Right now the mill has been broken for three or four months and it breaks down every three or four months after they repair it. Everyone has to take their *durra* and *esh* to Karkora. Why don't we have a mill that is working? It costs 50 *girish* [1 *girish* = 1 *piastre*] for one *kayla* [grain measurement] at the mill in Karkora. Well, we the Tigrinya have more money than many people so what is 50 *girish* to us? We can take the SCC car or take a lorry and go to Karkora. But what about everyone else who has to take the donkey and go to Karkora. The people of Um Gargur cannot afford it. We are all fed-up with the cooperative. People go to Karkora in the hot sun, and because it costs 50 *girish*, many people cannot afford to take more than one *kayla* and that might feed a family of four for four, maybe five days. After that they have to get up again and go to Karkora. People are fed-up! The cooperative do not care. The mill stays broken for many months and they still never repair it well. All the parts they bring are old and used and soon it breaks down again. Have you ever been to the cooperative store? What does it have? Matches, maybe soap. Why? Because they know that if it were filled up people would buy only from there. But since all of them have *shops* they know their business. They know what it is they are doing. The cooperative store should sell things cheaper. The idea is really a good one; the cooperative should buy things in Gedaref and Kassala cheap, and then sell them for the same price. Cheap. The idea is good and we have many stores like this in Eritrea. Even the EPLF has one. But it can only work if you have good people running it. With these people here, you know the money goes

into their pockets. They don't want us at their meetings because they know us [Tigrinya] and we know them. The other day the woman from COR, Saadia, came here to Um Gargur. She had already had a meeting with the sheikhs and she asked them to give her some women to take to Showak to train for soap-making. They gave her some girls. Then she came here because when she asked everyone 'Where do you find the women?' she was told 'At the clinic under the rakuba'. So she came here. When she explained what she wanted and told us that she had met with the sheikhs, we said 'how can you meet with the shiekhs? How can they know which women will be good for this work? We are women, and we know. Why didn't you come to us first?' After this she didn't say anything. She was silent. Maybe she was thinking what I said was right and that she did the wrong thing. So we spoke to her but then she left. Now we haven't heard from her. We heard they took two girls to Showak or Gedaref so I don't know, maybe the girls were from the sheikhs. The COR, UNHCR and the sheikhs have one voice. Maybe the *moodir* doesn't yet know what the cooperative is like, or maybe he knows but he is like that other *moodir*...We will see.

Although I was informed that eighty per cent of the camp had paid a contribution of S£3.25 to join the cooperative in 1977, the longer I remained in Um Gargur the more apparent it became that the villagers received no perceptible benefits from membership (Bright, 1985:66). Unlike the *sanduug* which, although informal, supported its members both socially and psychologically and had the added attraction of offering them a little economic flexibility, the cooperative was perceived as an organisation which represented the needs of a select few. The *sanduug* "empowers" (within a very limited sense and context) those who are most in need of it while the cooperative sustains those who are already elite and empowered. While the *sanduug* is egalitarian and reciprocal the cooperative is regarded as paternalistic and self-serving. Although people seem to understand the basic concept underlying the cooperative and regard that as a positive one, they find that in reality its workings in Um Gargur leave much to be desired. None of the members of the cooperative are women. A number of its leaders are conservative

sheikhs who would not tolerate involvement from women and so the greater portion of the population is left out when it comes to making decisions. Even the men who attend the cooperative meetings appear to be afraid to challenge the cooperative leaders about what the cooperative is actually doing to assist people in Um Gargur. They will grumble privately in their homes, but no one is actually prepared to be outspoken. With the *sanduug* the disenfranchised get a hearing even if it is only from the other marginal and disenfranchised. They also get a chance to participate in something which is positive and beneficial. There is little potential for the *sanduug* to be misused in quite the same way as the cooperative. In fact whereas most of the women seem to feel accountable to each other and concerned about maintaining their good names, the leaders of the cooperative appear to have no such qualms. Were the COR and UNHCR to compare the role of the cooperative with the *sanduug* and examine each institution's effectiveness in voicing people's concerns, they would discover that the various *sittat al' sanduug* are far more qualified to give a consensus opinion than the cooperative leaders.

### 3. Traders

Although my preliminary study of the settlement revealed a remarkable absence of income-earning women, I was later to discover that a substantial number of women were actually engaged in petty trade, not outside in the visible sphere, but within the privacy of their homesteads (Bright, 1985). Not counting those women who were working in the formal sector, it has been estimated that approximately 15-20% of women are involved in petty trade at some point during the year.<sup>6</sup> A

sampling of an area in *hillat* Alighidir which contained twenty homesteads, revealed an even higher ratio; there were at least four women who produced food or other goods for sale. All women who enter into trade do so because of economic necessity. Some are involved more or less all year round, others only when the expense of special occasions such as family weddings or circumcisions, create a need for extra income.

### 3.1 Prostitutes and Home-Brewers

The first group of women I will discuss are those whose work brings them into disrepute. They are the women who earn a living as prostitutes and/or brewers of beer [*suwah-Tya*] and *aragi*, gin made from sorghum. There are five "overt" prostitutes in Um Gargur, all of whom are Christian and live in the same or neighbouring homesteads in *hillat* Habash. Three of those five also make money on the side by brewing alcohol. Alcohol does not carry the same religious injunctions among the Christians as it does among the Muslims but because it is frowned upon by those villagers who are fundamentalist Muslims and, in theory, by the authorities, all Christians are generally careful not to offend and concerned about protecting their good name. While individual families may prepare local beer or wine for their own consumption, mainly for festive occasions, the prostitutes tend to control the "illicit" commercial trade in alcohol. There is only one non-prostitute woman who brews alcohol for sale, and unlike the prostitutes, who are all single or divorced women, she is married with a family and because she is thought to be very gracious, manages to enjoy the social approbation of numerous people despite her work.

Without a doubt the "overt" prostitutes are among the richest women

in Um Gargur. Interestingly, most of their money is earned from servicing the Sudanese administrators in the settlement and furnishing them with alcohol. In 1986 a litre bottle of *aragi* cost about S£25.00 while the local beer, *suwah*, cost approximately S£1.00. These prices reflected the difficulty involved in brewing the *aragi* and the fact that most people could easily prepare *suwah* at home. While women who engaged in various forms of petty trade were extremely fortunate if they realised profits of S£5.00 for a week's work, the earning of a successful prostitute/brewer were in an entirely different league.

One woman in particular, A., was the most popular prostitute in the village despite the fact that she suffered from chronic gonorrhoea which she passed on to numerous men. A. was a very beautiful woman with great charm and a ready smile. She wore more heavy gold jewellery than any other woman I encountered in the settlement, which marked her out as an extremely successful prostitute. Although she did not tend to socialise with other non-prostitute women on a daily basis, she was present at most weddings and circumcisions in *hillat* Habash and was someone who could be counted on to prepare food and drink on these and other religious occasions. Her rates varied between about S£15.00 for an overnight stay and S£5.00 for a short visit, though they might fluctuate depending upon her need for ready cash. She also received business from some of the nomads who came through Um Gargur to use the bore-well for their animals during the dry season.

Even though prostitution is frowned upon among the Christian highlanders, when a woman reaches an age and status where she has ceased to earn a living as a prostitute, she can be absolved of the sins of her former life by a combination of fasting, prayers, ritual cleansing,

giving a large contribution to her church and receiving the blessing of a priest. Although this does not appear to be the case among Eritrean Muslims, among the Hausa of Nigeria, a Muslim prostitute who marries always visits a sheikh on the eve of her wedding to give him money and request that he offers a special prayer to absolve her sins (Cohen, 1969:69). Christians say that despite the Muslims' belief that they, as Christians, find prostitution acceptable, it really is regarded as a shameful profession. According to them the Muslims are confusing the Eritrean Christians with their Ethiopian counterparts<sup>7</sup>. The attitudes of both Muslims and Christians, of course, reflect stereotyping. Among the Muslims prostitution was entirely clandestine, with great shame being attached even to those who were felt to be attempting to attract men by their dress or manner. According to several men and women, there were between eight and twelve Muslim women in Um Gargur who were considered to be "underground" prostitutes. Unlike the others they were not referred to as *chermutta*, (the Arabic term for prostitute which has been incorporated into Tigre and Tigrinya for well over seventy years<sup>8</sup>) but merely as "women who slept with men for money". These were women who were divorced or whose husbands were away during the year. They were very poor and would surreptitiously have men over to their homes for the evening and receive money in exchange for their favours. Not many of the Muslims with whom I spoke would acknowledge that this sort of activity went on in any area other than *hillat* Habash.

When I first visited Um Gargur I was told by an expatriate that he had once been solicited in *hillat* Alighidir in a Beni Amer area. I found it very surprising at the time and asked a number of people whether there were any women engaged in prostitution in that area but

was consistently told that there were not. Later I discovered that although not one prostitute there was practising openly, that area in fact held (numerically though not proportionately) even more than hillat Habash. Initially it is difficult to account for the fact that many Muslims who must have known of these clandestine prostitutes were so quick to speak of hillat Habash as a place where immorality was rife (Bright, 1985). I later understood their disapproval to be linked to their perception that, for the Christians, prostitution was something which co-existed with every other form of trade, and that those who openly declared themselves as prostitutes were not shunned as they would have been among the Muslims. As in much of Um Gargur as long as things had the appearance of propriety, few would try to upset the *status quo* by drawing attention to the facts. There were those who obviously despised these "covert" prostitutes and spent very little time in their company so as not to be placed in the same category as them, but from what I could gather, little was said about their activities.

Another notable difference between these two sets of women in Um Gargur was that unlike the Christian prostitutes, most of the Muslim prostitutes were married with their husbands away (those who were not were divorced). Also unlike the Christian prostitutes, all of whom had been engaged in the same sorts of activities at home in Eritrea, none of these prostitutes had set themselves up in business as "professionals" but were trapped by the fact that they were very impoverished and desperately in need of money, and had not seen or heard from their husbands in months or even years. They had no set rates, although I learned that they generally charged much less than the professionals in hillat Habash - partly, it seemed, because of the surreptitious nature

of their activities. Some members of the male staff at the clinic confided that they were being propositioned frequently.

One of the difficulties that faced these women was that occasionally they would become pregnant. Since their husbands were generally out of the settlement and had been for some time, they now found themselves in the embarrassing situation of having to visit the clinic to seek advice on how to obtain an abortion. Even though the *daya* or traditional midwife was said to be able to perform abortions, it seemed that people preferred the hospitals of Gedaref or Kassala, since there they were assured of privacy and relative safety. Although I wondered whether one or two of these women were not in fact prostitutes but simply adulterers, I was assured that often those who required abortions were the same women who propositioned male clinic staff and some of the younger men in the settlement. In one incident a woman from Um Gargur died in Kassala after she had received an abortion which I understood to have been her fourth during the years that her husband had been away from the settlement.

For the prostitutes resident in *hillat* Habash, prostitution was a way of life long before they moved to the Sudan. A few of them hoped that later when they returned to Eritrea they would open bars or become owners of their own brothels with the money which they had saved up. All of the Christian prostitutes were strong-willed and independent and probably felt themselves unsuited for conventional marriages in which they would be at the beck and call of husbands. Although the impetus for the Muslim women is to find a way of escaping from poverty, because their situation is a covert one and the perimeters within which they can solicit are quite narrow and defined, economic independence for any of

them is extremely unlikely as long as they remain in Um Gargur.

For women who are left alone in Um Gargur with no relatives, no remittances from their husbands outside, and no marketable skills, the choices are few. Any woman who is in this position and who dreams of a better life for her children has only to look across at the Christian prostitutes to imagine that such lucrative gains could be hers. A woman who has to feed and clothe herself and the children of a man who does not send her money is in precisely the same position as that of a widowed or divorced woman who has no relatives in the camp. She can depend on no one but herself to attend to her needs and certainly she has no one whom she can shame into providing for her. She may in fact decide that her only option is to shame herself, if she believes that the choices are otherwise grim. At home the kin group would very likely have provided for her in such a situation, since in theory no male member of her family would like it to be known that his close female relative has to work or sell herself. This would bring as great shame upon him as upon her. But in the refugee context this kind of safety-net is not in place and thus many women are left to fend for themselves.

### **3.2 Petty Trade**

In Um Gargur there are clearly degrees of disapproval which a woman may be subjected to as a result of the economic activities she takes part in, and although as I have noted before, none are considered worse than prostitution and the selling of alcohol, it is always a contentious affair for a Muslim woman or girl to work. Yet many of these women do work and the way they are perceived by the other villagers is very much linked to how they are perceived by the other

villagers. A woman (or girl) should try as best as she can to protect the honour of her family by behaving in appropriate ways. Since those who choose to engage in petty trade are aware of the scrutiny under which they will be held, these women often elicit the support of others.

When it exists, this encouragement comes either from their relatives, friends or from the informal credit societies. The *sanduug* forms the basis for other enterprises and offers women a group of moral and economic supporters that they can fall back on. Women are less likely to speak badly of someone who starts up an enterprise if that person is an associate from the *sanduug*. Instead they will rally around to protect her reputation. Hence one can observe in Um Gargur an ongoing transformation in moral attitudes *vis à vis* income-generation by women (as long as their economic activities involved products not considered to be morally repugnant).

As a rule the women who were more likely to carry on some sort of trading were those who were widowed or divorced. The economic pressures placed on families meant that those women who chose to do so included women who were married with husbands away for much of the time, who found themselves burdened with the sole responsibility of caring for their children, and a minority whose husbands actually remained in the settlement. Almost all of the women I knew who had set up enterprises were also members of a *sanduug* and had used the money which accrued to them to establish themselves. Almost all of them carried on their business from within the confines of the homestead although a few set up first on the outskirts of the market and later in its centre behind the abbatoir. All such businesses were single-person concerns. An enterprise might only last for a month or it might continue

indefinitely, and activities were almost as varied as the women themselves. Sometimes a woman would save up to buy a sewing machine or to buy *zaf* and dye to make mats which she could later sell. Women began to sell all sorts of items.

Some would prepare *kisra* which they could sell from their homes to single men or to other women who were engaged in other enterprises. Sometimes they sold cooked food such as *shirro*, a chick-pea stew, or *bahmia*, made from dried okra. They sold doughnuts; sweets made out of sesame seeds; fresh vegetables such as aubergines and *jirjir*, a salad leaf. Because it is women who decide what the family will eat, it was women who were buying products from each other and keeping money circulating within the female sphere of exchange. Sometimes they would exchange their rations in one of the shops for flour or sugar which they might consume or use to produce small cakes. Women would *henna* or braid hair for a small fee or perhaps in exchange for another favour. This created a feeling of social and economic involvement which was ultimately very good for their morale.

Clearly the "economic niche" in which they operate is a very limited one, and in many ways the women of Um Gargur have been late in embracing entrepreneurship, but this has been entirely to do with the religious and social expectations in the settlement. Essentially they are their own customers in petty trade and once they realised that they could control some aspects of their lives in Um Gargur without offending notions of propriety by working outside or challenging their husbands' roles as breadwinner, many have been supportive of each other. Although a few people make money, the returns from most of this commerce are not great. On occasions, indeed, they are pitiful but they nevertheless

give women a sense of self-worth and a feeling of independence and security.

It is interesting that the first "Muslim" woman to begin to work outside of the home (besides the traditional midwives) was the Christian-born wife of an unemployed Muslim bricklayer (Bright, 1985). When I first met her she informed me that she enjoyed no favours from the other women and was not a member of any *sanduug*, essentially because she was too poor to join. Mariam had married Hamid in Eritrea and converted to Islam at the time of their marriage. When they arrived in Sudan he had difficulty finding work. According to her he was constantly plagued by headaches and chills, but according to others in the village he was merely lazy. He ended up scraping a living by selling wood and thorn-bush to the villagers for firewood, and from time to time he worked with on an agricultural project run by CARE. When the CARE staff moved to the village for a month to carry out major planting they were looking for a cook and Mariam volunteered for the job. At the time they were very poor, but since they were married, Mariam could not qualify as a "vulnerable" and thus receive extra aid. When she took the job she came under a lot of criticism and people would tease her about not behaving in a proper "Muslim" way. When I left the settlement after my first visit Mariam was still working for CARE as a cook and housekeeper and earning an excellent income of S£60.00 monthly.

Upon my return to the settlement over a year later I discovered that she was now working in the same capacity for SCF. She had saved up enough money to get a small business together, selling utensils for coffee and tea as well as small pots and pans. While she worked in the SCF compound, Hamid or the children would sell these items in the

marketplace. Later, when the SCF left the settlement Mariam's business had expanded to the extent that she was able to establish a permanent place in the marketplace along with her children, selling coffee in the area of the abattoir. When I asked her whether people disapproved she had this to say:

In the beginning everyone made things difficult for me. Not only the men, but especially the women because they thought that it was a shameful thing to do. But when I began to earn money everyone became jealous because I was making even more than some of their husbands. Before, there were no women in the market and even when I came to buy something I didn't like to come to the market, because everyday they would see me and talk. Even people who had not been to the market would say, 'Ya Mariam, today you bought soap in the market, today you bought oil.' When SCF came I was the first to go to work for them, but after that other women came from *hillat* Jaffe (where some Beni Amer live) to ask if there was work. Two of us worked in the SCF compound cooking and cleaning the houses...Now things are difficult again, since SCF left. When they were here people had work and money.

By the time I finally left Um Gargur Mariam had been joined by about five other women, three Baria, one Habab and one Beni Amer, who sat near the *abbatoir* selling their goods.

One woman who was very dear to me was Ade Amina or Ade Hedat, as she was known by the residents of *hillat* Habash. Ade Amina, who was seventy-five years old had been born a Christian. She had buried two husbands, her first, a Christian, died while the Italians were still in Eritrea, and her second, a Muslim, died around the time of the federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. She remembered the different powers which had occupied Eritrea with great clarity, saying that everyone felt betrayed by the British because they had believed them to be their saviours before the federation. Ade Amina was nothing if not a survivor. She was one of the first women to realise that if offered the choice many people would actually prefer to buy *injera* rather than

prepare it themselves. She had decided that the money she earned from her business would help her to get to Eritrea, where she was hoping to have an operation to remove a lump from her breast (she had already been recently and had been given an appointment to return later during the year). Ade Amina had sold some of the few gold pieces she had (aside from having aesthetic and symbolic value as a necessary enhancement of femininity, gold was easily convertible into cash and therefore a safe and sensible way to save) in order to augment her finances for the trip. Being widely respected and well-liked, Ade Amina was a pioneer businesswoman, and it was partly through her example that other women began to set up food enterprises from their own homes.

#### **4. Children as Economic Assets**

We have shown that although a significant number of women are involved in the economic life of Um Gargur, operating in a predominantly female system of exchange, their participation in the public sphere is in fact limited. In such a situation children have assumed a multitude of responsibilities, and with these, a greater significance to adult female society. Studies on women in purdah have revealed the extent to which child labour contributes to women's lives (Schildkrout, 1978; Cohen, 1969). Adults are sometimes as dependent on children as children are said to be dependent on adults: "If one focusses on the interaction of people of different ages, all as dependent variables, without assuming that one group or the other 'makes the rules', one is forced to reexamine the society itself and study the significance of the participation of people of different ages. It then becomes possible to study the 'value of children' in sociological terms" (Schildkrout,

1978:111).

Children occupy an ambivalent position in the settlement. Because of the difficulties of settlement life very small children are burdensome and take up a great deal of energy and focus. However as they get older they represent a form of security for their parents. Not only do people speak of children as their own personal hope for the future, but in a much wider political sense they think of them as Eritreans, who will have a role in the liberated Eritrea of the future. In this sense all children are *sha'ab*, the youth that will be depended on to set Eritrea free.

When one thinks of children as security for their parents one tends to imagine them as adults, earning an income and otherwise contributing to their parents' welfare. While it is true that in Um Gargur some of the older people have adult children who support them financially with remittances from the towns and countries where they work, the contribution made by youngsters between the ages of seven and seventeen is also crucial. It is mainly their presence within the settlement which has helped to maintain gender roles and keep women secluded. Without them the society would certainly have undergone more radical transformations.

For instance, almost all of the women who carried out a business enterprise, whether it was selling cooked food, sewing or making mats, did so from the privacy of their homes, being reluctant to sit in the marketplace or sell their wares themselves from house to house. Instead they were dependent upon their older children (any child over the age of seven) to act as vendors. Both within and outside the marketplace it was a common sight to see children selling pastries and other goods made

by their mothers. Although the number of children who worked in the market fluctuated, I estimated that there were about twenty who were regular vendors. There were also many children who sold within their *hilla* or who used their family donkey to collect water and deliver it to houses for a small sum. In *hillat* Habash there were two women who sold *injera* and several who raised chickens for their eggs. Like the women in other *hillat*, these women also utilised their children's labour.

Traditionally children also have a role as intermediaries, travelling easily between the world of adult females and that of adult males. Among the Muslims these two worlds rarely intrude upon each other, and it is children that have access to the spaces controlled by both, and the information contained in each. Children are the ones who supply their mothers with information which opens up the otherwise opaque male world to them. Whereas adults are generally guarded with other adults who are not their friends, they are rarely on their guard around children. They tend to speak freely to those they trust even when unrelated children are about, and as a result these children are very often in a position to hear more than their own parents. Thus even when economic considerations are secondary, mothers still benefit from their children's mobility.

