Traveling Souls

by Abebe Feyissa with Rebecca Horn, from Boston College magazine

The Kakuma Refugee Camp, a moderate-sized "city" of tents, shacks, and thatched-roof huts in the desert of northwest Kenya, is inhabited by more than 80,000 refugees (Sudanese, Ethiopian, and Somali, mostly, but also Congolese, Burundian, Rwandan, and Ugandan). Dating to 1992 and administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, it is equally a sanctuary and a prison—once residents are admitted, they cannot leave without permission of the Kenyan government. Inside its fences, children age into adulthood. 43-year-old Abebe Feyissa is a 16-year resident of Kakuma.

Within the Ethiopian community of the Kakuma Refugee Camp where I live is a marketplace filled with shops from which you can buy almost anything, and coffeehouses and restaurants showing the latest English Premier League football match.

To the occasional visitor who sees busy Ethiopian businesses, who witnesses refugees enjoying coffee together while they're watching CNN, Ethiopians in Kakuma might appear to be contented and calm. The truth is that there are only bodies in Kakuma.

All the souls are traveling. They've gone for resettlement, completed interrupted college studies, saved as much money as they wanted—in the world of daydreams.

In Kakuma people fight for no reason. A husband embittered by his long refugee life releases his anger on his wife: "Why are you quiet?" "Why is lunch late?" "Who was that man you were with?" A wife whose husband does not have a shop or a resettlement prospect, who has no task other than to assist her in cooking and fetching water, may see reason to desert him for another man. Children are punished for playing with friends or watching TV.

Ninety percent of allegations brought to the Ethiopian bench court in Kakuma are domestic.

Ethiopians first sought refuge in Kenya in 1984, when a massive famine hit their country. A sizable group arrived in 1991, following the overthrow of Colonel Mengistu's Marxist government by democratic rebels. The new rulers implemented policies that favored one ethnic group over another. This brought about conflict, and a large number of Ethiopians fled south across the arid land into Kenya.

This long refugee life has made many refugees chronically absent-minded. Initially, it was a source of amusement. We talked among ourselves about going somewhere on a bicycle and returning without it, of looking for a torch with the very torch lighting our search, and of locking doors while people were inside. But it is of concern when you hear that refugees do not remember what day, month, or year it is.

Some refugees seem more affected than they realize, talking to themselves and gesturing emotionally. There are sleepwalkers, too. Many have left their homes at night and disappeared. It is customary to report the disappearance to the police and conduct a search for a day or two in the surrounding bush and cliffs. Then the search is given up and the person is quickly forgotten.

Sebsibe Nigusie was a refugee who, no matter what, always talked of returning home. He often fell sick with malaria, and during his illnesses he was disturbed by nightmares. One night he disappeared. After a two-day search, he was found 25 miles from the camp, unable to say where he was going. He was brought to the Kakuma police station, and once he was back in the camp, he seemed to improve.

After a while, he again began to behave strangely. He said he heard voices. At this time, there were no special clinics or professionals to treat this type of illness. One morning a friend of mine told me that Sebsibe had disappeared again. This time, a wide and long search was conducted. Then a few days of mourning, and Sebsibe was forgotten. Two weeks later, locals found his remains, which had been ravaged by a wild animal.

In Kakuma the death of one refugee is a blow for all. After a burial, all seem to have buried something of themselves. Heads are down more than normal; faces are signboards of unspeakable sorrow. Everyone is crying, weeping for himself or herself. It is fear not of death, but of dying as an unfulfilled refugee.

My neighbor Yayeh Mamo lived in the camp selling tea and coffee with his wife. Back in Ethiopia, he had been a fourth-year
agriculture student at Alema University. He had always dreamed of going abroad, completing his studies, and becoming a renowned scientist. For him, Kakuma was like the Dead Sea, without a trace of life. But in 1997 his wife, Sara, gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Yayeh always told people how his dull refugee life changed completely after the arrival of their child.

One day Sara came home with “good news.” A neighbor had volunteered to include her name on his resettlement form as his wife, and to add Yayeh’s daughter as his own. Yayeh and Sara loved one another, but Yayeh told me that he did not care what happened to himself as long as his wife and child were safe. Sara and the child went abroad as the family of the other man. Yayeh hoped they would someday reunite.

Without his wife and daughter, Yayeh found life more difficult than he had imagined. The loneliness was unbearable; nothing could take the place of their voices. Then Sara wrote Yayeh a letter that made him deeply regret what he had done: The health of his daughter was deteriorating; she cried constantly for her father. She was not sleeping well, not eating well. Anxiety-stricken, Yayeh fled for Nairobi, more than 500 miles away, where he could make cheaper international phone calls to hear his daughter’s voice. He never returned.

Refugees who spend years stagnating in a camp are unable to think sensibly, or even sanely. They are impulsive, like animals cornered by a predator. They burn their own houses and accuse neighbors; they wound their own bodies with knives and accuse others of acting against them out of ethnic differences—all of which could earn them release from the camp. Women sometimes report being raped by someone they know as a way to gain resettlement and freedom.

Ethiopians fleeing their homeland in 1991 initially settled for about two years in northeast Kenya’s Walda Refugee Camp before heading to Kakuma. During this period, 800 or so displaced college students founded a library in a tent with six fiction books written in Amharic, Ethiopia’s national language. In 1993 the library was transplanted to Kakuma, and in 2006 it boasted more than 15,000 volumes—textbooks, reference books, novels—and many magazines.

A librarian who volunteered in the Walda library in 1992 is now the chief librarian at Kakuma. For all he has done to expand the library, he still feels unfulfilled. When he fled his homeland, he was 20 years old, in his second year of library science studies at Addis Ababa University. Today he is a graying man nearing 40.

Former students of higher education are well represented in the Ethiopian refugee community. Almost all of them work as teachers in the camp schools—kindergarten through high school—collecting a food ration and earning an “incentive” that amounts to less than $50 a month. (Kenyan law prohibits the employment of refugees; they can only volunteer and receive token incentives.) There is precious little other work or activity in the camp that can stimulate their minds, and in this long camp life they seem to have lost what they learned at college. Some of their students, however, having grown up, are now in colleges and universities, and some are inspectors and head teachers in the camp.

When I ask teachers how they feel when they see a student rise from kindergarten to head teacher of the school they themselves teach in, they say they are proud of their students’ achievements but are also sad.

“For the last 15 years,” one teacher said to me, “I was like a ladder standing against the wall. All of those students of mine climb on me and reach where they want to, as I continue standing forevermore leaning against the wall.”

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