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**Working Paper**

## Refugees and local power dynamics: The case of the Gambella Region of Ethiopia

Discussion Paper, No. 25/2021

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

*Suggested Citation:* Hagos, Samuel Zewdie (2021) : Refugees and local power dynamics: The case of the Gambella Region of Ethiopia, Discussion Paper, No. 25/2021, ISBN 978-3-96021-167-9, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn, <https://doi.org/10.23661/dp25.2021>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/243155>

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# Refugees and Local Power Dynamics

## The Case of the Gambella Region of Ethiopia

*Samuel Zewdie Hagos*

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Bonn 2021

Discussion Paper / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik  
ISSN (Print) 1860-0441  
ISSN (Online) 2512-8698



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Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-96021-167-9 (printed edition)

DOI:10.23661/dp25.2021

Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper

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*Published with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)*

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## Preface

Ethiopia hosts the second largest refugee population in Africa located across five of nine regions as well as in the capital, Addis Ababa. While encampment currently still remains at the core of Ethiopia's refugee hosting approach, the country has played an important role in the global process of developing and implementing the ideas of local integration. While this approach to refugee care seems to work well in some regions of Ethiopia, Gambella, unfortunately, is a showcase where the local integration of refugees proves to be difficult. It is a region that has seen long-standing conflicts between refugees and the host population. This paper elaborates on historic and contemporary reasons for these lines of conflict. With this, the paper complements ongoing work at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) within the "Contested Mobility" project. Here, the DIE team investigates the contestedness of migration policy and its implications for the relevant population groups in six countries, including Ethiopia. At a time when violent conflict has erupted in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia, killing thousands of people and displacing hundreds of thousands of others, the case of Gambella casts light on the difficult challenges that come with ethnicised politics in the face of conflict-induced humanitarian crises.

Bonn, July 2021

Dr Jana Kuhnt

## Abstract

The Gambella Region is one of the marginalised and most conflict-ridden regions in Ethiopia. Recently, violent clashes between the two largest ethnic groups in the region – the host communities, the Anywaa, and the South Sudanese Nuer refugees – have reignited the debate on refugee integration in the region. In fact, the roots of the Anywaa-Nuer conflict can be traced back to the imperial regime of Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century.

In the early 1960s however, the arrival and spontaneous integration of Nuer refugees was peaceful and relations between both ethnic groups were harmonious. During this time, refugee management was organised locally. Against this background, the focus of the present paper is to understand the nature, context and evolution of the long-standing conflict between the Anywaa and refugees from the Nuer ethnic group in the Gambella Region. Beyond that, the paper explores the Anywaa-Nuer conflict within the context of the political power dynamics of the last two decades. Thereby, the paper reveals that the disputes between the Anywaa and the Nuer have taken on a new dimension since the early 1990s.

## Acknowledgements

This paper has been written by Samuel Zewdie Hagos and peer-reviewed by Dr Eva Dick, Dr Mark Furness, and Dr Jana Kuhnt. Apart from the reviewers, the writer would also like to thank Dr Jörn Grävingholt for reading and commenting on the contents and Dr Jana Kuhnt who accompanied this study from the conceptualisation to enriching it with her insightful feedback. Moreover, the writer would like to extend his thanks to Katrin Klöble for her important contribution to the final output.

Final thanks go to the author's PhD supervisor Professor Kerstin Nolte (Leibniz University of Hannover) for her continued support and feedback. The author is currently working at the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) and is grateful for the support that the Department of Migration has extended to him which paved the way to continuing doing research in the areas of migration and integration of refugees in the global South.

The author is also grateful to all interlocutors (experts, host community members and refugees) interviewed for this report for their time and for providing the required information.