Among Christians in Um Gargur there is no acute separation between the female and male spheres. Men and women interact socially and as friends. Yet for both groups children fulfill very specific functions. Both in the highlands and lowlands of Eritrea people always depended on children to assist them in their daily activities. They took care of their younger siblings, did shopping, ran errands for their mothers, sold food, took messages, cared for farm animals, etc. In fact they did

many of the things which children continue to do in Um Gargur, but where in Eritrea women may have had greater choice as to whether or not they would fetch water, engage in trade, or go shopping in the market, in Um Gargur these things are actually proscribed for them. Since mothers have control over the labour of their children and cannot generally use male adults to undertake chores for them, all chores which call for leaving the homestead are done mainly by children.

As women's duties increase so too do the duties of children and concomitantly, the dependence of women upon their children. In terms of degrees, this is probably as true of the Muslims as it is of the Christians. Also, because of the pressure put on many women to remain within the area of their homesteads the extent of the dependence appears to have led to a more possessive attitude towards the children. One of the ways in which this has impacted upon the traditional family structure is that the need for children to perform more tasks both within and outside of the home has led to a decrease in the early marriage of girls, as women are reluctant to part with the help of their daughters. Whereas in the past girls in many of the rural societies were married off between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, now mothers attempt to keep them in the home to assist them for as long as possible. Of course once they reach the age of fifteen or sixteen parents are reluctant to send their daughters out too much in case they excite the attention of men, and so their chores are more limited to the domestic sphere.

Because they fulfill such a wide variety of functions for women, most of whom could not afford to hire someone to undertake such work for them, the economic and sociological "value of children" cannot be

underestimated. Without a child to work as the "trader" the majority of women would not make items to sell and would have no degree of economic flexibility. A woman without children would also, if she was without relatives or money, need to do everything for herself and would thus be more exposed to male society than women in Um Gargur are expected to be. It is such women, without relatives or husbands in the settlement (whether this is because they are divorced or widowed, or because the husband is absent) who one sees on days when rations are handed out, struggling under the load of their goods. It is for them, perhaps, that refugee life is the hardest. Hence, whether or not women make items for trading, children over the age of seven are still a vital asset for them in Um Gargur, bringing them knowledge about the public sphere and allowing them "respectable" involvement in the economic life of the settlement.

## CHAPTER V - HEALTH

*"Weyza tih na, Weyza tih na, kuta uhm nebeyna"*

(O health, O health, how sweet it is)

Tigrinya song

Ascha Idris, Baria ex-ELF fighter, aged 23:

*"When I was a little girl there was no opportunity to go to school and I never wished to be anything. For example, I could not wish to be a doctor if I do not know what a doctor is. I was just eating and drinking, not thinking of anything. But the [liberation] Front has shown us a different way. Listen, do I want Eritrea for myself or for the people? I want it for the people so the people could be educated so that they might know for themselves and work to help their brothers and sisters. We don't want to say 'This man is Tigrinya so I don't want to go to him,' or 'This is Tigre, I don't want to go.' We want the people to be brothers and sisters. To eat and drink together. Also we want the woman to be clean, smart and work for herself, her children and her people. If I think only of myself I would focus only on how to live well, learn only for myself, and work for myself. But I want all to be together, the Habash and the Muslims, like in the SCC clinic. There they said 'Let's work together and be my sister.'"*

## V. HEALTH

### 1. The Situation

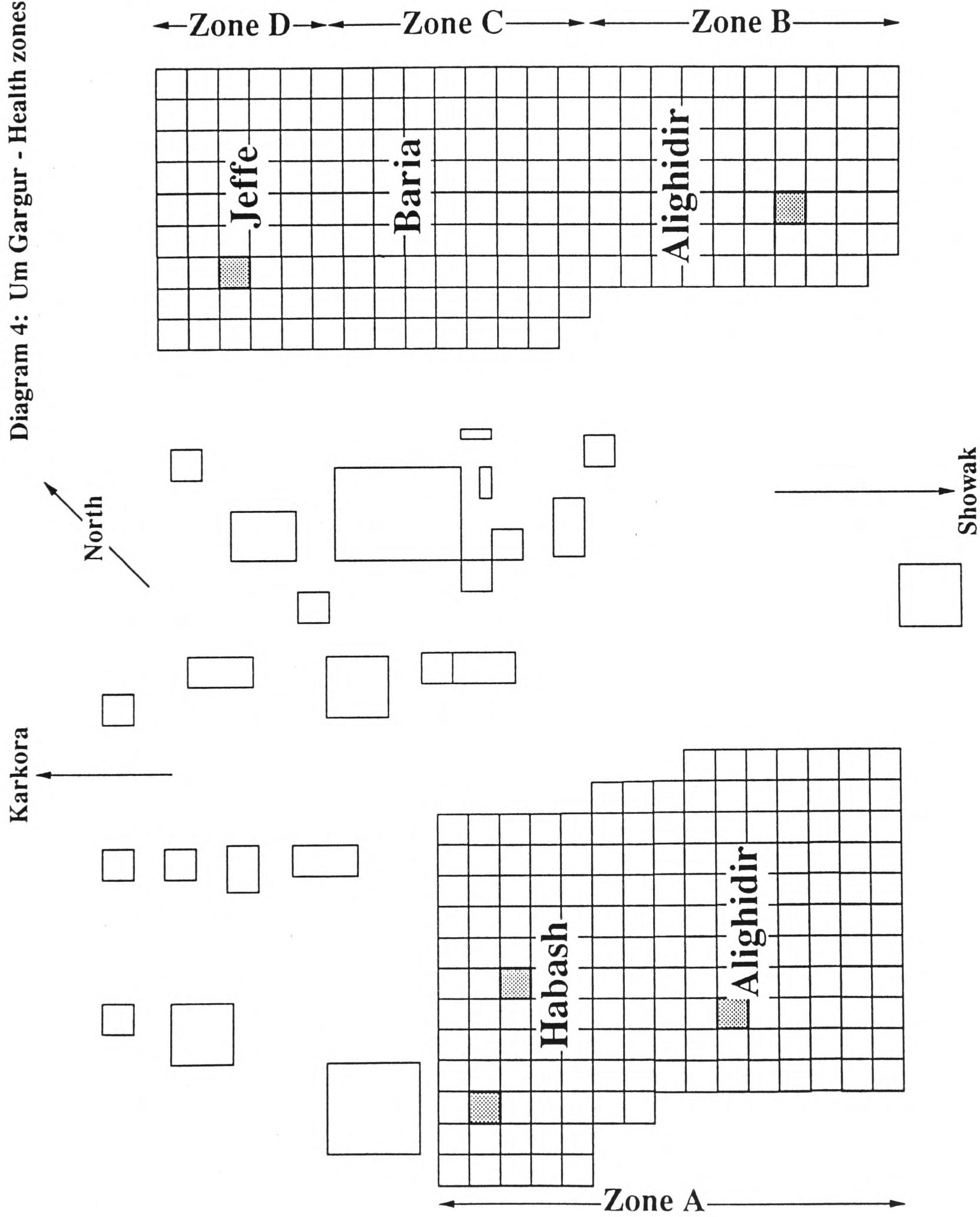
The state of health and health care in the settlement reveals a great deal about the constraints faced by people in Um Gargur, and about what refugee life entails. Health concerns occupy a large amount of the refugees' time and for many, health is regarded as a political issue. The economic and social constraints that are placed upon women in the settlement have a direct bearing on their health and on the health of their children. Conversely if women are not healthy and their physical and psychological well-being is undermined then there are repercussions for the entire society, since with the majority of men away it is these women, the "mothers of steel" who are raising the Eritreans of the future. While women are deliberately excluded from all formal institutions, they exercise almost total control when it comes to health. They sometimes earn money for food and medicines, they prepare meals and look after the health of their families. Thus women not only produce life but sustain it.

People believe that what happens in Um Gargur and in the other refugee settlements in which there are Eritreans will have some bearing on the independent Eritrea which they all dream of. In this chapter I will look at the clinics and examine the position of the health-workers and traditional practitioners, as well as the perception of the refugees towards them. I also include a detailed discussion of belief systems, circumcision, taboos, and traditional practices which affect health in general and which are all of paramount importance to women in their daily life.

Many of the ailments seen in Um Gargur are typical of tropical developing countries (Jelliffe, 1982): in the dry season conjunctivitis, gastro-enteric and respiratory tract infections, snake and scorpion bites are common, while during the rainy season diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria, coughs and colds are the main illnesses afflicting the villagers. Um Gargur has suffered only one cholera epidemic - three-hundred people were affected with only ten deaths) - in contrast with some of the larger settlements which provide ideal environments for pathogenic diseases and have had recurring epidemics with new influxes of refugees. Malnutrition, however, is a serious problem which affects the entire community. This must be understood not simply in terms of feeding practices but also in terms of the social and economic conditions in Um Gargur.

As in stable communities, the incidence of disease and illness in the settlement is to some extent linked to the demographic profile (Morley, 1973). Although it is impossible to draw up pre-refugee health profiles of the groups in Um Gargur, given the obvious demographic dissimilarities, it is safe to assume that they were substantially different. For instance children are, ideally, economically dependent upon their fathers. Yet we have shown that most of the adults who remain in the settlement continuously are women and that many of them have become not only economically responsible for their children (despite the fact that they are seldom employed), but also responsible for their health and welfare. The restrictions placed upon women's mobility meant that in the past even activities such as the small scale farming of nutritious vegetables was discouraged. Without adequate nutrition children are the first to suffer in these conditions of

Diagram 4: Um Gargur - Health zones and Hillat



economic stress. Women are also paramount to ensuring the community's well-being.

Of course the refugees' health problems do not stem simply from their current living conditions. The trauma of their original displacement was severe. I learned that the main fatalities during flight were old people, children and those who were already ill before leaving Eritrea. Also, during the initial period of displacement a number of refugees faced health problems which were either linked directly to the war, or to the difficulty of their flight. For many people the long years spent in the settlement coupled with the fact that they are rarely able to receive news of relatives who remain in Eritrea have resulted in a state of protracted stress. Children are also particularly vulnerable in these conditions. Thus, even when it is not immediately perceptible, refugeehood certainly influences health.

## **2. The Clinics**

### **2.1 Sudan Council of Churches Clinic**

In comparison to most rural African villages of a similar size, Um Gargur, like several other settlements, is very well provided for in terms of medical services (Wright, 1980:164). The village has two clinics of which the larger and better equipped was started in 1978 and is administered by the SCC which is directly involved in the training of its personnel. The second clinic is run by the COR with some input from SCF. The SCC clinic is staffed primarily by Eritreans of highland origin, mainly Christians although in the last few years it has made a concerted effort to recruit workers from all sections of the village.

The staff at both clinics are refugees and live in the village, although many of the higher level SCC staff have been transferred from other refugee settlements and will continue to rotate around settlements. These are primarily contract workers who work their way up through the echelons of the SCC.

Although it has facilities for overnight patients and treats adults (when I first lived in Um Gargur adults were catered for only during emergencies), it is still essentially a day clinic, and specialises in antenatal care and the care of children. The clinic area was entered through a main gate which was manned around the clock by a guard. Once inside the compound there are eight structures which comprise the clinic, including one newly built concrete building. There is a laboratory in which two technicians work diligently carrying out blood, urine and stool analyses, the results of which are passed on immediately to the patients. There are four *tukuls* or huts, which are used to house overnight patients - three for women and one for male patients, a concrete building housing the pharmacy and delivery room, a semi-permanent *rakoba* which serves as a resting and meal area for staff, one *rakoba* for teaching the *dayas* (midwives) new medical techniques and where patients rested, another which served as the main area for the maternal and child health clinic (MCH) and where most meetings, discussion groups and plays took place, and an examination hut (which people generally refer to as "the clinic") where the dressers carried out checks mainly on women and children. There were also four pit latrines on the grounds.

At the clinic there was one medical team leader who coordinated and oversaw the programmes, three examiners, nine dressers, one assistant

nutritionist, two nutrition workers (who gave women food during and after their pregnancies), fifteen home visitors, and two cleaners. A staff-worker was on call for emergencies at all times. In the dry season the clinic opened at 8:00am and finished at 12:30pm and during that time there were normally about 30-50 people who came for treatment. The rainy season saw about 70-90 people at the clinic and work ended at 3:00pm. There were days when the clinic was filled with people and these were usually the "well-baby" days (Sunday) when all the children from one zone (see below) came for weighing and vaccinations as well as general check-ups. On Thursdays (ante-natal day) the clinic was filled with pregnant women who came for their regular check-ups.

The number of in-patients at the clinic always appeared greater than the actual number because the relatives, mainly female, would sleep over (either on spare beds or on flat, thin mattresses which were put on the floor) in order to look after their sick. They brought in clean clothes, cooked for and bathed their relatives and there was always some kind of vigil being kept regardless of whether or not the illness is of a serious nature. Deep into the night when other parts of the village had long been asleep, the kerosene lamps at the clinic burned brightly and the grounds buzzed with activity.

This clinic has a major role in the social life of the village women. The thatched *rakobas* and out-huts provide shelter for the women as they wile away the afternoons talking and joking. When their appointments are over they gather together to visit friends in the in-patient section of the clinic or, if their husbands are not averse to it, in one of the other *hillat*. They compared prices in the *souk* to prices outside of Um Gargur, gossip, dream, discuss the new illnesses

spreading through the settlement. Women who would otherwise rarely meet outside of the various ceremonies meet here in the safety of the clinic's *rakobas* where there is water which is both clean and free. However because of the clinic's proximity to one of the bore-wells in Um Gargur, a primary breeding ground for mosquitoes and therefore malaria, it is thought to be a pretty unhealthy place in which to spend one's nights. Many people would say that they went into the clinic with one illness and found that they had caught malaria while there. People also say that the area where the clinic is has the most snakes and scorpions.

During 1984 the SCC clinic was paid regular visits by a Yugoslavian trained Sudanese doctor. These visits became increasingly rare and by mid-1985 stopped altogether. In 1986 a young French doctor assigned to the SCC began making visits to the settlement on a regular basis. In many ways the presence of the doctor was superfluous since the local staff were quite capable of handling the usual illnesses and minor emergencies which arose, and he was very inexperienced. The clinic was not equipped to handle serious cases which required surgery and these were referred to the Sudanese hospital in Showak or Gedaref. Most of the villagers did not like the idea of having to go to these hospitals even for emergencies. They felt that in their own clinics, although there were sometimes conflicts, they were at least treated with consideration. After all, the villagers often said, "In the end we are all Eritreans."

In the Sudanese hospitals they were seen to be and saw themselves as second-class citizens. There they were simply called refugees, "*ladji'in*", and they not only felt that the doctors did not take adequate care of them, but that they were actually resented by the staff

and their fellow patients. One woman reported an incident which she said occurred when she was hospitalised in Showak. This was at a time when the resources of the hospital there were seriously overstretched. The woman Mona, who was enrolled in literacy classes in Um Gargur, said that she was put in an overcrowded room and had been there for almost five days in great pain. On the fifth day there were several more patients admitted to the ward which was already at bursting point. Some of the new patients did not appear so ill as to warrant hospitalisation and so a number of women, all Sudanese, began complaining that some of these patients should be sent on their way and not be allowed to stay.

As the women grumbled the new patients began to get angry and a shouting match began during which a Sudanese nurse appeared. The nurse decided to diffuse the situation by saying that had the clinic refused to admit *ladji'in*, the situation would not have been quite so bad, but really it was all these refugees who were to blame. The other patients protested that there were no *ladji'in* in their ward and so her excuse did not apply. At this point the nurse promptly pointed her finger at Mona, the only refugee who was there. With all eyes now turned upon her she became embarrassed and self-conscious where before she had felt at ease and treated as an equal. A few days after this incident she was long in the toilet and she heard the women outside becoming very impatient. When she finally emerged and they saw that it was her, they began to mutter under their breath about "these *ladji'in*". According to Mona, the situation worsened as people began to take their frustrations out on her, constantly alluding to the fact that she was there on Sudanese sufferance, which was clearly wearing thin. Mona said that although she was still extremely ill, she did not want to remain in the

ward with such animosity directed at her. Some days later she decided to check herself out of the hospital, still in great pain, and head for Um Gargur.

Many villagers claim to have had similar encounters. The head of the SCC clinic in Um Gargur told me a story about a young woman from Um Gargur who was being operated on in the hospital in Gedaref. Midway through her tracheotomy the doctor learned that she was not Sudanese but a refugee. He immediately put his tools down and stopped the operation, saying that the doctors were striking and were certainly not going to operate on *ladji'in*. The young girl, now bleeding from a hole in her throat, was then taken to a hospital in Kassala, almost two hours away. There some sympathetic Sudanese doctors attempted to save her life but she had lost too much blood and subsequently died. Whether or not such stories are correct in their details, they serve to emphasise the perceived gulf between being a person "*min el balad*", one who belongs, and being a refugee whose life is seen as expendable. It is not surprising, then, that despite the many problems which arise among people in Um Gargur, and despite the constraints which restrict their lives there, few people would seek work or even spend much time outside of the protective confines of the settlement, if economic and social obligations did not force them to do so. Everyone in Um Gargur is therefore reluctant to go to Sudanese hospitals and will only do so in dire circumstances.

## **2.2 Commissioner of Refugees Clinic**

The COR clinic is a great deal smaller in size, staff (one examiner, one dresser, and an assistant), and range of treatments than the SCC

clinic. It consists of one concrete building with an outside area which serves as a waiting room, and two rooms, one of which is used as an examination room, laboratory and office, and the other as a records room. A day clinic with no in-patient facilities, it treats only adults but will see children in case of emergencies. The clinic was established primarily for tuberculosis, at a time when many adults had the disease, although it has now shifted its focus to patients with other ailments.

The two clinics do not ordinarily cooperate, except to refer patients to each other. The SCC clinic is very overburdened and will generally refuse to take in adults who are not seriously ill. The villagers do seem to have much more faith in the SCC clinic than in the COR's, and it was not unusual to find richer merchants and sheikhs in the village attempting to override the SCC rules by insisting on being treated there. The Sudanese in the village (the *moodir*, teachers, policeman and a few others) almost always insisted that they were more ill than they actually were in order to gain admittance to the SCC clinic, and simply because they were Sudanese the clinic staff were generally reluctant to turn them away even when they were extremely busy. The COR clinic sees about thirty patients a day during the dry season, with an increase of about 100% during the wet months when malaria, influenza, common colds and amoebic dysentery are rife.

### **3. Carers and Curers**

Before their displacement, attending to people's health was largely the responsibility of the indigenous system of healers, midwives, herbalists, and bloodletters. These practitioners [*seirai-T/fewasi-Tya*] were regarded as dynamic, effective and respectful of the people's views

and knowledge. Today, even though there are two clinics in Um Gargur for the villagers to use, villagers regard the clinic neither as their only option nor, necessarily as their most important one. There are many choices open to the sick (including the new free-lance 'pharmacists' working in the village who have managed to acquire caches of tablets and other medicines), and even though some of their roles overlap and correspond, people are quite pragmatic when it comes to their health. People will choose a healer on the basis of the illness and of the healer's reputed efficacy, and it is not at all uncommon for them to use both traditional treatments and clinic medicines simultaneously.

Table 6. Um Gargur Seasonal Calendar.

		D r i z z l e ----- S e a s o n			
SEASON	Dry	Rainy	Harvest --->	Winter	
MONTHS	Feb - July	Aug - Sept	Oct - Nov	Dec - Jan	
<u>ACTIVITIES</u>	Trading if harvest has been good; people from agricultural schemes return to the village.	Planting crops and praying for rain; visiting sheikhs and seers; exodus of large percentage of able-bodied men to farms, agricultural schemes and cotton fields for work until the dry season.	Harvesting and threshing; fruits, vegetables and other foods come in from Kassala; new homes are built; weddings and circumcisions.		
<u>ILLNESSES</u>	Conjunctivitis; dehydration (infants); anaemia; malnutrition and marasmus.	Malaria; common colds; dysentery; waterborne disease vectors e.g. giardia and amocbas.	Healthiest period.		
<u>MAJOR PROBLEMS</u>	Lack of water; food is scarce; people and animals very weak and labour output low; fires; infants, children, pregnant and lactating women at their most vulnerable.	Water is unsafe; lack of rainfall means crop yields low; transportation stops if there is too much rain, because of mud.	Protecting crops from locusts, vermin, and the cattle of Sudanese nomads.		

The majority of the (adult) residents in Um Gargur have visited the healers at one time or another as well as the clinic. There are no hard and fast rules dictating whether people may utilise one or more than one method (healer or clinic) simultaneously, and every individual differed from the next. But from my experience I would say that the first course of action for anyone who has a minor ailment is to treat themselves with convenient, easy-to-come-by, traditional remedies. If the person and his or her relatives do not know of a specific remedy they will generally ask one of the older men or women in the surrounding homesteads who are always willing to proffer advice. People also buy a lot of pills at the souk which will be taken at the same time as the traditional cures. Panadol and aspirin are the usual panaceas resorted to, and unless the illness persists people will use these tablets for almost anything.

There is more or less general agreement that there are illnesses which the health workers are not as well-equipped to handle as the healers, although it seemed to me that the villagers often regarded healers (not including midwives or those who perform circumcision) as their last resort. Clearly this was not because of any mistrust on the part of the villagers. In fact in cases where the clinic remedies did not give relief in the short run, most people I asked said they would go to the healers whose cures they felt to be tried and tested. It seemed that everyone could give instances of when the clinic medicine had "failed" and the healer's had not. Many of the traditional remedies, however, involved pain (regarded indeed as curative catharsis), which may have swayed some people towards the generally less painful clinic remedies. Also, visiting the clinic is a personal and private act,

while seeing the healer tends to bring the individual and his or her ailment to the attention of the community. Whereas in Eritrea a woman or man who was infertile might go to the local practitioners, in Sudan people are less likely to want to inform, albeit indirectly, a society of strangers about something which that society considers to be shameful. However in cases where people want to garner support and sympathy from the society, the traditional healer's role is culturally an extremely useful one.

### **3.1 Clinic Workers**

The clinic workers occupy an ambiguous position in Um Gargur. On the one hand, they are respected and valued because they are themselves refugees and share with the rest of the population the same needs, customs, and understanding of their situation. Although they are often accused of being patronising or insulting in their approach, on balance they are thought to be good-intentioned, though some individuals are seen as more sympathetic than others. Certainly few appear to doubt their commitment. On the other hand, there have been some problems. The clinic workers have been very disparaging about the role traditional healers (by this I include all practitioners) have to play, stressing the problems that might arise and often discouraging the villagers from consulting the traditionalists. Many, though not all, seem to believe that the cures are often "dangerous", and that the curers are "backward" and only serve to undermine the clinic's work (even though a few admit privately that they too might see healers for specific ailments). Since women are the ones most likely to visit the clinic, they are the ones who receive these negative signals. The women's reliance on traditional

knowledge should ideally, from the clinic staff's viewpoint, be replaced by a reliance on information proffered them by the health workers. Yet many women feel that they are having their most basic and reliable asset, that is their traditional beliefs, challenged, which leaves them feeling marginalised and confused. Yet as "mothers of steel" they manage to struggle against the prevailing order.

To some extent the clinic is regarded by the villagers as a Christian concern. This is partly because it is funded by the Sudan Council of Churches and most of its staff are highland Christians, but also because it is seen to lend at least passive support to the "socialist" EPLF. Over the last few years the clinic has succeeded in training a number of health workers from all the zones, a proposal which at first met with a great deal of resistance. What many of the clinic staff have termed "harmful practices", the villagers see as important to their identity as Eritreans.

In the past the health workers upheld a "Western" model of health care which treated most complaints with medication, hoping perhaps to encourage dependence on the clinic rather than indigenous medicine. They were often reluctant to discuss beliefs and practices which they imagined would be misunderstood by outsiders, and distanced themselves from these practices. As a result their relationship with the *dayas* and healers was characterised by suspicion and mistrust. Some of the more pragmatic health workers in the settlement said that even in Western countries many people visited alternative practitioners, and that unless the traditional remedies were actually doing harm, they were not a bad thing and might in fact be considered an important resource.

Already the disruption of their lives in Eritrea has meant the

abandonment of much of their social system and the destruction of their "cultural landscape". For the refugees to relinquish these traditional beliefs, is highly problematic for it means also relinquishing a support system that has sustained them, thus calling into question their identity and sense of themselves as Eritreans. In such a context it is understandable that people are hesitant about change, and will insist that the traditional practices are effective, whilst at the same time seeing the health workers' attempts to eliminate some of these customs as part of a larger "political" plan.

This suspicion is not altogether misplaced, though it would be difficult to unravel the complexities of where political and health concerns begin and end. Some of the health workers were already trained in Eritrea as dressers, examiners and laboratory technicians. The SCC has a policy of identifying and seeking to employ refugees who already have some degree of expertise in providing health care. Many then go on to further supplementary training which also focuses on the special needs of refugee population. The health workers do see adequate health care as being high on the political agenda, but it is not clear whether this is for party-political reasons or in the wider nationalistic sense of wishing to do their utmost as Eritreans to keep the youth healthy for the new Eritrea. I believe that both sentiments are motivating factors, and that providing health care is their way of taking part in their society's continued development.

The amount of time women spend at the clinic and the time the health workers spend advising women on better health is perhaps also in some ways a reflection of the human loss that the society has suffered. Losing relatives and friends to war, drought and illness means that the

importance of adequate health care has been emphasised to people in a way which may have long-lasting implications for the future. The health workers say that many of the deaths which occur in Um Gargur can be easily prevented, and see health education as one of the catalysts to social change.

One of the problems that the refugees have with the clinic workers stems from the fact that a disproportionate number of them apply for resettlement in the United States. Sometimes the most highly-qualified are ultimately accepted, which removes precious skills from the refugee communities. Even when qualified personnel do not leave for resettlement, many of them are rotated by the SCC to other settlements after two years, just when they are beginning to gain the trust of the population and getting to know the problems specific to the settlement. Many villagers are unhappy about this and even the health workers admit that this does not help the quality of health services. The SCC has tried to rectify this by offering training schemes for people who are more representative of the settlement population.

The home visitors - fifteen young women from all sections of the community - have been trained to administer basic health care. They carry out examinations, take blood pressure, check pregnant women and carry out home visits for the clinic. Their work met with resistance from the more conservative villagers, mostly men who did not want their wives and daughters to work outside of the home because they fear that by coming into close contact with unrelated men, they will become sexually active. In fact many people are even reluctant to let the male health workers into their homes to treat their female relatives, or speak with the women.

Martha Tesfamichael, a nurse from the Mensa tribe, trained in Eritrea and awaiting resettlement to the United States at the time, said that things are made very difficult for girls who desire to work as home visitors, and for those who encourage their work, it can often be a futile undertaking.

They [the men] say if you have females let them come to treat the women. But then they don't want their daughters to learn how to treat patients. This is a big problem. We have to teach one another that [just] because men and women are in the same room we don't have to become frightened by it. Many young girls get into trouble like this because they think if they look at a man and like him then maybe they should sleep with him. It isn't a normal way of reacting. If many young people begin to work in the clinic, then people will see that they shouldn't have this fear. Then people can see they are all equals and Um Gargur will be much healthier, especially psychologically. It is a question of changing and developing the society. If we stay like this then when we return to Eritrea everyone will be more advanced than us because at the Fronts things are equal for men and women, Muslim and Christian...I think that it is a little better here than where I was before in Um Sagata [another settlement] but still many children are affected because of malnutrition. These are big problems and everyone should help so parents should send their daughters and their sons to learn this work. Poverty and mass ignorance means that many children die. And also because of malaria, respiratory infection and diarrhoea. Children die at around 3 years old. This is around the weaning period because mothers aren't used to giving additional food. Even when they have they often don't know how to use these foods. If the home visitors come from one part of the village then they know the problems in that part of the village. They know which women have given birth, who is ill, where the old people are, which children are sick. They can help very much.

Ascha, a young Baria woman who used to be a fighter in Eritrea was the first of these home visitors, and she told me about her motivations for working in the clinic:

Before all its staff were Habash [Christians]. I was working in the nutrition programme. All the Baria and Tigre were saying to me 'This one works with the Christians.' I said 'The Christians are our brothers, they are Eritreans. I work with the Christians, the Beni Amer or Baria. We all have the same mother and father, Eritrea.' I tell the Baria girls that the Christians are good and we should work together.

Little by little the people began to listen. Now a lot of others are working in the clinic. If I had not worked before no one would have worked. The people had no intention for any women to work in the clinic. But when they saw I worked and benefited, many girls began working. At first when I asked them to work they were saying they will not work with Christians. But this year many are working because they saw I have worked and brought money and profited. Before, they did not understand. 'What do you want? Why do you work here?', they would ask. But now they understand. They are uniting as I wished. In 1984 to 1985 when I worked in the clinic they said to my father, 'Do you let her work with the Christians?' There was a lot of talking. But I did not listen to what they said. I worked. I said 'The Christians are peaceful people. We are brothers and sisters,' Allah be praised.

### 3.2 Traditional Practitioners

Like the health workers, perhaps indeed more so, the healers share the same basic priorities and needs as the other refugees in the settlement. All the health workers are literate with educational qualifications (ranging from high school degrees to university), and receive SCC salaries, whereas the healers have the same general socio-economic and educational background as the majority of people in the settlement. The fact that they are not preoccupied with western notions about the causes or treatment of disease and other illnesses, but have in common with the population the same stereotypes, world view and cultural values, gives them a certain advantage over the health workers. I do not know their exact number (more than seven) however there are four who are well known and sought after. All of the healers that I heard of (except for one who was Baria) were Tigre.

The typical healer [seirai-T/fewasi-Tya] has a more holistic approach to a person's illness, often taking into account the immediate social and economic conditions which exacerbate the illness. The

healers seek to ensure that the commonly recognised family and community obligations towards the sick person are met, unlike for instance, the freelance "pharmacists", who were the most mercenary of the curers in Um Gargur. The healer's diagnostic and curative skills were believed to be transmitted hereditarily and in several cases these same healers or their relations had taken care of members of Um Gargur's population in Eritrea years before. If their mothers or fathers were originally healers they would generally accompany them as they worked, honing the techniques of their trade. The skill of midwifery was not said to be transmitted hereditarily although, like the healers, the profession ran in families as midwives usually acquired their skills from watching their mothers or other female relatives at work.

There were three main male circumcisers in Um Gargur. One of them, an elderly man named Idris Shagar, had a reputation which was so widespread that he made yearly visits to villages in the Barka region of Eritrea to circumcise the babies born during the previous year and older boys. He was said to have never made a mistake in the forty years that he had performed circumcisions and it was thought to be an honour to be circumcised by him. In conversations with me he lamented the fact that none of his children or his grandchildren had chosen to follow his calling and that his technique would not be passed on. His brother's son, who he was training as his apprentice, remained in Eritrea fighting for the ELF and was unlikely to come to Um Gargur.

In addition to the healers were diviners [*sairdait-T/tenqualit-Tya*], who gave information about whether the rainy season would be a good one, or whether the harvests would fail. Generally these people made more money than the healers, being paid not only to foretell the future, but

also to ensure that it was bright. In one case, which caused a great many people to lose money, an eighty year old diviner said that unless he were given land, money, a house and a young wife, the rains would not come. Women were afraid that what he said was true and many of them visited him offering him what little they had. When the rains still had not come some months later, people were very angry but the diviner said that all his requests, including that of a wife, had not been met.

The health workers estimated that the ratio of practising midwives [daya] to females was 1:300, however many women over the age of forty have assisted in their daughters' deliveries. Five of the midwives were very well respected, of whom two were widely used. I know that one of the five was terribly old and people complained that she had lost her touch. As midwives are also responsible for the circumcision of girls, it is crucial that they be adept with their fingers since a child can easily bleed to death if they cut too deeply. The responsibilities of the *daya* are not limited to childbirth or circumcisions but include checking the bride on her wedding night to see if it is possible for her husband to enter her. If not, she creates a larger opening. After childbirth she is also responsible for re-infibulating the mother.

Before the SCC clinic was set up in Um Gargur all of the women in the settlement were served by midwives. The SCC encouraged women to give birth in the clinic, offering incentives such as blankets and clothing to women who chose to do so, thus alienating the midwives who saw the SCC as cutting into a vital part of their livelihood. The clinic staff readily blamed the traditional healers and the midwives for all complications which might occur after delayed referrals to the clinic. This of course made the midwives less willing to cooperate,

creating a lot of resentment between them and the health workers whom they felt had no respect for them, or understanding of their valuable positions in the community. Since the healers and midwives remained in the settlement, whilst many of the health workers moved from settlement to settlement, the traditional curers might be said to have, in the long run, more personal stake in the health care of Um Gargur.

Probably every woman who is resident in Um Gargur who has delivered more than two children has had a *daya* attending the delivery, but recently most people have come to the clinic to be re-infibulated since the methods used there are both hygienic and modern. The role of *daya* was thus diminished and undermined. In 1986 however, when SCF began working in Um Gargur, a new perspective was offered on the role of traditional practitioners. The idea was to foster cooperation between the two groups, teaching modern skills to the healers in a culturally sympathetic way which took into account their understanding of illnesses and their origins. The midwives were very eager to be included in the work of the clinic and responded enthusiastically to ideas about nutrition, hygiene and safe drinking water. They were encouraged to refer patients who were really ill to the clinic and the health workers were encouraged to show respect for their skills and assist them constructively: for instance many people believe that placing soap in the anuses of children would prevent dehydration and treat diarrhoea [*figar-T*]. Instead of this, the *dayas* were taught how to make oral rehydration (ORS) fluids cheaply using sugar and salt, and would pass this knowledge on to the mothers. They were also taught to identify the main causes of morbidity for children and to refer children to the clinic before complications arose.

I even went to one circumcision [*kushbo/tahuur-T*] where every aspect, from the beating of drums to calling the young girl an *arussa* [A], or newly-wed, was carried out according to tradition - except for the fact that a health worker was there in the hut administering an injection and overseeing the *daya* as she infibulated the child's labia. The *dayas* were taught that the custom of massaging the woman's stomach before birth to bring about delivery, and after delivery of removing the blood which remained in her stomach was a very dangerous practice which could result in the woman's haemorrhaging internally.

Through this kind of cooperation, the tension and fear that characterised the relationship between the two groups seemed to lessen. Yet later I learned that many of the health workers felt that incorporating the *dayas* into the formal structure was not an asset to the clinic, but a distraction and a threat. According to one health worker, "They [his colleagues] think they will lose their influence in the community. The traditional midwives know a lot of traditional medicine and they are much more respected by the people than the clinic staff. Some Islamic fundamentalists also talk in their favour. They do not like women to be delivered by men as it was most of the time in the clinic so they seek the services of the midwives."

Thus the two groups are at times, if not diametrically opposed, then in symbolic opposition although their goals are supposedly identical. The health workers feel threatened by the traditional practitioners having their roles legitimised by the clinic, fearing that it will lessen respect for the work of the staff and undermine their exclusive claims to medical knowledge. Yet as if demonstrating their own diminished confidence in the exclusive efficacy of their own cures,

traditional practitioners will sometimes get hold of medicines from the market, calculating that if they are seen to have access to such "modern" measures and special "medical" knowledge, their status will be enhanced.

It seems likely, however, that traditional practitioners will continue to have a role to play in the health care of Um Gargur as long as people believe that they can effectively treat the physical and psychological symptoms of ill health. As long as people have the option of consulting alternative curers they will continue to do so, matching the specific complaint to the practitioner who is perceived as its most appropriate curer.

#### **4. General Health**

Because of the length of time they have remained in the settlement, many of the refugees' health problems are parallel to Sudanese villages of equal size (Moodie, et al., 1981). However there are conditions which are atypical of stable communities, the most obvious of which is the fact that so few employed men remain in the settlement and women with no incomes are often left to fend for themselves. Also certain psychological problems persist which appear to be directly related to the villagers' displacement and powerlessness. Those who are employed and reasonably well-off have more control over their futures than people who are out of work. For the latter, life as a refugee is especially difficult. In this section both the physiological and psychological health of the people in Um Gargur is discussed.

##### **4.1 Physiological Problems**

According to the health workers, the first year is the most critical in the life of a child. However all children under the age of five are considered to be at risk from malnutrition because this is when they are weaned off the breast and their mothers are more likely to become pregnant. In October 1986 the SCC carried out a house-to-house nutrition survey on children below the age of five. Since any illnesses which affect the settlement are reflected in the under-fives, by assessing their nutritional status, the health workers found that it was possible to evaluate the nutritional status of the community as a whole. From the survey it was estimated that 9% of the population were suffering the effects of malnutrition. Approximately another 15% were thought to be mildly undernourished.

To facilitate data collection and surveying, the SCC staff divided Um Gargur into four health zones. The zones are geographical but they also reflect somewhat the ethnic configuration of the camp. Zone A contains most of the Christian population and Tigrinya speakers and a large number of Tigre-speaking lowland Moslems. Within Zone A one may speak of two distinct *hillat* or residential areas; *hillat* Habash, the Christian portion, (sometimes called Jedid, or new settlement, since the Christians were a later immigration) and *hillat* Alighidir, a name which refers to the town in Eritrea from which the *hilla's* inhabitants stem. Zone B, also known for the same reason as Alighidir is directly across from the Alighidir of Zone A. Many of these people fled Alighidir together and thus share not only a common language but past experiences of war and flight. Although many of their inhabitants are from the Beni Amer tribe and the majority are Tigre speakers, they are not, however, homogeneous. Zone C, *hillat* Baria and Zone D, *hillat* Jeffe, on the

other hand, host the Baria people and the Beni Amer people respectively.

Zone A is the healthiest of the four zones whilst Zone C is regarded as the least healthy because of the large numbers of children from there who returned time and again to the feeding programs only shortly after they had been released with a clean bill of health. The exact reasons for the high incidence of malnutrition in Zone C seemed to be linked to the fact that their traditional foods are unavailable or far too expensive, and people are reluctant to adapt their eating habits. It is also a common stereotype, both among the staff and other villagers, that the Baria lack the hygienic habits which are conducive to good health. Some villagers would say of the people in this zone that they are "clean on the outside but their homes are filthy on the inside." Even when people were confronted with the fact that the Baria's homes were on the whole no less clean than their own, common prejudices persisted. The Baria are certainly the poorest, and as a result suffer disproportionately both from marasmus and protein deficiency and had an extremely high rate of child mortality. Health workers often complained that the Baria were too willing to turn to traditional healers and medicines, and too late to come to the clinic. They said this about most of the villagers, but most often about the Baria.

The wealthiest of the four zones is Zone A, which has the largest concentration of working people. Living in *hillat* Habash are most of the staff from the SCC run clinic, social office and women's centre. This includes drivers, cleaners, guards, etc. It also has the highest number of wage-earning husbands and wives. In *hillat* Alighidir there are few, if any, wage-earning married couples (although, as we have noted, many women do earn money). This section of the camp also hosts

most of the big merchants, stall owners, shop keepers, cooperative heads, and other wage earners. Many of the people in *hillat* Alighidir have relatives working in Saudia Arabia and the Gulf states, unlike for instance the Baria, who only had one person from the village working in the Gulf. These workers send a good deal of money into the camp and sometimes entire families are supported by such remittances. When we compare households which have members working either in Um Gargur or outside with households which have none, it is clear that this is one of the major determinants of nutritional adequacy.

Marasmus is the most common type of malnutrition and this is often coupled with gastro-enteric and respiratory infections in children during the dry season. During the rainy season, diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria, coughs and colds are the common illnesses afflicting the village. Children who have diarrhoea also run the risk of becoming dehydrated and so mothers are taught to make oral rehydration (salt and sugar) fluids. 60-80% of pregnant and lactating women were undernourished and suffered disproportionately from anaemia and skin problems associated with nutritional deficiencies. Families with infants and small children as well as dependent elderly appear to be most vulnerable to malnutrition. Men in Um Gargur are, as a group, much healthier than the rest of the population. This is almost certainly because many tend to eat both in the marketplace and at their homes, and because at home they are given preference when food is distributed.

#### **4.2 "Psychosomatic" Illnesses**

There are also unidentifiable illnesses which affect the adult population. Those affected report many different symptoms which include

aches and pains in various parts of the body, fevers during the night, headaches, and heartburn. It is the view of the health workers that these are frequently physical manifestations of psychological problems associated with being refugees. Many people blame their ill-health on the environment in Sudan and claim that they were much healthier in Eritrea.

Almost all the health workers shared their opinions and felt that people were essentially homesick and many had psychosomatic illnesses which stemmed from missing Eritrea. One of them, a young Christian from the lowlands told me:

Some people had never been ill or never had a pill or injection when they were in Eritrea. They say the air and weather is like honey and that they felt much healthier there. I agree with some of this. In the Sudan, in Um Gargur we are refugees. In Eritrea we were "somebodies". Everyone now in Um Gargur was at least "somebody" in Eritrea. People complain because at home they had their roots, families, friends, a familiar environment and relative freedom of movement. There was also a lot of work around so people were not as idle as they are in Um Gargur. People say, 'The food here does not have any taste. It doesn't taste good.' Even the milk and meat of the animals we keep here doesn't taste the same since what they [the animals] eat in Um Gargur is not the same as what they ate in Eritrea. I understand them when they say this.