Bonn, July 2021

Samuel Zewdie Hagos

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## Abbreviations

ARRA	Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs in Ethiopia
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
FDRE	Federal Republic of Ethiopia
GPLM	Gambella Peoples' Liberation Movement
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (The UN Refugee Agency)

## 1 Introduction

In spite of the fact that Ethiopia is one of the top three countries in the world with the largest internally displaced population due to conflict and violence in 2020 (IOM [International Organization for Migration], 2021), the country has continued to host large refugee populations. As of May 2021, Ethiopia has been hosting 806,541 refugees and asylum-seekers mainly from its neighbouring countries, making Ethiopia the second largest refugee-hosting country in Africa (UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], 2021a). Plagued by conflict, political insecurity and persecution, military conscription, famine and drought, the majority of these people come from four neighbouring countries that are among the top ten migrant source countries in the world (Ayenew, 2021, p. 6). These include South Sudan (338,250), Somalia (198,670), Eritrea (171,876) and Sudan (42,119) (Vemuru, Sarkar, & Fitri Woodhouse, 2020, p. 16). Today, most of the refugees in Ethiopia are accommodated in 26 refugee camps with limited services and opportunities (UNHCR, 2021b). Many of them have been living in situations of protracted displacement, some of whom for even 20 years or longer (Vemuru et al., 2020, p. 156).

With the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in 2017, the Ethiopian government has responded to the protracted and precarious nature of the refugee situation. Generally, the CRRF includes commitments to be implemented in specific situations involving large-scale movements of refugees. These range from reception and admission activities, support for countries that host large numbers of refugees, to the promotion of inclusion and self-reliance, enhancing opportunities for durable solutions, and bringing together stakeholders such as national and local authorities (Nigusie & Carer, 2019). Thereby, the CRRF aims to respond to the needs of refugees in a more comprehensive and sustainable manner and, importantly, to integrate local initiatives and take into account their respective operational contexts (UNHCR, 2020a).

Though the CRRF offers great opportunities and benefits to both refugees and host communities, the regional application of the CRRF presents significant challenges. In the Gambella Region, one of the largest refugee-hosting and most conflict-ridden regions in Ethiopia, these become particularly evident. Currently, the region hosts around 321,014 South Sudanese refugees (UNHCR, 2020b). Of all South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia, this represents about 94 per cent. Displacement and the protracted presence of refugees have profoundly altered the social and political context of the region (Vemuru et al., 2020, p. 26). Along with this, the region suffers from intermittent ethnic conflicts and insecurity. For example, ethnic conflict between the host Anywaa and the refugee Nuer ethnic groups reached a tipping point in 2016 when violence escalated due to disputes over scarce resources and unequal distribution of services. More recently, attacks and inter-group conflicts continued in 2018 and 2019, resulting in the deaths of two Action Against Hunger staff members and a member of the Anywaa militia (Vemuru et al., 2020, p. 163).

Because these events have reignited the debate on refugee integration in the region and spurred fears among residents that Gambella could be further destabilised, the paper at hand focuses on the multi-layered occurrence of the ethnic conflict between the two major ethnicities in the Gambella Region: the original Anywaa inhabitants; and the South Sudanese Nuer refugees. As the patterns of the conflict are long-standing, the historical background is important. While in the early years of the 20th century, local Anywaa communities managed refugee movements and the Nuer integration took place largely

peacefully, this changed dramatically with the unabated flow of refugees and the centralisation of migration management during the socialist Derg regime in the 1980s. With the introduction of federal, ethnicity-based structures in 1991, the Anywaa-Nuer conflict took on a new dimension, as political leadership positions in Gambella's regional politics were to be redistributed. In addition, political parties have been encouraged to organise along ethnic lines and new issues of indigeneity and citizenship entered the political discourse, causing Anywaa and Nuer elites to formulate different sets of entitlement claims. Over the past century, both groups have attempted to enforce these political entitlement claims by instrumentalising political alliances with the Ethiopian government.

Thus, the aim of the study is two-fold: Firstly, the study examines the evolution of the interethnic tensions between the Anywaa and Nuer as a function of past and present refugee integration practices and depending on diverse levels of centralisation using the Gambella Region as a case study. Considering the broad historical context is important, as in the past the Anywaa-Nuer relations have varied between peaceful coexistence to ethnic conflicts and violent confrontations. Secondly, the paper aims at exploring the integration of refugees in the context of political power dynamics between the Anywaa and the Nuer. The analysis will focus on the timeframe after 1991 since, with the introduction of ethno-federal structures, new issues of citizenships and diverging entitlement claims have shaped the political power dispute between the Anywaa and Nuer in Gambella.

The method of the paper draws on qualitative research inquiries with local residents in the region. Importantly, the author can draw on many years of field experience in the Gambella Region. Between September and November 2019, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 key informants. The participants of the interviews were selected on the basis of their knowledge, experience, and their roles in each community. Focus group discussions included people with different backgrounds (civil servants, academics, elderly) and from various ethnic groups. In two locations in the Gambella Region, four separate focus group discussions were held. A total of five people participated in each focus group discussion. Discussions involving civil servants, students and elders from Anywaa communities were conducted at the beginning of November 2019. Focus group discussions were held under two themes derived from the two fundamental questions that guided the investigation.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides background information on Gambella as a multi-ethnic regional state, having a glance at the historic migratory movements in the region. Section 3 examines how refugee management in Gambella has changed over the past century. Starting from traditional hosting arrangements in the early 20th century, the gradual shift to a more centralised administration based on encampment policies and the current political situation are outlined. This also involves looking at the evolution of interethnic tensions between Anywaa and Nuer through the lens of differences as political communities. Section 4 presents the political power disputes between Anywaa and Nuer since the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991. Thereby, the political entitlement claims of both ethnic groups are related to the instrumentalisation of political alliances with the Ethiopian government in the past. Finally, Section 5 concludes.

## 2 The multi-ethnic state of Gambella

### 2.1 The region and the people

Gambella is located in the southwestern part of Ethiopia along the border with South Sudan. Since the Ethiopian State introduced ethnic federalism in 1991, Gambella constitutes one of the nine regional states of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE).<sup>1</sup> Administratively, the Gambella Region of today is divided into three zones<sup>2</sup> along the three major ethnic groups i) Anywaa zone; ii) Nuer zone; and iii) Majang zone. These three zones are further divided into 13 *woredas* (districts): five under the Anywaa zone, two under the Majang zone, five under the Nuer zone, and one special *woreda* that is directly accountable to the regional state council of the Gambella Region (see Figure 1) (Ojulu, 2013, p. 105). The total size of the region is estimated at 34,063 square kilometres (Dereje, 2011, p. 1) and the population accounts for 307,096 inhabitants according to the 2007 census (CSA [Central Statistics Agency], 2007). With about 4.1 per cent, the region exhibits the highest annual rate of population growth of all Ethiopian regions. Importantly, Gambella has rich natural resources, including arable land, ground water resources, forests and livestock and fish resources (Tadesse, 2007, p.5). Due to its access to grazing land and water, Gambella is a desirable location for pastoralists and agriculturalists, which has led to the arrival of various ethnic groups in the past (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, p. 137).

Like other regions in Ethiopia, Gambella is multi-ethnic. Among the people living in Gambella, the Anywaa (or Anuak) and the Nuer are dominant. Numerically, the two ethnicities make up two-thirds of Gambella's population. Other ethnicities include the Majangir, the Opo, the Komo and settlers from the highlands such as Amhara, Tigray and Oromo regions (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, p. 139). While all these groups are distinct in nature, the Anywaa and the Nuer are particularly different in terms of livelihood activities (Seide, 2017, p. 16). The Nuer communities are generally pastoralists and follow seasonal migration patterns for cattle grazing and to protect their livestock from the threat of drought and flood. They are also engaged in subsistence farming and to a lesser extent in small-scale water retreat shifting cultivations (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 19). In contrast, the majorities of Anywaa make their living through fishing and agriculture. Anywaa communities have mainly been involved in shifting cultivation and water retreat agriculture. They cultivate plots of land temporarily and then abandon the plots to allow them to revert to their natural vegetation. The communities living near river banks are mainly involved in flood-retreat agriculture (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 20).

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1 Previously, during the military regime of the Derg (1974-1987), the region did not possess the status of a regional state, but the status of a district only, the so-called Illubabor District. Also during the imperial Ethiopian regime of Haile Selassie I (1941-1974), the periphery of Gambella was rather loosely integrated into the Ethiopian state. Only in 1987 did Gambella obtain the official political status as an administrative region (Dereje, 2011, p. 4; Seifert et al., 2006, p. 7).

2 Zones are a second-level administrative subdivision in Ethiopia, below regions and above districts (*woredas*). Ethiopia is a federation subdivided into ethno-linguistically based regional states and two chartered cities. Each region is administratively divided into zones, districts (*woredas*) and wards (*kebele*).