It is believed that a child who is ailing and is difficult to diagnose is probably suffering from the ill-influence of a malevolent person. These people are called witches or *buda* (Tya). They are both capable of sending harmful animals or insects to endanger a person's life, and are capable of entering a person through the small finger of their left hand. These *buda* attack (or "eat") people because they are jealous of their wealth or their beauty, entering the body of their victims, causing them incredible pain. If the victim suspects that s/he is being eaten then s/he will visit an expert who will tell them to

inhale the smoke from a branch of burning herbs. Apparently the *buda* finds this smoke (referred to as "*dawa*" or medicine) very painful. The *dawa* makes the *buda* speak through the victim saying "I am leaving through the arm...through the hand." *Buda* are known to be very cunning so until it says, "I am leaving through the small finger of the left hand", it has not honestly left the person's body. *Buda* are extremely difficult to identify and no one can discover their identities except in cases where they have tried to "eat" someone. The *dawa* sometimes has the effect of making the victim yell out the name of the *buda* for all to hear but often the leaves the body without revealing its name. In Um Gargur many people said that though *buda* exists, if you do not speak of it, it cannot harm you.

*Dawa* is extremely powerful "medicine" which can be used either to harm or to cure. Some people said that in Eritrea they believed that if a person intended to witch another all he had to do was to put *dawa* into the imprint of the person's foot that was left in the sand. When I asked people if they could be still be harmed in this way opinions were divided but everyone agreed that certain bodily excrescences such as the placenta, circumcised foreskin, and the umbilical cord, must be buried in secretly so that no one is likely to retrieve them. Hair, finger nails and toe nails are also buried and although some people say that they do not bother to bury these things now, others aver that they will always bury them because in Um Gargur there are too many "strangers".

The evil eye [*shihirtai*-T] is also regarded as the cause of some of the villager's illnesses. A person who is known to have the power of the evil eye is capable of rendering his or her victims unconscious or causing them to have severe abdominal cramps. Pregnant women in

particular are very frightened of being around people who are not able to conceive, because they feel that these people's jealousy will affect their unborn child. I once bought a chicken from another town which was reputedly the largest and whitest that had ever been seen in Um Gargur. Many people came to visit me simply to see this chicken and others whom I visited at the farthest ends of the village had heard about it. My friends warned me not to allow too many people to see it because I ran the risk of the chicken being killed by someone who was jealous and possessed *shihirtai*. I did not take them seriously and when the chicken died a month later everyone agreed that it was the evil eye which had killed it.

I have never known anyone to accuse a specific person of having the evil eye but I do know that people, particularly those most vulnerable, take many precautions against it. Pregnant women and children wear small leather pouches around their necks which contain Koranic verses, and babies have the Koran or some of its verses in their beds to protect them from the evil eye. It is widely believed that a person affected by such malevolence can easily die unless they are cured by traditional healing. This is what Kiros Sereke of the SCC clinic, told me he witnessed:

I saw the wife of a friend of mine collapsing suddenly. It just happened while she was lying down on her bed one afternoon chatting. She was as normal as any of us and so we did not understand the problem. Suddenly her blood pressure was very low and her pulse was very weak. I wanted to take her to the clinic but people began to laugh and said that this does not need medicine from the clinic unless you want her dead. I became angry and her mother was called and the neighbours came over. I realised I was alone in wanting her to go to the clinic so I chose to wait and see, hoping that they would fail and then come to me for help. Her mother first smoked her with incense to wake up the spirit which possessed her. The mother began to ask her questions and told my wife that she was talking to her

daughter's *jin* [spirit]. Her *jin* told the mother that the daughter was attacked by a man with *shihirtai*. We left her there and returned the next morning to find her in the same situation as the night before, in a state of shock. Her mother said that after her *jin* had left her she had become like this. After this her husband came home with two men I didn't know and he asked us for help. I held her hands by the thumb and the other friend held her feet by the big toes. The man made her sniff from the medicine. The sick woman's power was so overwhelming that all of us had difficulty in keeping her still. The man asked her questions, 'Who are you?', 'Why did you attack her?' She first talked in a language none of us could understand and then she gave the name of the spirit with the evil eye and the reason he was bewitching her. The reason was that he saw her walking and liked her. The man made the spirit swear not to attack the woman again. Then he asked what was the treatment for the woman at this time and the spirit answered 'chicken faeces'. Then the man ordered 'Go and collect it yourself.' She got up immediately and fetched chicken faeces from about 40-50 metres away and mixed it with water and drank it. Mind you, there was a lot of it in the glass. The feces was almost half of the water glass and I knew that with her and her clean habits she would never do it consciously. But the most amazing thing was what followed after. She lifted a heavy grinding stone that none of us could lift easily and put it on her head, somehow she was well balanced and did it without any effort. She just put it there and that was it. Then she went around all bystanders and asked for forgiveness, running a little with her arms flinging. She did not try to support that grinding stone even once. I was there. It was in perfect balance. We began to ask each other many questions. How was she able to lift that grinding stone which was difficult for a strong man to lift alone? I tried to lift it later but could only do it with the help of another friend. She was a woman who did little physical work, she was thin and spoiled. What kept the stone in perfect balance? I have seen many very healthy children suddenly become sick without any apparent reason and no one can find any abnormalities after physical examinations. The belief in the evil eye does not come from the air but from our parents and great-grand parents. I believe there might be some truth to it.

Such spirits are said not to like the taste of chicken droppings or the smell of burning plastic and will always flee from either. There are other spirits which can possess women in Um Gargur that do not leave their victims' bodies as easily as in the case above, but exercise total control over them. These spirits have minds of their own and can demand

anything they choose in return for leaving the person they have possessed, for they are not tied by any of the society's moral codes. Women who are thus possessed are not held responsible for their actions, because the spirit, *jin* or *zar*, has taken hold of them, causing illness, barrenness, lethargy or mental illness.

*Zar* refers to both the spirit which makes a person ill and the curative ritual to exorcise it (Kenyon, 1991; Cloudsley, 1984; Boddy, 1991). The illness can only be cured by negotiating with the possessing spirits during the ceremony, when drums and other instruments create a hypnotic rhythm which mesmerises the spirit, making it amenable to negotiation. The *sheikha* (who cures possession) communicates with the spirit, acting as a kind of interpreter. The spirit explains why it has possessed the person and lays down its conditions for the person to regain her health. In most cases the spirit will demand material goods such as gold and clothing as well as an animal sacrifice, all of which benefit the sick person. The women are not cognisant of what their spirits want until they awaken from their possessed states and are told. Because they are very expensive and place a strain on already impoverished refugee families, *zar* ceremonies are always regarded as a last resort after the afflicted person has seen traditional healers, perhaps visited the clinic, and exhausted all other means of cure.

Apparently in the past these ceremonies were not uncommon in Um Gargur, but many of the religious sheikhs (in particular the Ansar) have objected and so they have recently been discouraged. Some of the clinic workers see *zar* as a form of "therapy" which allows women to "free their spirits" and temporarily unburden themselves of their responsibilities and lives of drudgery, whilst others disapprove of it, regarding it as a

kind of blackmail through which women get their husbands to buy them luxuries which they can ill afford. Opinion about zar also varies among the women but there is no underestimating its curative qualities. For some time afterwards they are treated with extra solicitude by their relatives, who are eager to avoid another possession. It is the only time that women are allowed to be *fiht* (without shame), that is, they can dance, smoke, be disrespectful towards people they dislike, or otherwise draw attention to themselves without the society holding them responsible for their actions. Zaharra Erbut, a Belin mother, told me of her experience with zar:

I am happy here in Sudan but during the first two years I was very sick. I gave birth to this child [son] and had a hard time. He was three months old and I went to Kassala, Wad el Hilew and Showak to find help. I had a lot of bleeding and everyone thought that I was going to die. After two years I once again became well. This was in Kassala. I went to a woman who gave me some medicine. This woman was a *sheikha* and gave me some medicine to drink. They killed a sheep that my husband gave her and I drank about two cups of its blood. The woman told me that if I were to drink it then I would get better so I drank it. Thank God I was cured. Later she told me to put this [a gold amulet worn around the neck] on. The woman told me to put on beautiful clothes and eat good food. My daughter from Saudi Arabia sent this for me [gold bracelet] and since then I have been very well...I didn't play drums. [at this point Zaharra's daughter interjects - 'They did not let her play because if she did the spirit would come back again to her.] The woman said to the spirit 'How are you? Are you well?' and then she tapped her stick and said, 'You have become well. How nice it is. Go away now and come back later.' Thank God he went away. I just sat quietly like this. There were a lot of women dancing, but as for me, I never moved.

Stress is an important factor affecting health in Um Gargur and both men and women appear to suffer from it, though women more than men. From my experience in the clinic it would seem that women are those who are constantly plagued by headaches, heartburn and insomnia. They are under a great deal of strain because their responsibilities generally

include looking after their husbands (if they are in Um Gargur) and children, cooking and doing all the domestic chores, and appeasing their in-laws who may reside with them in their homesteads. While this may have been less of a burden in their countries of origin, the insecurity which occurs as a result of refugeehood tends to complicate the situation. And although I knew several women who enjoyed living in the same homesteads as their in-laws and found them supportive, there were others I knew who seemed to find this an uncomfortable arrangement. I believe that in certain instances this contributed to some of the women's feelings of helplessness and depression.

Since many of the men who remain in the settlement are there because they have been unable to find work outside of it, this places a lot of pressure on them. As women took on greater responsibilities and came to be seen as hardy, resistant, and innovative - mothers of steel - men were steadily losing status. One man I knew, whose wife worked, people said to be "useless", *ma yemfa*, and he seemed always to be ill. His wife said that he was not ill at all but was pretending. I imagine that perhaps he was plagued by headaches as he said, probably brought on because he knew of the villagers' accusations that he was lazy and incapable of providing for his wife. Another man, who was having a "forbidden" relationship with his adopted daughter, was constantly having his head cut (bloodletting) to rid himself of the "bad blood" which gave him severe headaches. Although I lived with this family I cannot remember whether his headaches began after his affair became known or before. I do know that he was permanently under the scrutiny of his neighbours and felt harrassed by the sheikhs, who had visited him to ask that he stop the relationship and send the girl away to school.

In any case the young girl soon became pregnant and they moved to another town where they married.

Women who have young children but do not have the support system of the extended family, and are left alone in the settlement when their husbands leave, have to depend on their neighbours and friends for assistance with getting food from the distribution points, going to the market and so on. Also women on their own have their reputations to maintain which in Um Gargur is not necessarily a simple task. Women are also held responsible by their husbands, in-laws, and the rest of the community, for the behaviour of their children, whether male or female. In one case I knew of where a young girl was discovered to have lost her virginity, her father not only beat the daughter but the mother as well, blaming her for not having restricted the girl's movements.

Some of these women have complete breakdowns when they find no sympathy from either their families or the clinic. When the clinic takes their illness seriously then they have a much better chance of being looked after by their families. Depending upon the availability of space and having checked that their illnesses are not physiological, the more sympathetic health workers would occasionally give the women glucose intravenously, allow them to rest for a few days, and discuss their problems with them. Later they would speak to the women's families about the cause of their ailments and suggest ways in which they could be alleviated. Women appreciated this legitimisation of their depression because it allowed their grievances to be aired and their problems to be taken seriously. In this way the health workers sometimes traversed into the healers' sphere of influence.

### 4.3 Attitudes Towards Children and Birth Control

For the refugees, children represent continuity and the assurance that after so many years in exile, their voices will still be heard. Yet I came across many people who seemed ambivalent about having children. While people felt that children were very necessary to take care of them when they were old and infirm, they often commented that as refugees the life that they were able to provide for their children was a poor shadow of the life they had in Eritrea. People said all the time that Eritrea was the land of "butter" and "honey", and that there children could grow up healthily and easily, whereas in Um Gargur "even the milk was sour" so how could anyone expect children to be an unmixed blessing? Some women said that the best thing about their husbands' absence was the fact that they were relieved from the burden of having yet more children.

Yet attitudes towards children vary from individual to individual. It was said that children were both hard work and (in the short term) an economic liability, and some women would speak of children as being responsible for their ill health. Although few women die in childbirth, multiple pregnancies combined with poor nutrition weakened their resistance to illness and disease, making women less eager to have many children. This attitude runs counter to traditional beliefs, according to which having a large family is the ideal. In fact, many cultural notions about the role of children in the society underlie the custom of having large families and, particularly in Um Gargur where women face many social and economic constraints, children over seven are of great assistance to them.

There were many women whom I saw in the clinic and a number with whom I became friends who had had no less than nine pregnancies. The average was about six pregnancies, although many of their children had died in childbirth or not survived their first few years. It is not uncommon to hear both men and women say that having fewer children is desirable although it is very rare that they take practical steps towards reducing the likelihood of more pregnancies. Many women with whom I spoke in Um Gargur asked me about the different birth control methods available and in particular about the effects of the birth control pill. A number of them indicated that they would be very interested in taking it if their husbands would allow them to.

Nasra, whose husband worked as a lorry driver in Khartoum and whose father was a merchant in Um Gargur, had given birth to four children, the eldest a girl of nine and the youngest a baby who was not yet one when I left the settlement. Although she and her husband were fairly well-off she said that she was not particularly interested in having any more children, because all the births had been very difficult. She had large varicose veins in her legs which were constantly swollen during her pregnancy and she also suffered from nausea throughout the day. Her husband understood this, as did her mother-in-law who was very sympathetic to her plight. She told me jokingly that her husband would beat her if he knew that she didn't want any more children:

My husband doesn't come to Um Gargur so he doesn't know how hard it is to take care of all these children. It is good that Aziza [her daughter] is now big enough to help me because I don't know how I would manage otherwise. Now when he comes back to Um Gargur maybe he will want me to have another child but I will not agree. I will tell him no. I will find out from Haile [a health worker] what I can take and he can give me some pills or injections for this.

Nasra was concerned that if she was to get drugs to stop her conceiving they should not damage her insides or make her ill in any way because she had "...suffered too much from having children already and wanted rest from illness. Before, I thought that to have many children like my mother was a good thing but now I know that the more you have, the more you suffer." Although not all of the women said that they enjoyed sex, Nasra confessed that she generally did, but that recently her fear of becoming pregnant always made her anxious.

When her husband visited Um Gargur some months later I asked her if she minded whether I asked him what he thought about contraceptives. She was not sure that this was a good idea but some days after she and I discussed it, an opportunity arose by coincidence when he asked me why I didn't have any children. I gave him several reasons one of which was that my family were prone to having twins and that unless I was strong and healthy enough to bear them I could become ill. I also said that as yet I didn't have enough money to take care of two children at once. He seemed quite sympathetic on both points and mentioned that he could understand because Nasra had also become ill and that giving birth was a difficult thing. He told me that he personally did not want any more children but that taking contraceptives would interfere with God's plan. "If Allah decides to give us more children then it is His will. We cannot do otherwise." He also seemed to feel that his wife wanted more children, and later Nasra told me that she always pretended to want children because to suggest otherwise might lead him to suspect her of being unfaithful.

Nasra's husband was one of a number of men I knew in the settlement who said that a man could not detect whether his wife was having extra-

marital relations if she used contraceptives and was concerned that contraception would allow his wife the freedom to sleep with whoever she chose and thus encourage her to do so. Although many women do indicate an interest in taking birth control, if they disobey their husbands and are caught they believe that they will not only be divorced immediately, but will be regarded by the other villagers as *fitht*, or loose. Pregnancy is thought to be a deterrent to infidelity on the part of the women, who their husbands feel cannot be effectively controlled whilst they are away from Um Gargur. Some women say that their husbands seem to feel that the more children they have, the more their wives are tied to them although the husbands are not necessarily tied to their wives. The majority of women are virtually unable to leave their husbands even if they would like to since they are often in Um Gargur without their own relatives to provide a support system, and they have limited economic opportunities.

Most of the people I asked about childbirth and birth control said that they had become pregnant within the first year of marriage. All the women said that it was a woman's role to have children as quickly as possible since this "is what marriage is for". Most of them said that there was something wrong when a woman didn't conceive within this time frame and agreed that although it was always assumed that sterility was the fault of the woman, this was not always the case. I heard numerous stories about women in Eritrea whose husbands divorced them for barrenness, but after remarriage the men themselves were found to be sterile. One woman laughingly told of a friend of hers who had met the same fate and later had several children. When her husband's new wife conceived, everyone assumed that the new wife had another lover. The

man was said to have been embarrassed at the fact that his old wife now had children and could not be blamed for the previous failure, but knew that if he seemed unsure about his new wife's child, people would assume that he was a cuckold.

Men also said that the purpose of marriage was to have children, and that for one to fail to do this would be to fail as a man and as a Muslim. Among the Christians great emphasis was also placed on fecundity, although many of the younger generation seemed to think that birth control was a good idea until they could afford to have children. Many of the elderly put pressure on their children to marry early and conceive. Whereas in Eritrea people were expected to marry young, not to delay childbirth and to have large families, in the refugee settlement so many constraints are placed upon families that people were now increasingly conscious of the economic burdens that came with children. Despite the fact that most of the traditional notions with regard to having children persist, there is a lot of discussion among men and among women of the pros and cons.

#### **4.4 Childbirth**

Among all of the ethnic groups in Um Gargur, people say that in Eritrea when a woman was pregnant it was the normal practice for her to move to her mother's home for prenatal care and delivery, usually between one and three months before the birth. If it was her first child she generally went for a much longer period, since the first birth is regarded as the most difficult and the most important. In Um Gargur many of the women do not have their mothers nearby. Some are still in Eritrea so, many women receive additional pre-natal care from the

village clinic. Those whose mothers are in other settlements will travel to be with them unless the health workers at the clinic have warned them not to. Not every woman chooses to deliver in the clinic and many opt for the services of one of Um Gargur's many midwives. In the past the clinic discouraged this, but without the resources to care for all it decided in 1986 to encourage women who do not have medical problems which might interfere with delivery, to deliver at home, except in the case of the first birth.

The ideal scenario, then, is for the needs of the expectant mother to be met by members of her immediate family before and for forty days after the delivery of the child. Her hair is oiled and plaited by a female member of her family or a close friend, and at this time she is visited by both male and female family friends. Her husband also visits at this time, and if they can afford it her family will sacrifice a little in order to get her meat, dates, and plenty of fresh milk.

If a woman remains in Um Gargur she will visit the clinic regularly where she will also be given dates, dried milk and *madeeda*, a mixture of corn meal, sugar, oil and milk which is served as a hot porridge. Women are usually brought into the clinic when they begin their contractions and remain in the waiting room of the clinic until it is time to deliver. In the clinic she is checked regularly by the examiner to measure her contractions and the dilation of her cervix. Whether at home or the clinic a woman will be given tea or water to drink but no food at this time. A woman who gives birth at the clinic is usually attended by her mother and perhaps a close female relative. In the absence of close relatives women rely on their friends for support at this time. During the birth the woman's mother or friend is by her side

encouraging her to be strong and brave. It is considered very shameful for a woman to cry out whilst giving birth, and she is ridiculed by all if she does. Should a woman scream or cry she is angrily chastised both by the mother and the attendant and I have seen many women threatened with a slap when they complain.

After delivery, if the mother and baby are found to be healthy, she is released the following day to her home. Should she have any problems she will remain until she is thought fit enough (as a great many women are anaemic, many are kept over for observation). Her mother (or close friend) consoles her, takes her to the toilet, assists her to change her clothing etc. Her companion remains with her throughout this time to offer moral and physical support, for she is an important part of the birth ritual.

Since the majority of the women in Um Gargur are infibulated and therefore have to have the previously sewn vulva opened, it is important that the slit is made at the proper moment. To open the lips of the vulva too soon, before the baby's crown is visible, could lead to severe blood loss thus making the delivery extremely difficult and in some cases fatal. To open the circumcised vulva too late can result in several problems for the mother and the child: the mother's scar could easily tear and result in severe pain and extreme blood loss; she could become weak and her contractions could cease which might be fatal for her and the child; if the child is born, its brain could be damaged by the pressure placed by the closed vulva on the soft fontanelle. It is necessary that the incision be resealed as quickly as possible after delivery. In the unlikely event that a woman chooses not to be resutured, (she is always asked), sterile pads have to be prepared for

her and she must remain in the clinic until she heals.

When the woman has delivered she is shown the baby and is congratulated by all, and her mother thanks the midwife or health worker and tells all outside the news. There is usually a chorus of female well-wishers, friends and neighbours who ululate. The woman is then taken home, where she spends the next forty days in confinement. She does not leave her hut except to wash and use the toilet. At this time her female friends and family are a real asset, preparing food, and assisting her to mind the baby. Many of the Tigre people say that in Eritrea it was prohibited for her husband or any male to see the woman during her confinement period. In Um Gargur, however, whether a family adheres to these traditions depends on whether the woman's or her husband's female relatives are available to help her or whether she has a dependable network of friends. In the refugee situation these friendship networks play a very important role, often functioning in much the same way as kinship networks.

#### **4.5 Traditional Perceptions and Practices**

Although some traditional practitioners have recently been working alongside the clinic staff, as a whole they feel that their livelihoods are under threat from different sources. For instance, the midwives, all elderly women who supplement their very meagre cash incomes by working as circumcisers [*keshbait-T*], are discouraged from doing so by many of the health workers at the SCC clinic. Some of the religious leaders also disapprove of the more radical form of circumcision which is practised by most of the villagers. The institution of circumcision has undergone some changes in the refugee context as people now

circumcise boys soon after they are born rather than between the ages of six and ten; and girls are circumcised in large groups, occasionally with someone from the clinic assisting with anaesthesia.

#### 4.5.1 Female Circumcision

Infibulation or pharoaonic circumcision is when the tip of the clitoris is removed and the labia are cut and either sewn together or sealed with the dust of *gharad* (T), a long curved bean pod, leaving only openings for urine and menstrual blood to flow. Some people, in particular the Ansar sheikhs, say that this form of circumcision was never sanctioned by Mohammed, and should be stopped while others, often women, insist upon it and saying that an uninfibulated vagina is "as incomplete as a house without a door". One woman said that if she were to be de-infibulated, her husband would insult her by referring to her daughter as "the child of the open woman". There are women who frequently say that they would prefer not to infibulate their daughters but that neither their husbands, their in-laws or their mothers would approve. They also say that their uncircumcised daughters might not have a chance to marry.

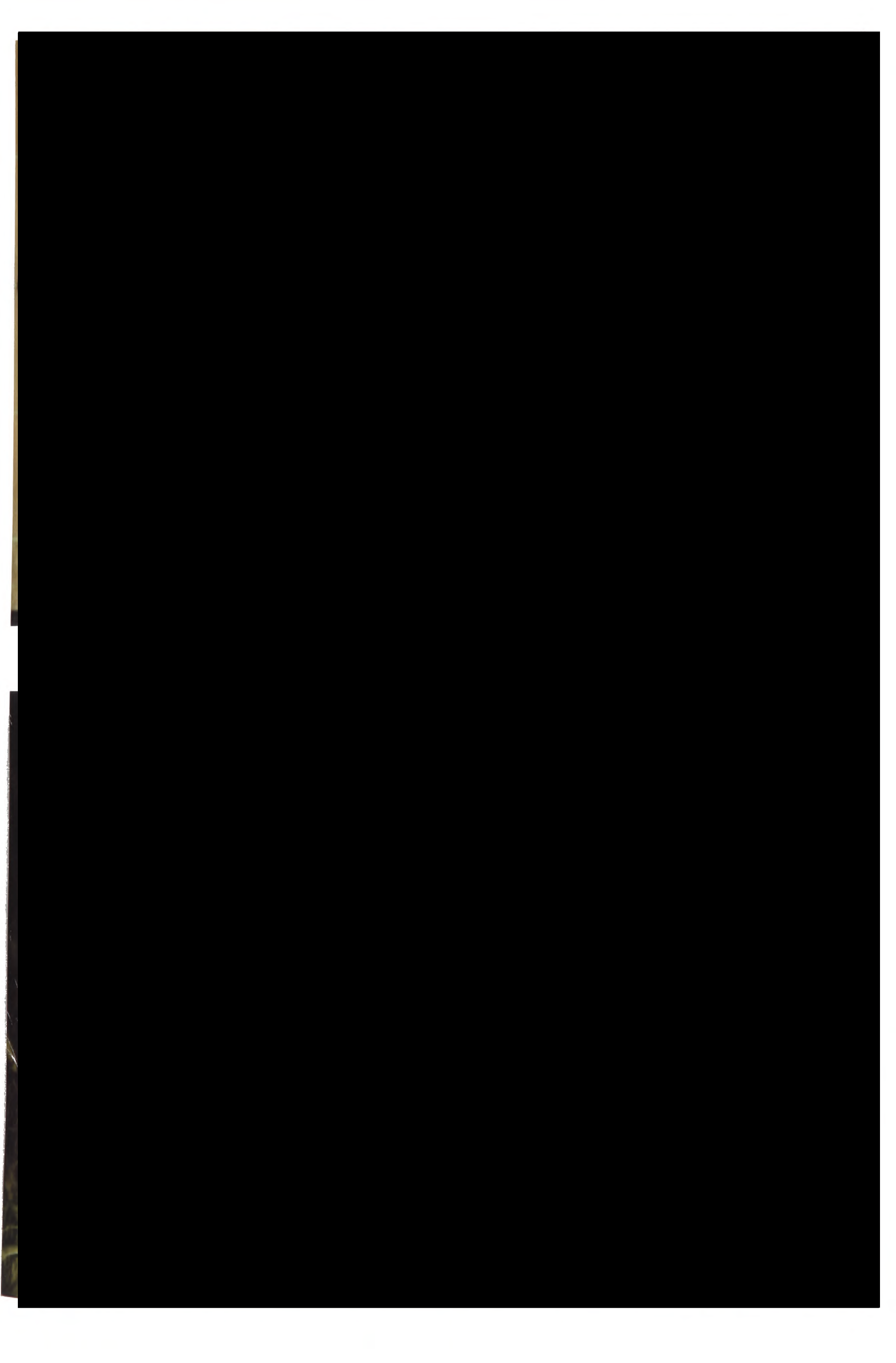
The circumcision ceremonies either take place after the rainy season when money comes into the settlement after harvesting or at any other time when remittances come from abroad. Circumcision [*kushbo-T/tahuur-A*] is regarded as a major event in Um Gargur, and is marked by a great deal of celebration. Sheep or even cows are killed and there is dancing and drumming late into the evening as the mothers and fathers receive visitors who come to offer their praises. A girl is usually circumcised between the ages of five and ten years old. On the evening or morning

before the ceremony she is washed down with cold water to cool her body and "keep its balance" for the operation which generally takes place around midday.

It is uncommon for only one child to be circumcised on her own. Because of the expense involved families from the same *hillat* or those who are relations usually get together to circumcise their daughters in groups, so it is not unusual to have children of varying ages circumcised at the same time. A girl is often dressed up and kohl put around her eyes in anticipation of her new status. Often children do not know what to expect and look forward to being circumcised. In the room the midwife has several people to assist her in holding the children still and keeping their legs apart whilst she cuts away. In some instances a health worker is there to anaesthetise the area before circumcision. Once the skin has been cut it is usually given to the child's mother who takes it aside to bury it in a secret place, away from the eyes of potential evildoers. *Gharad* dust or sugar is then put on the wound to enable it to heal more quickly. The child's labia are then held together by a contraption made from with sticks wrapped in disinfected cotton, whilst her legs are kept apart with a pillow or additional material. If all goes well, the child is up and about in less than two weeks, though she may still be sore.

#### 4.5.2 Male Circumcision

Unlike female circumcision, male circumcision takes place usually from 7.00am to 8.00am and often on the same day as the naming ceremony [*samaya-T*], seven days after the birth. I understand that in Eritrea people circumcised their sons as late as age ten but, because of the



expense involved in having both a naming ceremony and circumcision, the two occasions are now combined and late circumcisions are rare in Um Gargur. The child is dressed up and beautified with *kohl* around the eyes. Before the circumcision a sheep or goat is killed and the man who slaughters it calls the name of the child as the first blood is spilt. The *haarass* (T), or mother, is still in seclusion at this time (since it is under forty days) and she is kept behind curtains in her hut so as not to be seen by men. (In the past even her husband was not allowed to see her but because of the constraints of settlement life, women cannot afford to take this time off from their daily routines and will get up once their own infibulation has healed and they are stronger.)

The mother stays in bed during the boy's circumcision and gives the child to a relative or close female friend. A cloth is put on the lap of the person who holds the child in order to catch the blood. The *keshbai* (T) or circumciser, then checks the foreskin of the penis to measure the length which needs to be cut. He takes the foreskin back over the penis as far as it can go, testing its elasticity. When he is certain of the length which will be removed he pulls the foreskin in front and fits a round metal or bone ring around it, pulling hard on it until as much skin as is possible to pull comes through, leaving the penis itself behind. Once the *keshbai* is satisfied that the penis cannot slip through the ring and that the foreskin is held tight, he says "*bis mi' allah*" - in the name of God - and with one swift stroke, removes the skin. The mother and other women ululate and the child is passed back to her. Either the mother or grandmother then buries the foreskin in a hidden place. There are no conflicts surrounding the institution of male circumcision and both the health workers and the

villagers all share the belief that it is absolutely necessary. Female circumcision, as I have noted, is far more contentious.

#### 4.5.3 Other Belief and Practices

Other practices which bring the traditional practitioners into conflict with the health workers are the various types of bloodletting widely favoured: *Magirnab* (Tya) and *haleybot* (T), the cure for diseases of the eye consists of two or three deep incisions about half an inch long made (usually) in the area of the eyes or around the temple. This is a very common practice and salt is put in the wound to assist in its healing and to prevent jaundice, conjunctivitis and other eye infections. *Mersersar* (Tya)/*serserot* (T) - the practice of curing severe headaches by driving the stem of a leaf sharply into the nose to allow "bad" blood to flow - is less widely practiced and is thought to be a last-resort cure, taken only when pills and injections do not relieve the pain. It is thought to cure blood clots in the eyes and relieve pressure in the head which is regarded as the primary cause of headaches.

A less drastic form of bloodletting - also called *haleybot* (T)/*mukhalah* (Tya) - is used for less severe headaches and consists of incisions made into the base of the skull, just below the hairline. Heartburn, drowsiness, fainting spells and colds are said to be soothed by cutting several times into veins in the calf of the leg and rubbing it with a stalk to remove the dark, "impure" blood. This is called *michenda* (Tya) or *watebot* (T). If a person suffers from migraines or backaches that cannot be cured by the clinic medicines, then a small hole is cut into veins in the area where there is pain (back or head)

and a small horn is placed over the hole. The horn is then sucked by the healer until it fills with blood. This happens three times, over at which point it is said that the "dirty" blood has been removed. This practice is called *mahgoma* (Tya) and *mahajem* (T).

Concern with blood is a prominent feature among all of the people represented in Um Gargur. Good health is thought to be preserved in a number of ways, one of which is to ensure that all the passages through which blood (or other fluid) flows remain unblocked and its potent force uninterrupted. Bad blood is blood which blocks these passages causing all manner of illness and disease. There are also blood taboos which annoy the clinic workers because they interfere with their objectives. When a severely anaemic Baria woman died after compatible blood donors from her family refused to give blood in the belief that the blood donor as well as the recipient would die, this was given by some of the health workers as another instance of "stupidity" and "backwardness".

One man upon being asked to give the blood which would save his pregnant daughter who was clearly dying, explained to the staff that he was also the father of six others, and since he was certain to die were he to do as they asked, who would be responsible for taking care of them? A Beni Amer man who donated blood to his wife was admonished by his relatives for doing so. They told him that he should take another wife if she died but not to give blood. The clinic staffers are reluctant to take blood from women because many are already anaemic. They say that as women lose blood every month through menstruation, and are extremely weak much of the time, it is preferable to take it from men. Although people rarely give blood, everyone acknowledges that there is a great difference between giving blood to a woman and giving

blood to a man or male child. These latter are "valued" more highly than the female sex and everyone, men and women say that this is how things have always been. As a result, there has never been an instance where a man who has needed blood has not received it from a relation.

People are also often unhappy about taking blood from others or will not allow their children to take blood even when they are ill. Opinions vary, but most people believe blood to be a special fluid, too much or too little of which causes illness. Some people say "*Allah karim*" (God is merciful), and allow things to take their course, while others say that in Eritrea they knew nothing of giving blood because they had no clinics, but that if giving blood will save lives then they will. Thus, it seems that for most people blood may only be lost in certain culturally specific ways, none of which includes its passage from one human body to the next. Giving away such a vital fluid to another person is regarded as foolhardy and not something to be done lightly since it is likely to endanger the lives of both the giver and the taker. These cultural conceptions about blood are among those which are the most deep-rooted, and even though some people change their minds when confronted with the illness of a close relative or friend, those who are most obstinate in their objections include some of the people who have suffered most.

Impurities of the blood and diseases of the skin are treated by drinking herbs, many of which can be found in the markets of the Sudan (sometimes herbal remedies are also brought from Eritrea). It is thought possible to clean one's own system out without resorting to traditional healers. *Gharad*, for instance, which is used in circumcisions, is also crushed and drunk with hot water to combat

respiratory ailments. Smoke baths, [tennet-T/tish-Tya] made with scented woods, are also very important for women of child-bearing age for they are believed to restore the body's equilibrium and rid the body of impurities. Such baths are also used when a person is possessed by zar and are believed to jolt the possessing spirit and bring the body back to its natural state.

A person who has measles is also thought to be possessed by spirits, and is isolated from others in the household, put in a darkened hut, and wrapped with cloths. The person is given as much food as they can eat and the healer or relatives of the person are expected to stay up all night talking with the spirit, in order to appease it and cajole it out of the body of the afflicted person. The spirit must be kept contented and no medicines must come into contact with it for these can only anger it, and therefore endanger the life of the person. Because of the cultural beliefs which surround this disease people are very reluctant to go to the clinic when they are afflicted with measles. As it is children (often malnourished) who are mainly affected by measles, this means that they are not brought to the clinic until their malady has worsened and they are in a critical state.

Another traditional cure which is widely practised is *tacosote* (T) or *metkosa* (Tya) which entails burning the skin on the arm or chest with red hot nails or needles in order to cure a wide variety of symptoms including chest pains, jaundice, hepatitis, tuberculosis and fever. This is favoured by everyone and it is not unusual to see children who are sickly covered with old and newly-healed scars from this practice. One young child of about three who was severely retarded was consistently being treated with this method in the hope that it would

cure him. His parents were constantly in conflict with the staff at the clinic, who urged them to stop the treatments.

When tuberculosis does not respond well to *tacosote*, people look for camel fat, which is said to be one of its remedies. It is also believed that by having their uvulas removed, children will be less likely to contract serious illnesses and as a result most people in the village had been operated on as children. The practise continues in Um Gargur. For heartburn warm ashes are rubbed onto the chest, their heat being thought to draw out the "heat" of the sickness to give a soothing effect. Heartburn is also treated by drinking a mixture of ash and water or by drinking cold milk. Both drinks are thought to neutralise the "heat" of the heartburn. For a baby whose fontanelle is sunken because of dehydration, women will take cold earth from under the base of a *zir* (large water jug) and place it on the soft skull of the child to bring its fontanelle up. The child may then be taken to the traditional healer who will place a finger in the baby's mouth, lifting the child up by this finger. The pressure that the finger exerts on the roof of the mouth as the child is being lifted is believed to push the fontanelle upwards.

The health workers are constantly attempting to discourage some of these practices, which they say are harmful. Women often remark that they realize that the health workers have their interests at heart and that they are eager to learn from the clinic, but they also explain, realistically, that if the clinic medicines do not produce marked improvements they must turn to methods they are more familiar with and which they know to be effective. The health workers for their part complain that women come to the clinic much later than they should and

that the clinic is too often seen as only a supplement to traditional medicine. The opposite seemed to me to be true. I think that women generally use their own instincts and experience first to treat illnesses. If they see no marked improvements they go to the clinic where medicine is free and the process of administering is usually painless. The traditional healers appear to be the last resort, but this, of course, depends on their perceptions about the illness and whether the clinic medicines are known to cure it. It seems clear that all of the adults who are taken ill in the settlement have visited both the clinics and the healers at various points.

#### **4.6 Drama and Health**

One of the tools employed by the SCC clinic to inform the women about health care is drama. The plays are staged during the Mother Child Health (MCH) sessions and have proved both popular and contentious. The clinic has always been something of a social centre for women and it is, in many respects, where they have become empowered. It is also the only place where they meet in large groups, except on social occasions, and where they can chatter and gossip unencumbered by the demands of their families. The plays are enacted by the clinic staff and featured, to the merriment of the audience, men dressed as women. One of the plays I saw went as follows:

A young woman has lost two of her three children to malnutrition. When the third child develops the same symptoms of loss of appetite, diarrhoea, and fever she is at her wit's end lest the same fate befall him. She takes the child, as she had done with her two other children on previous occasions, first to a sheikh who prays over him and prepares

a *hijaab*, a leather amulet containing a piece of paper on which is written a prayer from the Koran and some symbols. After some time she sees no improvement in the child's health. Instead the child becomes worse. She then takes the child to a traditional practitioner who says the child has been cursed by the "evil eye". He gives the child some roots to drink and then burns the child with a nail and assures the mother that the child will recover in no time. The mother waits a few days and noticing no improvement, assumes that her child will die. Friends go by to comfort her and one of them informs her that there are some new pills just arrived in the market and maybe these will help. The desperate mother sends out for them. Another friend drops by and asks her why she has not yet taken the child to see the health worker. The friend convinces her that she should go. When the health worker sees the sick child he scolds the mother for having waited so long to bring the child to him for treatment, then explains to her what is wrong and how the child can be cured. He prescribes a rehydration drink of 1 tablespoon of sugar, a pinch of salt and a large glass of boiled water. He insists that the child should be given boiled water until he fully recovers. The mother cannot believe that anything so simple will save her child but she is prepared to try anything. The health worker tells her never to allow the child to roam around on the ground since it might eat anything, always to use a cup rather than a baby's bottle to feed the child because the nipple, if not boiled and properly cleaned, will retain bacteria, and never to buy medicine from the market without knowing what she is buying because "medicines can kill". The woman leaves with this advice. Some weeks later she returns to the health worker with a healthy and happy baby. She has come to thank him for

saving the life of her child.

The play presents us with an idea of how the clinic staff have seen themselves and their roles *vis à vis* the community and the other health practitioners. After the play the women are encouraged to discuss its contents, how these relate to their own lives and experiences. The discussions which take place are often lively, revealing both the seriousness with which the plays are taken and people's sensitivities about how they are perceived. In one instance I witnessed one woman getting up and protesting about what she perceived to be an insult. She said that the play implied that she did not know how to care for her children, and that she allowed them to run around and eat dirt or whatever they could get their hands on. The woman said that the play's approach treated her as though she were ignorant, and could not distinguish right from wrong. "Everything you have been talking about I know already", she said, with great emotion. Another woman took issue with her opinion. She thanked the clinic workers for presenting the play which she said she found enjoyable. Turning to the first woman she said:

How many times have my children been sick, and I have heard that there are medicines in the market. I don't know what this medicine is for. If it is for the head, or the stomach, or the leg, I do not know. I only know that it is medicine and I only know that my child is sick. So I send to buy this medicine. Now I hear from the doctors that medicine can not only cure, but that it can kill. Before today I did not know this. I only knew that medicine was medicine. I only knew that Panadol will help me to get better. So today I have learned something good. Why are you angry with the doctors? When they say that the children run around on the ground and we don't know what they eat, is this not true? But what can we do. We cannot look at the children every minute. Today I have also learned that the cup is better than the bottle. Everyday we hear that the bottle is good. You say you have not learned anything and that everything the doctors tell you, you know already. Alright, if you know all of this it is good for you and you too must teach us. Now, I ask you,

why have you not taught us? But we did not know this. Today even if you have not learned something, I have learned something new. These are our people.

One of the health workers, a Mensa who was one of the few lowlanders working in the clinic, responded by pointing to the scars above her eyes which identified her as a Tigre and saying:

We are not putting on these plays to insult you or to make you feel bad about yourselves. We are your people and you are our people. We are one. This is only to teach you about some things you might not know. We know about the problems of our people because our mothers brought us up in the same way.

Another woman pointed out that the health workers were always saying that the women must boil water for the children. But she reminded them that wood was expensive and where, she asked, would most women get the money to buy the wood. In defence of the drama, another health worker this time a highlander, explained:

We are not English or German or American. We are from you. We have the same mothers, and you are our mothers and sisters. We know from Eritrea what is good and bad. Here we are all refugees and when we show you this play it is because we see what we are doing wrong. Your children are our children and we want our children to return to Eritrea as healthy children. We are not doing this like Europeans. We are doing this because we are one.

Aside from their belief that the level of malnutrition can be attributed to an overreliance on traditional knowledge, the health workers also attribute many health problems to the mothers' ignorance and the frequency with which women have children (despite the fact that the birth rate has decreased because men are absent for long). Women are very aware of this perception. The onus falls on the women to attend the clinic and to implement its teachings but in Um Gargur women often do not have the money or authority to respond as the clinic would wish. One incident which members of the staff pointed out as an example of

"ignorance" involved a baby that had to be readmitted to the clinic only days after she was born, because she had contracted tetanus. Apparently her grandmother had rubbed a mixture of ash and water onto the child's navel string in order to help it dry and fall off properly. Some of this mixture entered the child's body through the cord and resulted in tetanus.

At the clinic the grandmother was warned never to attempt this again since she had almost brought about the child's death. The child subsequently recovered but the grandmother was distressed for weeks afterwards. Sometime later she explained that this was not the first time she had used this treatment; it had proved efficacious with all six of her own children and this had never happened. She was at a loss to understand how, all of a sudden, her method of twenty years had failed her. No one at the clinic had taken the time to explain what exactly had gone wrong. Instead she was made to feel "useless". This affected her morale and her relations with the clinic for sometime afterward. The health workers speak often of the importance of healthy strong children for the liberated Eritrea. Yet it is women like these who are the mothers of the *shebab*, the Eritrean youth. Most women use the clinic regularly but there are some others, very like this grandmother, who feel alienated by what they perceive as the clinic's dismissal of knowledge which is based on years of experience, both in Eritrea and in Um Gargur.