**Figure 1: Map of the Gambella People's Regional State**

Source: Bureau of Finance and Economic Development, Gambella, Ethiopia (2017)

Since the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991, all five ethnic groups, with the exception of the “highlanders”, have been recognised as indigenous<sup>3</sup> to the region by the Ethiopian State (Tadesse 2007, p. 5).<sup>4</sup> Therewith, Nuer gained the right of political representation and have the possibility to run for public office (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 17). However, the Anywaa, who are the ethnic group that firstly inhabited the region, have been refusing to accept that. They consider themselves as the sole indigenous group of the Gambella Region, while the Nuer are simply the “other” with weaker territorial claims (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, p. 140). They even find evidence for their definition of the Nuer as foreigners by referring to the 1902 international border, which placed the majority of the Nuer into Sudan (Dereje & Hoehne, 2008, p. 12). Especially in the past three decades, these

3 However, the regional council has fallen short of explicitly defining the word “indigenous” itself.

4 The term “highlanders” refers to the people from the Northern Highlands of Ethiopia. Many of them were relocated to Gambella in the course of the Derg’s resettlement programme in the 1980s (Seifert et al., 2006, p. 2). Conversely, the people from the lowlands include Anywaa, Nuer, Majangir, Opo and Komo. According to Dereje (2011, pp. 5-6), in addition to regional origins, the two categories are delineated based on skin colour. That is, the “black” people from the lowland-region of Ethiopia are contrasted with the “red” people from the Highlands.

ethnic identity issues have been one of the main causes of the political power struggles and violent confrontations between the two ethnic groups.

Overall, understanding the evolution of ethnic tensions between the Anywaa and the Nuer requires sketching out the historical migration dynamics in the region. This will contribute to gaining a deeper understanding of power disputes between both ethnicities and the present conflict situation in the Gambella Regional State.

## 2.2 A glimpse of the historic migration dynamics

Historically, Gambella has experienced various migration flows – both from outside Ethiopia and from regions within the country. The roots of the Anywaa-Nuer conflict can be traced back to the end of the 19th century when Nuer groups – that is Gaajaks, Gaajok and Gaagwang – expanded eastward, into land which was already occupied by Anywaa groups (Tadesse, 2007, p. 6). Previously, the Nuer were confined to a small area in southern Sudan near the Bahr Jebel River. By the early 20th century, the Nuer had expanded – in large part peacefully – to the Laajak hills near Akedo on the Baro River. In 1902, geopolitical events and the demarcation of the Ethio-Sudanese border suspended the Nuer expansion. Thereafter, it continued but ushered in a period characterised by cooperation, interethnic marriage, and trade (Dereje, 2010, p. 315-317).

Apart from the long-standing patterns of eastward migration among the Sudanese Nuer, Gambella as a border region was exposed to two Sudanese civil wars (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, p. 1). In 1955 the first civil war in South Sudan broke out, causing thousands of Sudanese refugees to cross the international border and settle in different parts in Gambella Region (Dereje, 2011, p. 7). With the conflict escalation in southern Sudan in the early 1980s, the influx of refugees into the region reached its historical peak. By 1988, the number of refugees in the region exceeded 300,000, which outnumbered the Ethiopian population in the region (Carver, Gebresenbet, & Naish, 2020, p. 11; Dereje, 2013, p. 116; Markakis, 2011, p. 222; Regassa, 2010, p. 93).

Almost at the same time, Gambella's ethnic composition was supplemented by internal migrants from the Ethiopian highlands. In the mid-1980s, the northern highland region of Ethiopia was struggling with recurrent droughts and famine. Therefore, as part of the planned resettlement project of the Derg – that is, the ruling socialist military regime that replaced the imperial regime in 1974 – a total of about 600,000 people were forcibly relocated to the south and southwestern parts of Ethiopia which were more fertile and were perceived to be underpopulated (Maru, 2017, p. 7). Within this context, 60,000 highlanders, most of whom belonged to the Amhara, Oromo and Tigreans ethnic groups, came to the Gambella Region (Dereje, 2011, p. 2).