However, given the restrictions experienced by them within Um Gargur, the majority of women have come to see the SCC clinic as a place of refuge which, on balance, is sympathetic to their needs and problems. It is the only formal institution which gives them an arena in which to

air their views. Yet the clash between the women's more traditional outlook and practices, and the modern ideas proffered by the health workers, is clearly not insignificant. Women seem to want to learn new curative methods, clearly because their experiences in Um Gargur have shown them that knowledge is empowerment. However they also say that some of their own methods of curing have been efficacious for years and that by ignoring this, the health workers are negating *their* knowledge. Thus, the attitudes and responses of the health workers towards the women's "ignorance" has meant that women, from time to time, have felt marginalised by the very institution which is attempting to empower them. And yet, of all the institutions within Um Gargur, it is the clinic which, by prioritising the concerns of women, has contributed greatly to the forging of their identities as "mothers of steel".

## CHAPTER VI - IDENTITY MAINTENANCE AND TRANSFORMATION

Ascha Idris, Baria ex-ELF fighter, aged 23:

*"In the east, Eritrea's boundary is the Red Sea. If you ask to what the Red Sea is joined it is Bab El Mendab which joins Africa and Arabia. If we close it Africa would never meet Arabia at the Red Sea. Because of this strategic place all the countries want Eritrea. And what do we want now? We want our country, the fertile land. People are fighting and dying for it. Green Eritrea. All are longing for it. We will fight and die for it until independence. We have left our country not because we were thirsty or hungry or afraid. We left to prevent everyone dying at the hands of Ethiopians. Our old people have grown up in it and the young people want to be old in it. We will have children and bring them up so that they can go and fight against the enemy. When it is solved we will go back to our country and become brothers and lift each other up with the national democratic revolution. Our army and the people will go forward to victory. We will go forward with one heart. Our mother is Eritrea and our father is also Eritrea."*

Jemal Abdul, Assa'orta, aged 11:

*"I am going to the Front to fight. If we win then Eritrea will be ours. If I die, then there is God."*

## VI. IDENTITY MAINTENANCE AND TRANSFORMATION

### 1. Notions of Home

The refugees in Um Gargur are in a state of limbo, suspended precariously between an idealised past, an intractable present and an uncertain future. Unlike those Eritreans in the Sudan who assimilate and pass as Sudanese, the people in this settlement cling to the idea of being "*ladji'in*" despite its many disadvantages. This decision is both conscious and politically symbolic. In this way they maintain their integrity and are always reminded that home is elsewhere: a better place to be, and a dream to look forward to. Everyone refers to their time in Um Gargur as temporary - children who were born in the settlement and are weaned on a diet of other people's memories and myths; and young people who left Eritrea when they were too small to have acquired memories. They all speak passionately of "*adna*" (T) or "*adyna*" (Tya), "my country". There is no "if" in the idiom of the settlement, only "when", for, although it has provided them with refuge for over a decade, no one entertains the possibility of remaining in Um Gargur. For the refugees the return to their true home is always imminent and they are, metaphorically at least, permanently poised to leave. Ascha Idris, a young woman who trained as a fighter with the ELF told me:

We believe, *insha allah*, we will return to our country and settle in our country and administer our country by ourselves. Ethiopia is our enemy but all Ethiopians are not our enemies. The government and the leader is our enemy. The Dergue [Ethiopian government] is our enemy. The soldiers are bought by money. Their children cry and they don't want to fight and die. But they are forced to make their living like this. For example if Sudan forced me to go and fight I might do it to live. And so the Ethiopians come to Eritrea to make a living for themselves and their children. They don't know yet but there are many revolutions going like this. We say let us work together. We are living in Sudan

and Sudan is not our country. Anyone who does not live in his country is just like a dog. You say to a dog 'go', he goes, 'come', he comes. You give him something to eat, he eats. We have become like dogs in Sudan. If we were in our country nobody would be able to play over us, foreigners or nationals. But now in Sudan we are just like dogs. The Sudanese if they want to put us in prison, they put us in prison. They do to us as they wish, even beat us. We just accept all this in peace.

Home is not merely the land, it is also an idealised abstract; it is a place where one's identity and role in the society is a given, where one is free of the apathy, fear, and insecurity which is often concomitant with being a refugee; it contains their past and holds promises for their future. If, as many people say when speaking of their lives in Sudan, that they are "like dogs", then Eritrea is where they can become humans again. It is a place in which they are neither anonymous nor parasitic but where they have status and, more importantly, potential.

As "mothers of steel", women are aware that health and economic issues constitute only part of their concern; equally relevant to them is ensuring that the generation of children born and raised within the settlement know and understand how they fit into the scheme of all things Eritrean. Women say expressly that their children must, in the Sudan, *learn* to be Eritrean. Women therefore pass on to their children a national and political consciousness. This occurs within the private sphere, an area controlled exclusively by women and in which women are strategists in their own right.

There are some similarities between the women of Um Gargur and Palestinian refugee women who, as cadres in the camps, taken an active role in politicising "the family", reminding them of the urgency of

returning to their homeland (Peteet, 1991). Their activities within the private sphere are clearly critical for the resistance movement since they educate other women to sacrifice their sons, husbands and daughters to the cause. Yet their involvement was not limited to the private domain; "Their support was important...because of its broad strategy of rousing the whole Palestinian people to understand its situation and mobilising them to struggle to change it" (Sayigh and Peteet, 1986:113).

Not all women in refugee situations are believed to make such positive political contributions. Kay in her study of Chilean exiles in Scotland notes that women whose lives centred around the domestic sphere were regarded by their men as, not merely counterproductive, but damaging, to the political struggle. "At a time when the men were desperately trying to hold onto their political ideals in the face of adversity, the privatised women seem to be undoing their work in the home. The women's sense of satisfaction at certain benefits of exile...caused a great deal of misgiving amongst their men...given women's pivotal role in the socialisation of the young, the privatised women transmitted this personalised world view to their children" (1987:186).

Unlike their Chilean sisters, women in Um Gargur perceive no benefits in exile. In fact, everyone's sense of self-worth is challenged sharply when they step outside the boundaries and confines of the settlement because although they know that they are peripheralised, the refugees become even more aware that their entire community constitutes a "problem" in the eyes of the wider society. Whatever respectability may have been achieved by their families in Um Gargur

becomes negated once they leave their familiar environment. In order to counterbalance this, people transmit to their children a message of confidence and pride in their Eritrean nationality. This message is disseminated in symbolic form through myths, songs, poems, and new names. Because they are ever present, it is generally women in their traditional roles as socialisers, who in the imaginative sphere, offer their children continuity with the past and shape their identities.

## **2. Formal Education**

The Eritreans regard education as the key to social change and economic advancement. Before Italian rule virtually the only education received was transmitted through churches and mosques. Such religious instruction, whilst of some spiritual and intellectual benefit, was also divisive and served to strengthen ethnic and religious polarities between groups. Mission schools established in the nineteenth century were more secular in thrust, although they too stressed religious instruction. During the early twentieth century the Italians set up government schools, introducing legislation which prohibited Eritreans from proceeding past the fourth grade, in order to produce "a barely-qualified, deferential labour force and army" (Firebrace, 1984:117). Although the British and the Federation governments later increased the number of schools in the country, under the British, schools were segregated so that Muslims were taught in Arabic, and Christians in Tigrinya, whilst under the Federation both languages were abandoned in favour of Amharic.

Whilst most of the highlanders were exposed to some form of education in Eritrea, formal secular education is a new development for

the majority of these lowland pastoralists in Um Gargur. Today most of the refugees, both male and female, Muslims and Christians, take a great interest in formal education and what it means for their children. There are three elementary schools in Um Gargur: a Sudanese boys' and a girls' school which extend to the sixth grade, and the Sabbe (ELF-PLF) school which extends to the eighth grade. Arabic is the medium of instruction in all three schools although the Tigrinya alphabet is also taught. Although everyone is enthusiastic about education and the need for schools, some people have argued that the curriculum at none of these schools is entirely appropriate for the future needs of their children who will someday return to Eritrea. They feel that besides mathematics, English, and natural sciences, it is important that their children become literate in at least one other Eritrean language, and that the curriculum should have a bias towards Eritrean history and culture.

The better educated among the refugees, both Muslims and Christians, say that the Sudanese schools make a token effort to teach their children about Eritrean history but have no real desire to do so, and that those Eritrean teachers who work there are ill-qualified to teach. The majority of people seem relatively content with the education system because it has a strong religious content which appeals to them as Muslims. There are complaints even among the Muslims however, that in the Sudanese school Sudanese history is stressed and that in the Sabbe school, the curriculum places an emphasis on the history of countries such as Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia (from which the school receives its funds) rather than on Eritrean history. Most of the teachers are Sudanese, even in the Sabbe school which, some say, is Eritrean in name

and directorship only but is primarily interested in promoting an Arab identity. And although Islam as a subject is said to be optional at both schools, some Christian children who have tried to opt out have discovered that this is marked against them as a "failure", reducing their grade point averages. As a result even those least interested in Islam are bound to take it as part of their curriculum.

### **3. Names and Identity**

Of the various strategies which the Eritreans in Um Gargur have called upon to maintain their cultural and political identity, the most novel is the creation of new names and the adoption and popularisation of previously little utilised names. The Eritreans demonstrate their ability to adapt, at least symbolically, through slight but significant additions to their naming system.

From the study of names in various societies we have learned that they can sometimes shed light on categories as varied as social organisation, culture, caste systems, occupation, class and economic background, and totems and taboos (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Barnes, 1982; Linsky, 1967; James, 1978; Needham, 1971). Linsky suggests that names are only there to enable their referents (i.e. their owners) to be made the subject of discussion; the semantical content or syntactic structure of a name is irrelevant to its being a name and functioning as such, for the name exists in and of itself and has no meaning *per se*. On the other hand Lévi-Strauss asserts that names do not generally "exist" on their own but that the very process of giving a name is part of a wider classificatory structure. Although this does not necessarily apply to conventional European names, in many other societies there exist

conventional names which are given to children born in a certain order, on a particular day of the week, because of peculiar characteristics or incidents associated with the births, etc. They are not anomalous but are clearly part of a total system.

The changes in the naming pattern of many children in Um Gargur have political cross-referents. In the sense that the names derive from current political experiences and suggest a particular genre of conceptualisation, they both express the ideological stance of the donor, and presume that of the child. This accords with Lévi-Strauss' suggestion that all names fall between two extremes. "At one extreme, the name is an identifying mark which, by the application of a rule, establishes that the individual who *is named* is a member of a preordained class...At the other extreme, the name is a free creation on the part of the individual who *gives the name* and expresses a transitory and subjective state of his own by means of the person he names" (1966:181). The story of Nadal, an eight year-old boy born to his mother Hawa during her flight from Eritrea to Sudan illustrates this dichotomy neatly. Nadal is also the Arabic word for "struggle":

We were asleep when we heard the guns. It was night. We were not prepared for this. My children were all with me, and Adam Jamil [her husband] went out to see what was happening. We were thinking, what is this happening. We heard all the people around us. Eyee! Eyee! Everyone was screaming and there was much noise. We didn't know what was happening. Everyone was screaming and the children too were screaming. I was trying to stop them but we could hear the noise of the guns, (kracow, kracow,) and we could see the smoke. There was too much noise that night. Adam Jamil came in and said the Ethiopians had come and they were killing people. We picked up our children and ran. None died, thanks be to Allah. We did not even take our clothes, we just took some gold. My stomach was out to here but what could we do. We heard the guns and everyone running so we grabbed our children and we ran too. We thought we would die. My stomach was this big and I could not run fast. All night we travelled by foot. For seven nights and seven days

we walked. Many people were on the road with us. Then the pain came. The pain was strong. How the pain was strong. Then Nadal was born. Thanks be to Allah. We were in the struggle and the struggle came in my stomach. We didn't have any food. Thanks to Allah we met some Arabs and they gave us food. We didn't have any money for food but the Arabs gave us food and water. When we came to Sudan we had no money even to build a house. I did not know how we were to live and all the children, you see how they are big now? Then they were all small. Everyday they wanted to eat...We were in the struggle, in Eritrea there was struggle, in Sudan there was struggle and the struggle came from my belly. I thought I would die. So we gave him the name Nadal.

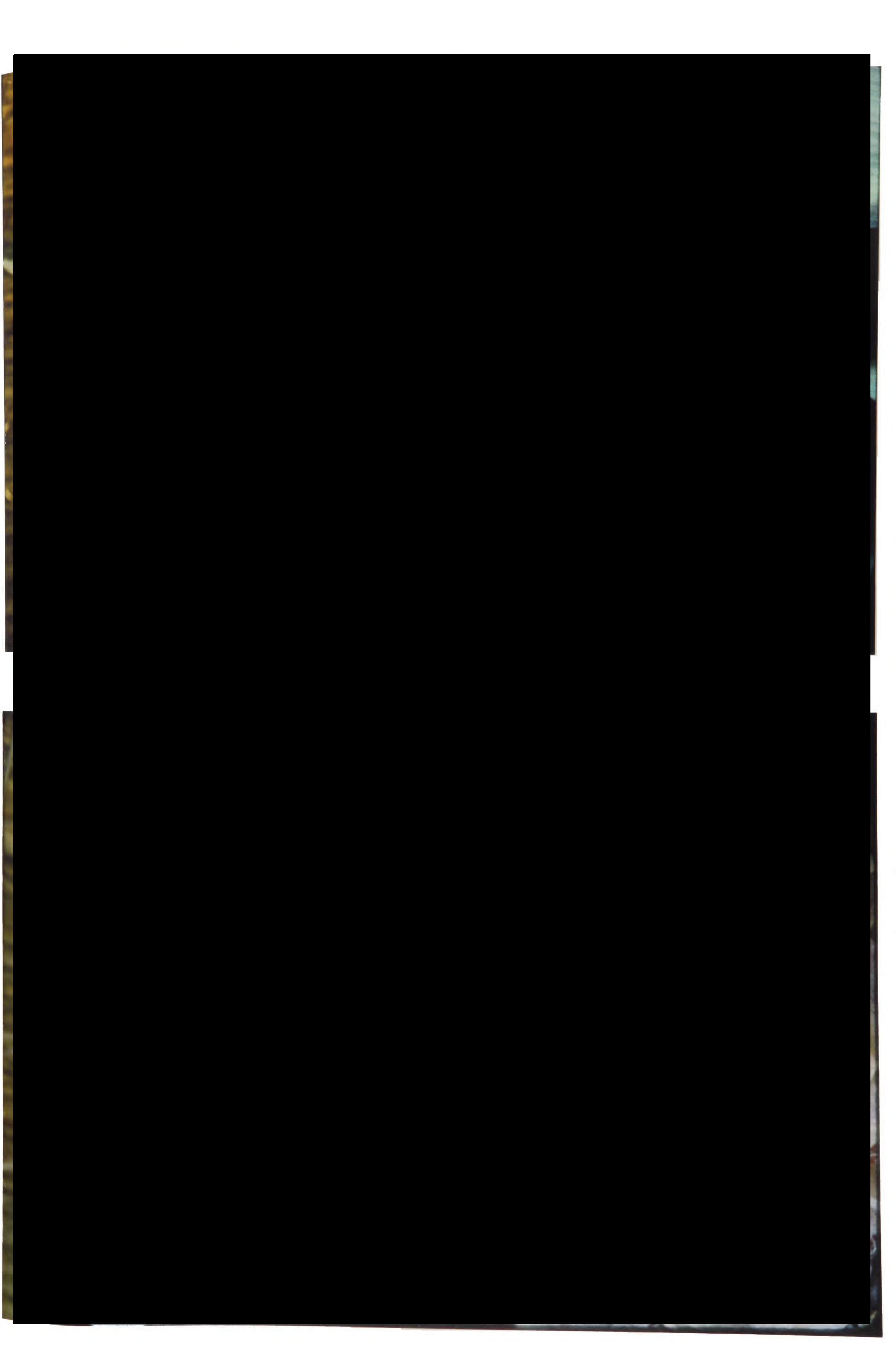
The creation of new names, and the popularisation of names which had previously been little used, represents a dynamic idiom of social action in the state of limbo and powerlessness that characterises refugeehood in Um Gargur. The names are referred to as being of the *saura* (A), or revolution. Although the system of freely-created names is not an essential characteristic of identity maintenance, it is important to note that they are not formed within a vacuum but result from particular conditions and signify a kind of moral cohesion. In Hawa's case, the circumstances surrounding the birth of her son were aptly encapsulated by the word "struggle" hence *nadal*. According to everyone I asked, this word was not generally utilised as a proper name among the Eritreans. The same is true of the younger generation of Palestinians, among whom names with political overtones are rife.<sup>1</sup>

James has said that freely-created names create "a timescale within the succession of persons and events, rather than subordinating them to a wider mythical-historical framework. The connection of names is not with the broad canvas of the past, but with the local, often unexpected, and discontinuous happenings of the present and of living memory" (1978:115). Many of the new and revived Eritrean names might belong to characters in an allegorical drama or a morality play (see Table 7).

These names are not thought to bestow their implied attributes upon the bearer but since they both describe ideal characteristics and refer to concrete social conditions, most *saura* names may be regarded as a condensed form of oral history. One example of this is the story of Nekhat (consciousness [Tya]), the daughter of Kiros Sereke:

Nekhat was born in 1978 in the Sudan. This was around the time that the EPLF started to raise the consciousness of the people who were living in the Sudan. 1977-78 was the year when the fronts had liberated almost all of Eritrea so it was the time of politicisation and everyone was talking about "consciousness". It was the key word. "Nekhat" was the name of a magazine circulated by Eritreans in America but I hadn't heard it used before as a name. Even my son Yoel was given the name Bideho which means "challenge" [Tya]. He was born in 1981 and it was the time the EPLF was preparing for the sixth offensive. It was a big challenge because the Ethiopian government had prepared a big army of around 200,000 soldiers and new Soviet tanks and fighter airplanes. What made it different from the other offensives was that this time they had prepared nerve gas. Menghistu himself came to Asmara and said that he would eliminate all these fronts within a few weeks because of all these weapons and the Soviet support. He thought that he had found new strength with which he could destroy the liberation movements once and for all. He was preparing from 1979 after the fifth offensive to 1982. The front was also trying to prepare the people for the chemical warfare. Everyone had a challenging spirit. There were even songs about this. Yoel was born in 1981 so it was a good time to call him Bideho...A friend has called his son Toboguso (initiative [Tya]). Things have changed and names will probably change according to the situation. The reason he [the friend] gave his son that name was because the Eritrean/Ethiopian power had become equalised and so it [possible victory] was left to the initiatives of the Front. I don't think that the new names will die out completely but it will depend on the times, and the names will change.

Names may imply desired aims as in the case of "Simret" and "Asmarom" which both mean "unity"; "Houria" and "Netsenet" which mean "freedom"; "Marrnet", "equality"; "Harnet", "liberation"; "Fethi", "justice"; "Awot", "victory". Names of actual places, generally sites of successful battles, are also commonly given to children. "Adyna",



which means "our country" in Tigrinya and "Eritrea" are two names borne by children. Nicknames are the only ones which are character referent. A number of them refer to implements of war; names such as "Tanki" (tank) and "Grenet" (grenade) show that even English pronunciations have been appropriated. The one person I knew of who bore the name "Erbeje" (anti-tank missile) was a short, squat fellow who was said to be very strong. Such nicknames are said to be quite common in the field among fighters and are reportedly used with more frequency than proper names.

There are two cases I recorded of adults who had changed their names. Both the persons concerned had Ethiopian (Amharic) names originally. The first, a woman, used to be known by an Amharic name Siminesh which means "you are the sky". She joined one of the fronts as a fighter and later changed her name to "Merei" or "vanguard". The other character, a man, was baptised Ethiopis by his Coptic parents. He later took on the name "Gembar" or "front", discarding his original name altogether. Most of the new names are not gender specific and may be borne by members of either sex. This is a radical departure from the traditional Muslim and Christian names; also because Eritreans do not have surnames but take the first name of the father, non-gender-specific revolution names are likely to have a long-term impact.

It is possible to place the creation of revolutionary names within an approximate temporal context. First however, note must be made of a little discussed episode in Eritrean history which was recounted to me by several of the older villagers. In Chapter One we noted that sometime shortly after the federation the Ethiopian government began to systematically undermine what they rightly perceived to be the rise of Eritrean national consciousness. Eritrea's flag and the penal code as

well as its languages were altered and adapted to an Ethiopian model. According to the villagers, it was around this time that Ethiopia began to forbid the Eritrean population from referring to their homeland as a national entity. Some of the villagers said that the mere mention of Eritrea in a nationalistic context was apparently enough to send one to jail. Because of the repressive tactics of the Ethiopian authorities and the fact that at this time there was a proliferation of spies, people began to think of new names by which to call Eritrea. Names were taken particularly from songs and Eritrea came to be referred to variously as Lula-Hadra (green jewel), Echet-henna (henna tree) and more popularly, Mariam Fatima and Fatna Zaharra. In the case of the former, because it included both a Muslim and a Christian element it was a way in which unity could be articulated and Ethiopian values rejected. Songs were sung about the "beloved Fatna Zaharra", "If you see Fatna Zaharra please remember to salute her". At one point thousands of people - students, workers and housewives - marched through the streets of Asmara carrying the effigy of a woman whom they called Fatna Zaharra, referring to her as their loved one and singing songs of love and praise.