After the fall of the Derg and the introduction of ethnic federal structures in the early 1990s, Ethiopia registered about 550,000 Sudanese refugees with a majority of them belonging to the Nuer ethnic group (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, p. 149). In the following decade, Ethiopia experienced both large numbers of refugees returning to South Sudan (exact numbers of returnees are not known) and further refugee influxes due to intensification of the conflicts in South Sudan. By 2005, the number of refugees in the Gambella Region stood at around 95,000 (Carver et al., 2020, p.11). In the same year, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement

(CPA) officially ended the Second Sudanese Civil war, raising new hopes for the people from South Sudan.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, 35,000 Sudanese refugees were returned back home to Sudan under the repatriation programme of the Ethiopian Government in 2006 (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, p. 150). Nonetheless, the fighting in and between the two Sudanese states and the violent spill-overs into Ethiopia re-erupted in 2013, causing new arrivals of refugees in the Gambella Region (Nigusie & Carver, 2019, p. 4).

In sum, both past and present population movements have been enduring and highly challenging for the local communities in Gambella. This has shaped the interethnic relations between the Anywaa and the Nuer for decades and still continues to do so today.

### 3 From peaceful to violent integration

#### 3.1 Contrasting political communities

The way the Anywaa and Nuer communities are politically organised differs significantly (Dereje, 2011, pp. 41-44, 2010, pp. 314-315). Since the 19th century, these differences have shaped the historic relationship between Anywaa and Nuer communities. Viewing both ethnicities through the lens of their political organisation structures helps better to understand the evolving conflicts between host and refugee communities starting in the mid-20th century.

The organisation structure of the Nuer in the second half of the 19th century can be characterised as “ordered anarchy” (Dereje, 2010, p. 42). To be precise, the Nuer were a highly individualistic culture that did not have defined leaders but still formed a community. Nuer communities were characterised by the absence of a central authority, an administrative machinery and constituted judicial institutions, with sharp divisions of rank and status (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p. 6). Evans-Pritchard (1940, pp. 5-6) describes the Nuer community as an ordered society in which there was no coercive political unit or social contract that restricted individual freedoms.

In contrast, the communities from Anywaa ethnic groups are organised along administrative units with clear-cut boundaries called *kew*. Each administrative boundary consists of one or several villages and/or clusters of homesteads which are governed by a traditional leader, a noble (*nyieya*, plural: *nyieye*) or a chief, a so-called village headman (*kwaaro*, plural: *kwaari*) (Klinteberg, 1977). While nobles used to control the southwestern part of the Gambella Region, the village headmen were responsible for the villages along the Baro river (Regassa, 2010, p. 52). Each political unit has the mandate of administering its own village (cluster) including land-related resources (Klinteberg, 1977, p. 60). This has the advantage of flexibility in responding to internal and external issues, such as managing cross-border conflicts or granting the right to establish villages in the area (Klinteberg, 1977). Moreover, each chief (*kwaaro*) and each *nyieya* does not interfere in the administrative issues of other villages but respects the autonomy of those political units (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 68).

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5 In 2005, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudanese Government signed the CPA. The CPA included a timetable for the South Sudanese independence referendum and was meant to bring peace between the North and the South of Sudan (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, pp. 149-150).

Thus, it becomes clear that Anywaa's centralised leadership traditions stand in sharp contrast to the non-centralised, anarchistic organisation of the Nuer. Dereje (2010, p. 322) contextualises the political community of the Nuer within their gradual eastward expansion that was observed in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the perspective of the Nuer, mobility is an intrinsic feature of their local economy as not all tribal areas are equally endowed with key natural resources. Hence, driven by the search for fertile land, the pastoralist Nuer gradually expanded eastward, penetrating deeper into the tribal territories of the Anywaa communities. Until the second half of the 20th century however, the Nuer settlement phase towards the east mostly took place peacefully as they used to accept and observe the political authorities of the Anywaa host communities (Klinteberg, 1977, p. 64). This was one of the factors contributing to peaceful coexistence. However, following the change in the historical and political dynamics in Ethiopia, refugees from the Nuer group more commonly adhered to their own settlement logic rather than adjusting themselves to the structures followed by the Anywaa. This contributed to the polarisation of refugees and to violent conflicts between both ethnic groups.

### 3.2 Traditional management of refugees

During the imperial regime, and especially since the 1960s, refugees from the Sudanese civil wars and internal migrants from the Ethiopian highlands have settled in Gambella (Dereje, 2015, p.32). The first civil war in Southern Sudan, which began in 1955 and lasted over a decade, caused thousands of people and families to flee the country and seek protection in Ethiopia. During this time, the refugees – most of whom belonged to the Nuer ethnic group – easily succeeded in establishing one of the first refugee settlement sites in Ethiopia. An Anywaa elder from the former villages of Pukumu remembers the establishment of refugee sites around the Itang District<sup>6</sup> in Gambella:

I remember that after the escalation of conflict between the Sudan government and the rebel groups in the mid-1960s, some refugees arrived at Itang *woreda*. During those years, the government, as well as the traditional leaders, allowed refugees predominantly from Nuer ethnic groups to set up villages in Itang district. (Interview with an elder from Anywaa community, 7 November 2019)

In fact, the way Anywaa communities manage refugee movements is based on long-standing traditional structures and the centralised administrations of each political entity, which is in line with their political organisation structure (see subsection 3.1). A scholar from the Anywaa community outlines the general decision-making process in accepting refugees:<sup>7</sup> At each political unit there are delegates – either a *nyibur* (custodian of land-related resources under *nyieya* (noble)) or the respective village headmen (*kwaari*) – that manage the ways newcomers can be integrated into the local host communities. These delegates are responsible for handling all issues related to the hosting of newcomers. Importantly, when determining whether and how newcomers are to be integrated (that is, as

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6 Itang is a special district in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, which is directly accountable to the regional state council (Ojulu, 2013, p. 105).

7 Interview with a scholar from the Anywaa community, 28 November 2019.



individuals or as groups), the respective community members are directly involved in decision-making processes and participation rights are guaranteed.

Specifically, this is confirmed by respondents outlining that the procedure of hosting newcomers is clearly defined and well-known by all community members. That is, when groups of people want to set up their villages among Anywaa communities, the request will be presented to the respective leader of the political entity. In cooperation with the community members, the leader verifies the circumstances and the causes of flight. If they are seeking protection on account of instabilities, fears of persecution, flood or droughts, the refugees can move to areas traditionally inhabited by the Anywaa communities.<sup>8</sup> For that, the traditional leaders thoroughly discuss and deliberate the circumstances the people find themselves in as well as the viabilities of settlement in a particular area. The final decision is then made collectively, and (temporary or permanent) settlement site is allocated through the facilitation of the respective traditional leader.

Generally, the early phases of the “spontaneous settlements” can be characterised as peaceful (Dereje, 2011, p. 180; Regassa, 2010, p. 136). This is confirmed by a local Anywaa elder explaining that:

In the mid-1960s, when refugees first arrived in Anywaa villages, the refugees accepted the norms and the culture of the host villages and behaved respectfully. This was one of the main reasons for the peaceful co-existence between the refugees and Anywaa villagers in those years. (Interview with an elder from the Anywaa community, 28 November 2019)

Similarly, settlement processes in villages such as Berhane Salaam, where both refugees and host communities were predominantly of Nuer ethnicity, went smoothly. Specifically, tribal affinities and the openness of the Nuer to accept and integrate members of their tribe were one of the main reasons why they were able to set up pockets of settlements around Berhane Salaam villages (Kinteborg, p. 65). Furthermore, during this time, refugees gained access to agricultural land and engaged in cattle exchange with Anywaa chiefs (Dereje, 2003, p. 20). As a result, with the possibility of subsistence farming and livestock-rearing (Regassa, 2010, pp. 189-94), a vast majority of the refugees achieved roughly the same subsistence level as the nationals (Kinteborg, 1977, p. 5).

Along with this, the Anywaa’s openness to accept others as long-time guests as well as the activism of traditional leaders effectively supported and facilitated the spontaneous integration of refugees in the early 1960s (Kinteborg, 1977, p. 64).

The settlement site established in Pukumu for the Komo ethnic group in the Gambella region of Ethiopia was mentioned as an example by one of the interviewees to clarify the structure and norms laid by the Anywaa communities to host newcomers.