Revolutionary personal names do not seem to have evolved before 1961 and it was probably not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that they were really in evidence. After 1975 however, it appears that new names materialised with greater frequency and some old names, of which several had fallen out of use, gained new political significance. Some people suggested that this was because the EPLF began to place more emphasis on consciousness programmes and political education, however it is also clear that these new names were equally widespread among ELF supporters.

**Table 7. Saura Names Given to Eritrean Children.**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Origin-Bearer</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Asmarom	Tya/m	1975	coming together/unity
Asmeret	Tya/m	1975	coming together/unity
Awot	T-Tya/m		victory
Entisar	T-A/f		victory
Fethi	T-Tya/f-m		justice
Harenet	Tya/f-m		liberation
Houria	T-A/f		freedom
Marrnet	Tya/f-m		equality
Mentisar	T/m		victory
Metkal	Tya/f-m		political objective or stand
Nasr	T-A/f-m	1972	victory
Netsenet	Tya/f-m		freedom
Saura	T-A/f-m		revolution
Simret	Tya/f-m	1974	unity: after ELF-EPLF civil war
Merih	Tya/f-m	1975	vanguard
Nekhat	Tya/f-m	1978	consciousness
Toboguso	T-Tya/f-m	1978/83	initiative
Barheh	Tya/m	1976	flame
Bideho	Tya/f-m	1980-2	challenge; during "Red Star"offensive
Dejen	T-Tya/f-m		base
Errdi	Tya/f-m		fortress
Grenet	T-Tya/f-m		hand grenade
Gembar	Tya/f-m		liberation front
Haraka	T/f-m		underground (liberation) movement
Mahta	Tya/f-m		spark
Mesreh	Tya/f-m		process
Nadal	T-A/f-m	1976	struggle
Rahwa	Tya/f		prosperity
Selam	Tya/f		peace
Selamawit	Tya/f		one who loves peace
Selamawi	Tya/m		one who loves peace
Tarabarab	T-Ty/m		fight to the end

Tarikh	T-Tya/m	history
Tomocrow	T-Tya/f-m	experience
Yikaalo	Tya/m	God will make you victorious

#### Nicknames

Erbeje	T-Tya/f-m	anti-tank missile
Saruch	T-Tya/f-m	rocket
Tanki	T-Tya/m	tank
Toomsah	T/m	crocodile; strength
Cabral	T-Tya/m	homage to Amilcar Cabral
Che Guevera	T-Tya/m	homage to Che Guevera

#### Place Names

Adna	T/f		my country
Adyna	Tya/f		my country
Denden	T-Tya/f-m		mountain in Sahel which the Ethiopian army failed numerous times to capture; often sung about by fighters.
Duta	T-Tya/f-m	1975-8	mountain in Barentu where Ethiopian army clashed with ELF
<b>Eritrea</b>			
Hager	m		battlefield in Sahel; often sung about
Hawashite	f/m		river with ELF camps
Semhar	f/m	1977	Eritrean province. site of EPLF victory
Togorba	m	1974	site of first major battle between ELF and Ethiopian army

In addition to this, new names would crop up both in the field and in the settlement with every successful offensive against the Ethiopians. Most of the names collected within the settlement are from the Tigrinya language (see Table 7). This implies that most of the creators of the new names were themselves Tigrinya and probably Christian, however the evidence from both the ex-fighters living in Um Gargur, and the general

population, suggests that a clear dichotomy no longer exists. Revolutionary names are now everyone's prerogative and surprisingly, are not necessarily signifiers of religious background, gender, ethnic or geographical origin. In some ways these names can be regarded as one of the main expressions of unity between Christians and Muslims. The names which existed previously but which have been given to children recently have renewed political meaning, and are also said to be revolutionary names. As these names are a recent occurrence, it is not yet possible to say whether the giving of such names is an ephemeral phenomenon. What is interesting, however, is the fact that contemporary experience has been condensed and translated into a system of appellations; the *saura* names reflect an Eritrean conceptualisation of the recent past as much as they reflect a conceptualisation of the future.

#### **4. Songs and Stories**

In Um Gargur it is very common to hear songs, poems and stories about Eritrea. While some of these are anecdotal and have been told to children by their parents for generations, others have filtered into the settlement from outside or have been created by refugees themselves. They have the dual function of entertaining their listeners while vigorously and vividly perpetuating a connection with Eritrea. Many of them retell the refugees' troubled history in various ways and are sometimes nostalgic, and sometimes advocating change. They are often characterised by sentiments of loss and grief. Like the *saura* names, they are a crucial mechanism of identity maintenance, a celebration of survival despite the odds. New creations by adults and by young children who were born in Um Gargur spread via children from *hilla* to

*hilla*, changing as they travel, while old songs and verses are more widely known. It is often difficult to ascertain if a story or a song is old or new, conceived externally or within the settlement, especially when many people were also uncertain about the origins. If most people seemed to know a song, story, or poem, I assumed that it was old and from outside (Eritrea or other settlements) but there was no way of being certain unless, of course, the villagers were themselves sure. One evening when I visited Fatna Mohammed Ofash, a young Baria woman whose family left Eritrea when she was eight, she recounted a tale about the legendary Fatna Zaharra. Several children were present:

There was a girl Fatna Zaharra whose mother died. The father later remarried a woman called Ethiopia and told his wife to take good care of his daughter. Then he travelled far away. The step-mother Ethiopia didn't give the girl food or drink. The daughter was very thirsty so she went to get water. When she was out her step-mother came and killed her. Fatna Zaharra then became a bird. When the father returned and asked for his daughter, the step-mother said that she went to the house of a neighbour. The father then went outside to rest under a tree. The step-mother did not know it but Fatna Zaharra was up in this tree waiting for her father. She began to sing to her father, 'When you went to Suakin my mother didn't feed me. I was thirsty and hungry but when I went to get water, my mother came dressed as a thief and killed me. She killed me and I became a bird'. The father then went to a *fekir* who told him, "Give Fatna Zaharra *simsim* and sugar and she will become a person again'. He gave this to his daughter and she became a person. He sent the step-mother, Ethiopia, away.

In this story (which has elements of the brothers Grimm), Eritrea is ultimately freed from the wicked step-mother and regains her human form. Her fate and the fate of the refugees is intertwined; when Ethiopia is dismissed militarily or otherwise, the refugees, who speak of themselves variously as "dogs" and "beggars" can regain their humanity and with it their dignity.

Other stories told to children by their mothers and older relatives

are essentially family tales about what life was like in Eritrea before the troubles. Children who were born in Sudan can often describe in great detail how much cattle their fathers had in Eritrea and how much gold and how many cows were given to their mothers upon their marriages. They can describe the landscape of the villages which their parents stemmed from and know who the rich families were and how they acquired their wealth. Peteet reports similar findings among Palestinian refugees: "Today young people often can discuss how much land their families owned and what was grown on it. They know many of the families of their former villages, if not by acquaintance at least by name, and are aware of village history...Everyday life in the refugee camps was constantly compared to a past that had been shattered abruptly and violently...Youngsters began to sense the urgency of return - the need to live a normal way of life and a secure existence within their own country" (1991:26).

The dispossession felt by these Palestinian children is echoed by young people throughout Um Gargur. Nasrudin Ismail, a nine year-old boy who was born in Um Gargur one year after his parents arrived, reflects the distress of many refugees in his poem:

My eyes are weeping tears of blood  
because I have been away for too long  
from my home, it is called Eritrea.  
One day soon me and the youths will return  
to our home, it is called Eritrea.

The refugees described by Peteet felt that Palestine might remain forever out of their reach. In Um Gargur however, the feeling of exile is to a large extent balanced by the feeling of hope, both of which permeate the discourse of the settlement. Even in this poem, the overwhelming sense of loss articulated by this child who has never seen

Eritrea, is eased by expectation.

The songs which are imported into the settlement are not only hopeful but they are generally calls to arms. The most popular song among all children was "Shebab Eritrea Sabir Woodey" (Tigre), an ELF song which was first sung in 1975:<sup>2</sup>

Youth of Eritrea, have patience  
 You will be victorious and will return to your country  
 Your history will not disappear.  
 Work for her [Eritrea] honestly and truly  
 Try to look after your revolution.  
 We are not afraid of anything  
 Our decision is in our hands and we can make it<sup>3</sup>

Another popular ELF song was "Jebha Shar'abi", a song of gratitude and praise to the People's Army (ELF):

Thank you very much for what you are doing  
 You are the guarantee that we will liberate our country  
 Wait Menghistu, killer of women and children  
 A terrible fate awaits you  
 The Front for Liberation [ELF] derives from the people,  
 Goes back to the people and goes from strength to strength<sup>4</sup>

Some songs are sung only in conjunction with a cassette of the music or when they are played over the radio. These are generally political songs which filter into the settlement but were conceived in the field by the cultural (entertainment) troupes of the liberation fronts. Excerpts from one political (Tigrinya) song runs thus:

Husband:

The winter has changed to summer, they've taken all our corn and millet. Our houses have all been bombed and we've been driven from Aboy Blahta [feudal system] to the dergue. If the dergue will give us clothes, then wife, let us join them.

Wife:

What??! Don't you remember Blahta Haile [Haile Selassie], the thief of our people's food. Here [the dergue are] killing people, and burning houses. But it would be much better to die of starvation, than to eat the dergue's injera.

Husband:

We had our supper but even though we get the injera of the refugees, there are so many of us that it all finishes before we can eat our fill. A father and son working day and night to produce food, that is the food which lasts forever, because they

have worked for it.

Wife:

If we tie our waists with shawls and try to cut the bushes and grasses, maybe the Dergue will appreciate it.

Chorus: Rain is falling on the hills, the bushes are heavy with dew.  
If the enemy doesn't leave our homes,  
we will never again see a time of plenty.

Husband:

We shouldn't say we want to make our suffering less, we must tie our hungry intestines. If we fight then the children will become brave and learn, so we have to fight against the enemy. We will spit them out and throw them away.

Wife:

You're right, you're right.

Husband:

And that's the only way we can get out of this trouble<sup>5</sup>

Another song which came from the field and was sung in both Tigre and Tigrinya was called "Women's rights":

When I remember the past, with the hardship and suffering,  
how I hated to live in this world, which my mother brought me  
into. I remember I was not treated equally with my brothers,  
and the culture did not allow me to develop and advance.

I was a creature without rights and skills  
and I was treated like a slave.

A heavy load was carried on my shoulders  
and I never had help from others,

I was merely a house servant. But with our struggle we have  
abolished all these bad practices,  
and replaced them all with new.

We have turned the darkness into light.

With our struggle we have crossed the fence  
that prohibited us from moving forward.

With our struggle I can lift up my head and step out from  
bondage to fight for our people's freedom and rights.

I can contribute equally like the men in short trousers,  
shirts and sandals, struggling by the side of my brothers, to  
serve my country.<sup>6</sup>

Although in Eritrea there are many female fighters, few of the women of Um Gargur would have imagined themselves donning trousers to go and join their "brothers" in the liberation war. Yet it did not prevent them from interpreting this song as a tribute to their lives. It was one of several songs which dealt only with women and spoke of the changes which were taking place among Eritreans outside of Um Gargur.

It was also hauntingly beautiful, and very popular among women of all ages and backgrounds. It was however, not entirely popular among many of the conservative men who regarded this particular song as a criticism of their cultural practices. On the whole, it must be said that most of the songs, poems, and stories, are interpreted as symbolically expressing an ideal of unity rather than disunity. As such the verses tap into the collective consciousness of the refugees, reminding them constantly that even if they have never seen it, they have a country which is a vibrant complex of ideas and traditions and cultures.

## CHAPTER VII - CONCLUSION: MOTHERS OF STEEL

*All life comes from water.*

(Eritrean proverb)

Matsuda Erbut, Belin mother and literacy student, aged 26:

*"In our country everyone lived according to his knowledge with their tribe only. Then Eritrea became hot [with war] and we came here to Sudan. We decided to learn. When we came to the school [women's centre], I learned from one woman and she learned from me. This is because we wanted to remember our country. Everything that we learn is something we brought ourselves from our own country. It is not something we discovered here in the Sudan. Because of the knowledge we brought from home now we are able to come to each other and learn. Here the UNHCR gives us serafiya [rations]. But this knowledge is our serafiya [aid] to each other. We remember our country and we have learned from each other."*

## VII. CONCLUSION

### 1. Mothers of Steel

This thesis has been an ethnographic account of women's lives and experiences in an Eritrean refugee settlement. In it I have analysed the aspects of life which are of highest priority to the women in Um Gargur, examining how categories as diverse as health, economics, honour and politics impinge upon their lives and those of their children. My arguments have shown that none of these categories can be narrowly theorised and that all of them have a moral dimension. Paradoxically, the struggle for cultural continuity in Um Gargur has been accompanied by the emergence of greater restrictions which are legitimised through religion.

I have demonstrated that Um Gargur is not a community in stasis merely awaiting its deliverance from limbo, but is a society undergoing frequently subtle, but profound changes. The proximity of groups of people whose lives would never have touched each other has created the conditions for the erosion of prejudices and stereotypes; formal education and healthcare are available; women's roles have been infused with new significance both as upholders of tradition, and as idealised representations of tradition who are required to behave in "proper" ways. All of these changes, negative and positive, have come about through the refugees' experience of displacement and dispossession. I have shown that in Um Gargur ethnicity, particularly in the presence of non-Eritreans, is undercommunicated and national identity is symbolically articulated. Intimate social networks have evolved which function among women like kinship networks, giving them moral and

physical support. The stranger, once someone to be feared, is ultimately an Eritrean and therefore "from the same mother".

In all aspects of the society we encounter realignments which are generally anything but painless. Everyone has lost in this environment, but the loss of status experienced by men has translated into a loss of autonomy for women. The majority of men who are able to provide for their families do so *in absentia*, and therefore children grow up perceiving their fathers and most men who remain in the settlement not as providers but as idlers, dependent upon aid rations. It is only their mothers, as workers and carers in the home, who continue to lead productive, meaningful lives. Women's roles as teachers and transmitters of tradition are given additional import in the refugee context where children, bereft of most of their kin, are learning about life in Eritrea through their mothers' tales and songs. Women are also now more dependent upon their children than they are upon adult men. And yet in both the political and the moral spheres, men who saw themselves losing status sought to compensate for this loss (and to create the illusion of power) by suppressing women, and by seeking to re-establish formal mechanisms of male authority. Nowhere was this more forcefully illustrated than during the water riot which took place in Um Gargur.

In September 1986 the *moodir*, with the sheikhs and the cooperative leaders, decided that the villagers of Um Gargur should no longer draw water from the bore-wells for free. Instead they would be charged five *piastres* per gallon. This money would be entrusted to the cooperative leaders who would put it towards paying for the repair and upkeep of the pump, and towards hiring a guard to oversee its management. Charges

were instituted without consulting the women in the settlement, who make use of water for all their domestic chores - cooking, drinking, washing dishes, clothes and hands, bathing their children and themselves. Nor was discussion entered into with the villagers about the cooperative's role in managing the funds.

In fact the women of Um Gargur learned that they were expected to pay for water only after a few children who had been sent to collect water came home empty-handed. Word quickly spread through the settlement that water was no longer free. At the prices instituted, a frugal family of three would find it hard to spend less than S£9.10 per month which for a woman on her own with two young children was excessive. Everyone knew that the cooperative leaders were among the richest in the settlement. The refugees' experience had shown that the cooperative leaders, mostly shop-keepers or relatives of shop-keepers, faced a conflict of interest when it came to stocking the cooperative shop with cheap goods. People believed them to be corrupt and felt that water charges were simply a clever new method of extortion employed by the cooperative. The women said that it was unheard of to make people who had so little means pay for something so basic and yet so necessary as water. The Eritreans have a saying: "All life comes from water". Were they now to be deprived of life?

In a rare exhibition of outrage and solidarity, over one hundred women, approximately 8% of the adult female population, descended on the shops of the cooperative leaders and on the area around the pump, proclaiming their right to free water. Most of them were accompanied by their children. Several of the women who took part reported that they were abused by the settlement manager. According to Um Caltoum, one of

the protest leaders, the settlement manager said, "Get lost, you *Habash rabesh!* [loosely translatable as Eritrean scum] Go drink water from the *hafir* [reservoir]. There it is open!" She was among six women who were imprisoned in Showak by Sudanese police. They were fined S£25.00 each and all of them reported being told that if they did not pay they would be whipped. They stayed in prison for ten days while other women from the settlement found the S£150.00 needed to secure their release. This money was collected entirely by women for women. Several hundred women in Um Gargur contributed and the money was taken, mainly in small coins, to the prison in Showak. For men and women in Um Gargur this day marked a turning point in their perceptions of each other. Zaharra Ismail described why these actions were taken:

The village women said that the cooperative had been making a profit out of the shop, the bakery and the grinding mill and did they now want to make a profit from water as well? The women said 'No way'. Many women came together and they were supported by the young people. They went to the market and attacked the cooperative shop and began to hand the goods to the people. Then the police came and took all of them to the prison in Showak. They beat everyone, women and children. It was the end. After that they came and said we must pay money for the water. Finished.

We were many women but not all of us were arrested. Myself, Halima Rahouda, Sadia mother of Osman Caltoun, the mother of Salih the shopkeeper, many many women were there. They went and broke the shop. They threw stones at the grinding mill and went to the water pump. Then the police came and beat the women and children. They beat us and the men did not say a thing. They just sat and kept quiet. Then they took us to prison. The men were sitting like this [arms crossed] whilst the women were being beaten. The children began to sing, 'teet, teet, *umhatna hadid!* [our mothers are steel], toot, toot *abouhatna garoud!* [our fathers are monkeys] teet, teet, *umhatna hadid!*, toot, toot, *abouhatna jelud!* [our fathers are as useless as old skins]'.

At first the police did not want to take us to prison but the elders like Mohammed Nur Maibatot were angry and said to the police 'Take them to prison!' Why did they [elders] do that? They said, 'Have you seen women behave like this? Have you seen Muslim women behave like this? It is shameful. Beat them and take them!' We were put in prison for six days. There were many women who started the trouble but all of them

did not go to prison. Only half of them went to prison. The others ran away. We said to them when they were taking us, 'You see this water here? We are refugees, how can we pay for it. We are only refugees, we have little money'. They said, 'You are going to pay because we have put in a new pump for you'. They told us that we would have to pay and now we are paying. If all the men had said 'No', if they had joined with the women then it would have worked. But they did not. Only us women together. It was no use. Can women alone change things? Can women alone be useful? They cannot. Now for the bakery we pay money. For the shop we pay money. We are paying twenty-five piastres for bread. It is not fair. Where can we get the money from. Some people can afford it. The people who own the cooperative can afford it, but not everyone. They say that the cooperative belongs to all of us but this is not so. The children were singing '*La ta-awn, baad el yum, La ta-awn, baad el yum*' [No cooperative from today]. We said 'We do not want any more cooperative'. When the children broke the shop they took the candies, biscuits and the money. They ate the candies and biscuits and ran with their mothers throwing stones and shouting '*teet, teet umhatna hadid. La ta-awn baad el yum*'. The men complained that the children were destroying the shops and mill and said 'What is this?' The women replied, 'Let it be so'. This happened on a Friday. On Fridays the market is empty at mid-day. The women decided to go at that time because they knew then that the market would be empty. The shopkeepers were very angry and even though some of their sons were among the demonstrators, they told the police to beat the women and children. They also beat Saleh Abdul Rahman, the Jiberti, because he said 'Do not beat the women'. He was the only one of the men who spoke up for the women. They said to him, 'Oh, so you are with them?' And then they beat him until he became ill. They also hit my husband with a stick. He was running and his turban fell off his head and when he bent down to pick it up, they beat him on his back. Although usually there is only one policeman they anticipated the trouble and many police were brought in from Showak. They came with whips. People like Abdullai, the son of Ali Bakhit were demonstrating with the women. After the demonstration Abdullai came here to our home. Later the police came here as well and said 'Get up, get up', and they took him in their jeep. People must have told the police that he was marching with the women and that he had come here afterwards because otherwise they would not have known. They took him to Showak and imprisoned him.

After the women were taken to prison some of the other women collected some money for us. Two women went to Showak with food, kisra and tea. They asked the police to see us. We welcomed them and they came in. They gave money for the boys also who were imprisoned, money to buy tobacco and cigarettes and gave the rest of the money to the women. They said to us that if we were not released after a certain time that they would bring us some more money. After some days we were

released. I don't know what happened to the rest of the money but they collected a lot of money. But all our troubles did not bear fruits. The men did not support us. They kept quiet. They did not stand with us. They did not say 'We are not going to pay a cent'. They kept quiet, they were useless. The women demonstrated, were beaten and imprisoned, but to no avail. When we were beaten by the police they said 'We do not care, they are drunkards, hooligans'. All the men said this. The elders did not care because they use the money for themselves. Because they eat the money for themselves, the men said 'Let them be beaten'. Our demonstration did not work. The men are useless, they did not stand by us.