When they arrived from the former province of Wolega, the Komos requested to get permission to establish their own permanent settlement sites. After inclusive deliberations on the issue, the village headmen (kwaari) facilitated the integration of

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8 In the absence of concrete reasons behind the flights of the newcomers, it is hardly ever that the Anywaa communities allow newcomers to set up villages in the areas inhabited by the Anywaa communities (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 68).

people from Komo ethnic groups by providing them with land for the establishment of a village. Moreover, they named the village Pokum, which means a village of Komo people. This naming ritual is meant to signal a message to the next generation that the land is given to this people to establish permanent settlement sites based on the freely given informed consent of all villagers so that dispute between the settlers and Anywaa can be avoided. Besides, after the permanent establishment of the village and local integrations, the Komos have full rights of administrating their own villages. The Anywaa supported the participation of Komo communities in the political processes not only at their own village level but also at the district and regional council of representatives as well as at both levels of the administrations. (Interview with one of the family members of *nyieya* (nobles), 19 November 2019)

To get a clearer picture of Anywaa's willingness to accept refugees these days, interviewees were asked about whether people fleeing persecution and conflict could be sheltered among their communities. All respondents reiterated that each political unit could host newcomers for some time and, on rare occasions, newcomers could be integrated into the community permanently. Although guests (*welo*) are much respected, of utmost importance is that they respect their culture and work jointly towards peaceful co-existence<sup>9</sup> (see also Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 60). Hence, in principle, Anywaa's hosting norms still exist today.

In summary, the findings of this section have led us to conclude that the success of the integration processes up to the early 1960s in the Gambella Region was hinged on both the motivation of South Sudanese refugees to adopt the norms and political organisation of the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity and the corresponding willingness on the part of host Anywaa communities to welcome refugees.

### 3.3 The gradual shift to encampment policies

Until the late 1970s, there had been only sporadic skirmish between the refugees and Anywaa communities. However, with the unabated arrivals of refugees and the territorial expansion of the Nuer at the expense of Anywaa territories, the formerly cordial relations began to deteriorate (Klinteberg, 1977, p. 5). Gradually, as the competition for fertile land and aquatic bodies along river banks intensified, self-settlement strategies changed from culturally accepted approaches towards the violent establishment of settlement sites:

After the shift in population dynamics, the refugees began to challenge the traditional peaceful co-existence. The refugees even evicted many Anywaa villagers from their ancestral lands after arming themselves with the support of the South Sudanese rebel groups operating in Ethiopia. (An elder from the Anywaa communities, 28 November 2019)

In the early 1980s, the conflicts in South Sudan escalated, causing migration flows into the region that exceeded 350,000 (Regassa, 2010, p. 93; Dereje, 2013, p. 116). Against the backdrop of minimising the negative impacts of the influx of refugees on the local population, the Ethiopian government took on an active role in the migration policy of the

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9 For instance, this includes working to protect settlement sites from external threat, showing mutual respect for the traditional ways of resolving disputes and refraining from initiating or threatening violence (interview with one of the family members of *nyieya* (nobles), 19 November 2019).

region and introduced encampment policies (Atrafi, 2017). Consequently, multiple refugee camps were established in the regions around Itang, Pugnido and Bonga, where refugees were required to reside (Atrafi, 2017). By the 1980s, the camp in Itang was the largest refugee camp in the world (Tadesse, 2007, p. 8). Despite the immense influx of refugees, with the support of international agencies and UNHCR, in many of those camps, refugees were provided access to social services including quality education and health care (Dereje, 2010, p. 319). There were even times when it was more favourable to live in a refugee camp than outside, which, however, caused resentment among Anywaa groups (Dereje, 2011). Furthermore, these camps became an operational base and training ground for the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which was fighting the Sudanese government (Carver et al., p. 11).<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the South Sudanese refugee flows, the Gambella Region saw another population shift in the 1980s: As part of the state-run resettlement programme of the socialist Derg regime that ruled Ethiopia between 1974 and 1991, 60,000 people from the Northern Ethiopian highlands were brought to the region.<sup>11</sup> Basically, the resettlement programme aimed at overcoming periodic droughts and famine in the northern highlands. At the same time, the Derg's policy sought to transform the traditionally predominant subsistence agriculture into planned state agriculture. However, the unilateral decision of the Derg regime to implement resettlement programmes without proper consultation with or the consent of the host communities exacerbated the already strained relationship between the host Anywaa communities and other immigrants (Byazen, 2011, p. 85). Moreover, for the Anywaa communities, the Derg's resettlement programme was also accompanied by the elimination of its traditional institutions and ways of life as peasants (Dereje, 2015, pp. 45-46).