Women were characterised in two ways by men in Um Gargur. Among all the groups represented in the settlement one would hear, "What are women good for? They stay at home, eat and sleep; their concerns are few." These were common comments, often made in the company of women, who themselves rarely refer to the laborious tasks they perform at home as "work". One would also hear the same people say with equal conviction that "While a family without a father will survive, a family without a mother will surely die." These notions, while seemingly paradoxical, stem from the same root - the ideal woman is one who remains in the home, preferably reproducing. Women are believed to be agents of continuity; they regenerate the society by bringing new life into it, they sustain life by cooking and caring for their children and families. Women's relevance within their circumscribed spheres is embodied in the saying "If a mother becomes ill, the home becomes dark."

The question then is why, if women are regarded as the cornerstone of their society's well-being, would the men in Um Gargur have allowed Sudanese strangers to do them harm? Why would they allow their women to be beaten? The answer, I hope, can be found in my representation of the nature of refugee life and its frequent displacement and distortion of ideas, values and institutions. However the aim of this thesis has not

only been to analyse the extreme character of life in Um Gargur, but also to demonstrate why some of the community's responses to it are likewise extreme. Although gender fractions are at the centre of the discussion, they are a point from which other more substantive analyses have been made. The forces which propel women into public displays of rage while at the same time transforming such behaviour which their societies regard as "shameful" into "honourable" action, are exactly the same forces which can incite young people to shame their fathers by shouting, "Our fathers are monkeys!...Our fathers are as useless as old skins!". These forces also acted to propel men into sanctioning the beating of the women. Such forces are the prevailing social and economic realities which have left the society in a state of disarray, and its members in the position of having to reconceptualise their roles.

For the men, the women's behaviour signalled a crisis. All of their attempts at establishing "normality" in Um Gargur were being undermined and the society seemed to them to be in a state of collapse. The men said variously that everything was "finished" and that women had become "crazy". By vocalising their discontent in the most public of places, women were, in the eyes of men, not exercising their right of protest but actually usurping a role which was preserved for men. They were, in the men's words, "becoming men", an expression used frequently of women in other crisis situations who, by transgressing their prescribed roles, are said to personify the breakdown of their society (Ifeka-Moller, 1975; Peteet, 1991). Even children, who in the traditional context are socialised to show great respect to their fathers, were now telling men that they were redundant.

Among people for whom the codes of honour and shame are so crucial, it is no wonder that men called for the women to be beaten. Since they were clearly not going to join them in their protest, calling for the women to be beaten and imprisoned was perhaps the only way the men saw to save face. It was necessary to shame women as they, the men, had been shamed, in order to once again be able to assert a degree of authority over them and rescue their community from what they perceived as disaster. This, I believe is why none of the husbands either visited the prison, or raised money to release their wives from prison. Yet even this desperate strategy backfired - because women were supported by their sisters throughout Um Gargur, and because not one woman I knew who took part in the riot felt embarrassed by her actions. On the contrary, all of them felt disgust at the inaction of the men. Women knew that most men were also unhappy with the price of water but were too afraid to oppose the powerful cooperative leaders and sheikhs. In demonstrating, women dealt a double blow. They accused the men not only of failing to act, but of letting things reach the stage where women had to take themselves out of their homes into a glaringly public space, the market. By protesting women were indicating that they could not afford high-minded notions of propriety and seclusion when their children's welfare was at stake.

The riot represented a crisis point in the community and was an illustration of the realignment in gender relations and shifts in power bases and value systems which were occurring in Um Gargur and which have been the primary concerns of this thesis. To be seen in its proper perspective the women's riot cannot be interpreted primarily as a cry for economic or social independence, but must also be seen as a response

to conditions in which men do not or can not fulfill their roles as protectors of women and children. It was also a reaction to years of general apathy and depression. Women in Um Gargur have been "mothers of steel" for as long as they have been in exile. The riot merely offered the children a singular opportunity to articulate their recognition of the contributions and sacrifices their mothers have made. Women are not "mothers of steel" simply because they challenged the men and the camp authorities on this occasion; their right to the title was earned in the years and days before this event, when they were often prepared to flout tradition in order to create better conditions for their families. After the riot, perceptions of women as hapless, helpless and passive beings can never be considered as a given, for despite appearances, both the male-centred administration and the rest of the settlement are aware that women are capable of mobilising into a force to be reckoned with. In Um Gargur ethnic, political and religious allegiances are categories which are ultimately subsumed under larger identities, both national (Eritrean) and situational (refugees). In fact it is mainly through "low-profile" social identities and relationships established between women of differing ethnic, religious and political groups that refugees are linked in meaningful ways. Although it is unlikely that women will ever gain effective political power in the settlement, they take their strength from the fact that they have survived Um Gargur, mainly through their own initiative and resourcefulness.

In this thesis one disclaimer is called for regarding the characterisation of the ethnic and religious fragmentation in Um Gargur. Ethnography is by its very nature historically specific. While there are other refugee settlements in the Sudan which are similar to Um

Gargur, I believe that the tensions within them and within Um Gargur do not necessarily reflect present tensions in the refugees' places of origin (Wilson, 1991; Bulcha, 1987). They are not microcosmic recreations of the political macrocosm in Eritrea. For one thing, the experience of Eritrean communities in Europe and the United States has shown there are no inherent or prescribed political segmentations along ethnic or religious lines<sup>1</sup>. It would therefore be facile to attempt to make generalisations about present-day Eritrea based on the data from the settlement, although Um Gargur clearly does reflect many of the divisions which existed in the early 1970s' between highland and lowland, Christian and Muslim, and Tigrinya and Tigre. Nearly two decades of exile in Sudan have ossified some of these fractures among many of the refugees. A portrait of the same two decades in Eritrea seems to produce a very different picture - one of a country undergoing reform and revolution (Wilson, 1991; Firebrace, 1984).

Um Gargur, then, is evidently anachronistic. Today the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which enjoys the support of most of the refugees in Um Gargur, has all but disappeared from the wider political arena and is said to garner most of its support from lowland Eritreans living in Sudan's Kassala region and in its refugee settlements (Gilkes, 1991). Since the research for this thesis was completed in 1987, much has changed in Eritrea. During the last week of May 1991 the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) declared Eritrea liberated and established a provisional government in the country's capital, marking an end to thirty-years of armed struggle against Ethiopia. Since that time a number of people from Um Gargur have left of their own volition for Eritrea, while others are waiting to be repatriated by the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>2</sup> and by the Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs (CERA). UNHCR has said that it intends to assist in the voluntary repatriation of at least 250,000 Eritreans by the end of 1992<sup>3</sup>. As the conditions in Eritrea improve and favourable reports reach the settlements in Sudan, larger numbers of refugees will leave, adding to the 250 daily who are reportedly returning to Eritrea. Soon Um Gargur will, as its residents have long hoped, finally cease to be.

This study however, will not lose its significance when Um Gargur's refugees have returned to their homeland. Indeed as one of the first long-term investigations of everyday life in a refugee settlement, it addresses itself to a far wider scope than academic research.

By focusing on culture and daily life within Um Gargur, the thesis forces us to rethink dominant assumptions about what "refugee problems" are. It problematises existing ways of thinking about refugees, by suggesting that issues such as gender, political fragmentation, economics, and ethnicity are major variables which cannot be ignored by policy makers, aid workers, economists, psychologists, social researchers, legal officers and others dealing with refugees and resettlement schemes. By analysing the economic and cultural constraints which impinge upon the lives of the refugees, this investigation might suggest ways in which interaction between development and income-generating activities and resettlement programmes may be facilitated, particularly with regard to women, whose involvement in the development process has been negligible despite their numerical preponderance in many settlements.

The data and analysis contained in this thesis may prove useful in

the identification of potential problems of future refugee movements by offering pointers about how refugees' backgrounds, expectations, capabilities, and strategies for survival determine the quality of their lives in resettlement situations. Even for returnees to Eritrea upheavals will continue, and this study could help to enhance our understanding of the problems of readjustment and reorientation which many will undoubtedly face once back in Eritrea.

This thesis, then, presents social scientists with an opportunity to examine a displaced heterogeneous society as it (re)constructs itself. Its contribution to Social Anthropology lies in helping to establish a foundation upon which the discipline can develop a framework for the analysis of societies in which such structural readjustments are not anomalous, but are specific characteristics. The thesis also helps to redress the fundamental neglect of the discipline to address itself to the question of societies which are undergoing rapid and profound social change. It shows that even in these extreme situations where social realities are constantly being redefined, Anthropology is capable of making a contribution.

In such situations statistical surveys and questionnaires are, although useful, also inadequate for inquiries into the processes of daily life, and, as many aid agencies working in similar conditions have discovered, often inaccurate. The particular conditions which characterise refugee communities, and the reluctance of people to divulge information which they feel might harm them, make this so. The empirical and descriptive approach of this study stems from a caution about making generalisations in this multi-ethnic context, where groups of people were still attempting to work out a way of living together as

a "community", and where compromise, syncretism, and tension were key features. The classical anthropological approach of long-term participant-observation is ideal in such environments for it elicits a quality of data which would otherwise be impossible to extract.

Refugee Studies must begin to take into account the ways in which historical events are symbolically reflected in people's belief systems, as well as the physical and social changes which are taking place within settlements. In Um Gargur we are presented with the emergence of new social networks, an informal economic sector, changing roles, gender realignments, and religious conflicts. Most of these conditions would generally be classed as "typically urban", yet we have seen the extent to which they are found in this "rural" setting. Clearly the anthropological study of refugees requires a methodology which is flexible in its use of approaches. This thesis tries to enhance our understanding of the processes of heterogeneity and change within societies *in extremis*, especially with regard to their impact upon gender roles, traditions and social infrastructures.

## Notes

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### I. Introduction

1. See Erlich (1983:4) and Gebre-Medhin (1989) for a discussion of the lack of social cohesion between religious groups during Italian rule. Erlich notes that the Italians encouraged Islam and Arabic while undermining the strength of the church by confiscating land.
2. *Horn of Africa Bulletin*, December 1991.

### II. Um Gargur: The Context

1. See Bright (1985:34). UNHCR in the 1984 "Inventory of Facilities and Services" lists the number of latrines as 500, however both the clinic and the SCF regarded this number as exaggerated and in 1986 put the number at approximately 400.
2. Personal communication with Osman Zayed, health and sanitation supervisor.
3. In 1984 there were two mosques, two Koranic schools and four secondary schools; by 1986 there were four mosques, three Koranic schools and three secondary schools. This can be attributed to the increase in religious conservatism and the funds received from groups such as the Islamic Front.
4. In my 1985 M.Phil. thesis I wrote that the refugees had arrived in Um Gargur in 1972. This date was based on several UNHCR and ILO records which were incorrect.
5. Personal communication in 1984 with Omer Yassin, then project manager.
6. See Gilkes (1991:627). The first civil war ended in what was essentially a stalemate, with both sides claiming victory. It resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Eritrean fighters from the Beni Amer tribe. The largest tribal group in Um Gargur is the lowland Beni Amer who, because they fled during this war, still have not forgiven the EPLF. The second civil war lasted from 1981-82 and was a definitive victory for the EPLF.
7. National Records Office, *Refugee General Rulings, Civsec. I 35/1/2*. Private Sec. to Asst. Dir. Intelligence, Khartoum, 14 October 1916. Memo: Deserters and Refugees from Eastern Frontier of the Sudan; Kibreab (1987:40).
8. Of the estimated 700,000 refugees in Sudan in 1986 (Source: Mr. Abiriga, UNHCR), less than 200,000 had chosen to live in organised settlements.
9. Wilson (1991:105).
10. Personal communication received from Omer Yassin.
11. For a discussion of political factionalism see Erlich (1983: 85-96).

12. See Erlich p. 28. Besides the ELF and EPLF, the third major faction in Um Gargur was the ELF-PLF (Sabbe) group. This group was, in the past, pro-Arab and saw the Eritrean struggle as part of an Arab nationalist movement. As a result the Sabbe school in Um Gargur receives a great deal of money from Iraq and the Gulf countries. Many years in the settlement had blurred the distinction between ELF and ELF-PLF support and people often simply said that they were ELF, only making distinctions when pressed.

13. Taken in longhand into notebook.

14. "Habash" is the term used in Um Gargur to refer to Christian highlanders. It is an Arabic term and traditionally means "mixed" or Abyssinian. Although it was odd to hear Eritreans referred to and referring to themselves this way, the word seemed to have now been adopted in Um Gargur. In fact, although in the cities of the Sudan the term was used to refer generally to Ethiopians (and at this time Eritrea continued to be seen as a province of Ethiopia), this is now changing and many Sudanese are now making distinctions between the two groups. Thus outside the camp one would hear the Sudanese ask whether someone was Eritrean or "Habash", the latter meaning, of course, Ethiopian.

15. Ullendorff p. 113. One Christian in the village said of the Jiberti, "We are the same except for the *halal* [ritually slaughtered] meat".

16. This was particularly the case among the Tigre groups and in several instances I would find members of the same immediate family identifying themselves differently. See Bright, p. 40.

17. Personal communication with Mariam Mohammed Omer.

18. See Bright, p. 46.

19. Personal communication with Mariam Mohammed Omer.

20. Trimingham, p. 124. *Islam in Ethiopia*.

21. Quoted in Trimingham, p.152. *Islam in the Sudan*.

22. Ibid. p. 156.

23. See Levine (1970:78); Nadel (1946:17); and Trimingham, p. 136. *Islam in Ethiopia*.

24. For a discussion of the events leading up to the rebellion, see Erlich (1983) and Gebre-Medhin (1989).

25. Erlich (1985:11).

26. Ibid. p. 12.

27. Personal communication with Emnetu Woldeselassie.

28. Ibid.

#### IV. Women and Economics

1. See S.H. Longrigg (1974:66) for a discussion on Mensa, Baria, Maria, Belin and the Tigrinya.

2. It is called *ukub* in Tigrinya but the highlanders also refer to it as *sanduug* in the settlement.
3. Men also form these networks, although on a much smaller scale. They also sprang up in workplaces such as at the two clinics where both men and women worked and were members. The clinic associations were the most lucrative because the groups were large and people were earning large salaries and could therefore put more money into them.
4. A variation of the term *esusu* is also found in Trinidad (Herskovits, 1974:76) and in Liberia. In both countries it is called "*susu*", however in Liberia it is also referred to as "*club*".
5. It was through the *sanduug* that many women learned of significant occurrences such as the proposed closing of the old SCC secondary school, the raising of money for women arrested during the water riot which later took place, and the possibility of ILO women's projects in Um Gargur.
6. Personal communication with Darhaba Tesfamichael, head of the NUEWm in Um Gargur and Rezan Ghebrenegus, head of the women's centre.
7. See Pankhurst (1974), "The History of Prostitution in Ethiopia" for a discussion of prostitution in Eritrea and in Ethiopia; and J.R. Rogge (1985) for a discussion of the implications of the stereotype for refugee women.
8. Pankhurst (1974:169).

## VI. Identity Maintenance and Transformation

1. Personal communication from Ashraf Ismail, Egyptian translator and from Hildegard Widemann, translator of Arabic texts.
2. I recently (May 1992) went to an Eritrean liberation day celebration where I encountered the author of this song, who was giving a musical performance. I put in a request for the song and before he sang he explained that as the words were no longer appropriate since Eritrea had now gained her freedom, he would change them; the song now runs "Youth of Eritrea you have fought for your liberation, and you can now drink the milk of your country/ Your history has not disappeared and your country now belongs to you."
3. Translated by Mariam Mohammed Omer, former EPLF fighter.
4. Trans. as above.
5. Translated by Jordanes Samuel, student.
6. Trans. as above.

## VII. Conclusion

1. See Pool (1982) or Firebrace (1984) for less abbreviated discussions of the interrelations between Eritreans of different groups. Also, for

a fictionalised account of life in the war zones of Eritrea, see Thomas Keneally (1990) *Towards Asmara*, London: Sceptre Books.

2. Personal communication with Kiros Sereke, December 1991.
3. *Horn of Africa Bulletin*, 1991 December.

Glossary of Tigre (T), Tigrinya (Tya) and Arabic (A) Words

- amin* (T) : *umum* (Tya) -- honourable men  
*aragi* (A) -- a strong gin  
*baal wahda* (T) -- fortune-teller who reads cowrie shells  
*berri* (T) : *nitshti* (Tya) -- innocent or modest, often sexually  
*buda* (Tya) -- witch who possesses a person out of jealousy or love  
*bunn* (T) : *gahwa* (A) -- coffee  
*chermutta* (A) -- prostitute  
*dahab* (A) -- gold  
*dawa* (A) -- ordinary medicine: may cure or bring about ailments  
*daya* (T/A) : *meheresit* (Tya) -- midwife  
*farhay* (T) : *foquis* (Tya) -- shameless; cowardly; weak character  
*fatuur* (A) -- breakfast  
*feddan* (A) -- areal measure equivalent to 1.04 acres or 0.42 hectares  
*fitht* (T) : *kelal* (Tya) -- unchaste; loose  
*garoud* (T/A) -- monkey  
*gharad* (T) -- a long curved bean pod, the dust of which is drunk as a  
remedy for colds or used in female circumcision to seal the wound  
*haarass* (T) -- a woman who is in seclusion for forty days after the  
birth of her child  
*hak al' jeran* (T) -- neighbourly obligation  
*hakuma* (A) -- government or administration  
*halal* (A) -- allowed under Islamic law  
*haleybot* (T) : *magirnab* (Tya) -- the practice of cutting the area around  
the eyes to cure eye infections  
*haram* (A) -- forbidden  
*hashm* (T) -- honour which derives from authority or status  
*hilla; hillat* (A) -- residential areas  
*jelud* (T) -- dried animal skins  
*jin* (A) -- spirit which takes possession of person  
*keshbai* (T) -- circumciser  
*khawaja* (A) -- foreigner, usually white  
*kijilet* (T) : *hifret* (Tya) -- shameful  
*kisra* (T/A) : *injera/taita* (Tya) -- flat unleavened bread  
*kushbo* (T) : *tahuur* (A) -- circumcision  
*ladji'in* (A) -- refugees  
*ligimat* (A) -- fried doughnuts  
*lugma* (A) -- a stiff porridge  
*mahgoma* (Tya) : *mahajem* (T) -- method of curing aches by cutting a small  
hole into the area where there is pain, and placing a horn over it  
which is then sucked by the healer until it fills with "dirty" blood  
*memareset* (T) -- experienced, often sexually  
*merissa* (T) : *suwah* (Tya) -- local beer made from fermented grain  
*mes/tej* (Tya) -- honey or date wine  
*mogogo* (Tya) -- earthenware stove used for making *injera* or *kisra*  
*moodir* (A) -- settlement project manager  
*mukhalah* (Tya) : *haleybot* (T) -- a form of bloodletting used for less  
severe headaches and consists of incisions made into the base of the  
skull, just below the hairline  
*rahima/rahmet* (T) : *hiyaweyti/hiyawnet* (Tya) -- virtuous  
*rakoba* (A) -- thatched shelter attached to huts

*sairdait* (T) : *tenqualit* (Tya) -- fortune-teller  
*sanduug* (A) -- rotating savings association; also box in which money for savings association is kept  
*seirai* (T) : *fewasi* (Tya) -- healer  
*serafiya* (A) -- food rations  
*serserot* (T) : *mersersar* (Tya) -- the practice of curing severe headaches by driving the stem of a leaf sharply into the nose to allow "bad" blood to flow  
*sha'ab* (T/A) -- people  
*shabab* (T) -- youth  
*shaay* (A) -- tea  
*sharaf* (T) -- honour which derives from an individual's moral persona  
*sharia* (A) -- Islamic law  
*shihirtai* (T) -- evil eye  
*sitt al' beit* (A) -- woman of the house (supported entirely by her husband and who needs not earn money to survive)  
*sitt al' sanduug* (A) -- woman who acts as keeper of the savings box and organiser of *sanduug*  
*souk* (A) -- market  
*tacosote* (T) : *metkosa* (Tya) -- burning the skin with nails or needles to cure hepatitis, tuberculosis and a wide range of other ailments  
*tennet* (T) : *tish* (Tya) : *dukhan* (A) -- smoke (incense) baths  
*tereket* (T) : *nehual* (Tya) -- damaged goods, esp. a maiden who has lost her virginity  
*tobe* (A) -- lengthy fabric worn wrapped by women over their clothing  
*tukul* (A) -- hut  
*wajib* (T/A) : *gubue* (Tya) -- duty or obligation  
*wajib al' jeran* (T/A) -- neighbourly obligation  
*watebot* (T) : *michenda* (Tya) -- practice of removing "impure" blood to cure severe heartburn, fainting spells, malaria and hepatitis by cutting into the veins of the leg  
*zar* (T/Tya/A) -- refers to spirit possession and the spirit which possesses  
*zigni* (Tya) : *mullah* (T) -- sauce eaten with *kisra* or *injera*

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