The swelling conflicts between Anywaa and Nuer became increasingly politicised during the Derg military regime which strongly favoured the Nuer. Apart from allowing the SPLA to operate from military bases in Ethiopia, the Nuer people were incorporated into high positions in the local administration of the Gambella Region. Encouraged by the Derg, the forced uprooting of Anywaa communities in Gambella continued, fuelling persistent ethnic tensions between the Anywa and Nuer communities (Tadesse, 2007, pp. 8-9). Eventually, with the ongoing dramatic demographic changes due to the Sudanese civil war and the increasing influx of modern arms and weapons into the region, the situation spiralled out of control in the Itang district in 1989 when the SPLA attacked Anywaa villages in Pugnido, resulting in more than 120 deaths (Dereje, 2003, p. 20; Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 27).

In general, the Derg era left behind a hostile environment that contrasted sharply with the previous traditional refugee management in the region. During the imperial regime, the refugee management by Anywaa communities had been self-administered and regionally organised. Specifically, the active involvement of host communities and their respective leaders paved the ways for cooperative solutions and avoided unproductive forms of conflict, including violence.<sup>12</sup> Further, as the central government did not take an active role in the management of refugees but ruled the periphery rather indirectly, the spontaneous

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10 The SPLA (1983-2011) was one of the best-organised rebel groups fighting the Sudanese government and played a central role in the second Sudanese civil war in the 1980s. After South Sudan's independence in 2011, the group was absorbed into the Armed Forces of South Sudan (Malwal, 2015, p. 152).

11 In 1974, Emperor Haile Sellassie I was deposed by the Derg military junta after four decades of reign.

12 Interview with a civil servant in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia, 16 November 2019.

integration of refugees was, de facto, facilitated (Dereje, 2011, p. 180).<sup>13</sup> However, the socialist regime of the Derg in the 1980s put the Gambella Region under central control and threw the Anywaa's traditions into disarray. Customs, traditional institutions, and regional leaderships were banned and labelled as "feudal", "reactionary" or "anti-revolutionary" and attempts were made to dismantle them completely (Kurimoto, 1997, p. 799; Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 30). By debilitating the traditional institutions and replacing them with weak formal institutions, the Ethiopian government has left a void that traditional leaders could not fill anymore. At the same time, this encouraged newcomers not to adhere to the traditional structures and norms of local host communities. The lack of capacities in formal institutions has thus contributed to leaving many disputes unresolved and has further destabilised the region.

### 3.4 The current situation

Today, the security situation in the Gambella Region remains volatile and unpredictable. Recent security incidents have affected host communities, refugees as well as humanitarian workers, and have also caused fatalities. For instance, in September 2019, an Action Against Hunger vehicle was stopped by armed individuals near the South Sudanese refugee camp of Nguenyiel and two staff members were killed (UNHCR, 2019). In 2020, the murder of a local Nuer official sparked ethnic conflicts that resulted in 12 deaths (Ezega, 2020). In fact, unresolved ethnic tensions between the Anywaa and Nuer populations lead to the recurrence of conflicts on a regular basis. Consequently, state security forces have been deployed in certain locations in Gambella to improve the security situation in the region (UNHCR, 2019).

Most of these recent ethnic clashes are centred on access to land resources and power. Since the re-eruption of conflicts in South Sudan in 2013, the number of new refugee arrivals in Gambella has once again increased. By the end of 2017, the host population was estimated at 307,097, while the refugee population stood at 399,174, representing 57 per cent of the total population in the Gambella Region. Despite the large numbers of refugees and the instability in the region, the Ethiopian government has continuously maintained its open-door policy toward refugees (Atrafi, 2017, p. 5). Since the new arrivals in 2013, existing camps have been filled to capacity and the Ethiopian Government has opened up new refugee camps. By now, more than 320,000 South Sudanese refugees are sheltered in 7 camps in the Gambella Regional State. This includes the Nguenyiel camp (83,988), the Tierkidi camp (65,260), the Jewi camp (59,220), the Kule camp (45,815), the Pugnido camp 1 (43,719), the Pugnido 2 (9,424), and the Okugo camp (11,858) while 1,730 refugees are accommodated in Akula (see Figure 2) (UNHCR, 2020b).<sup>14</sup> Importantly, five of the refugee

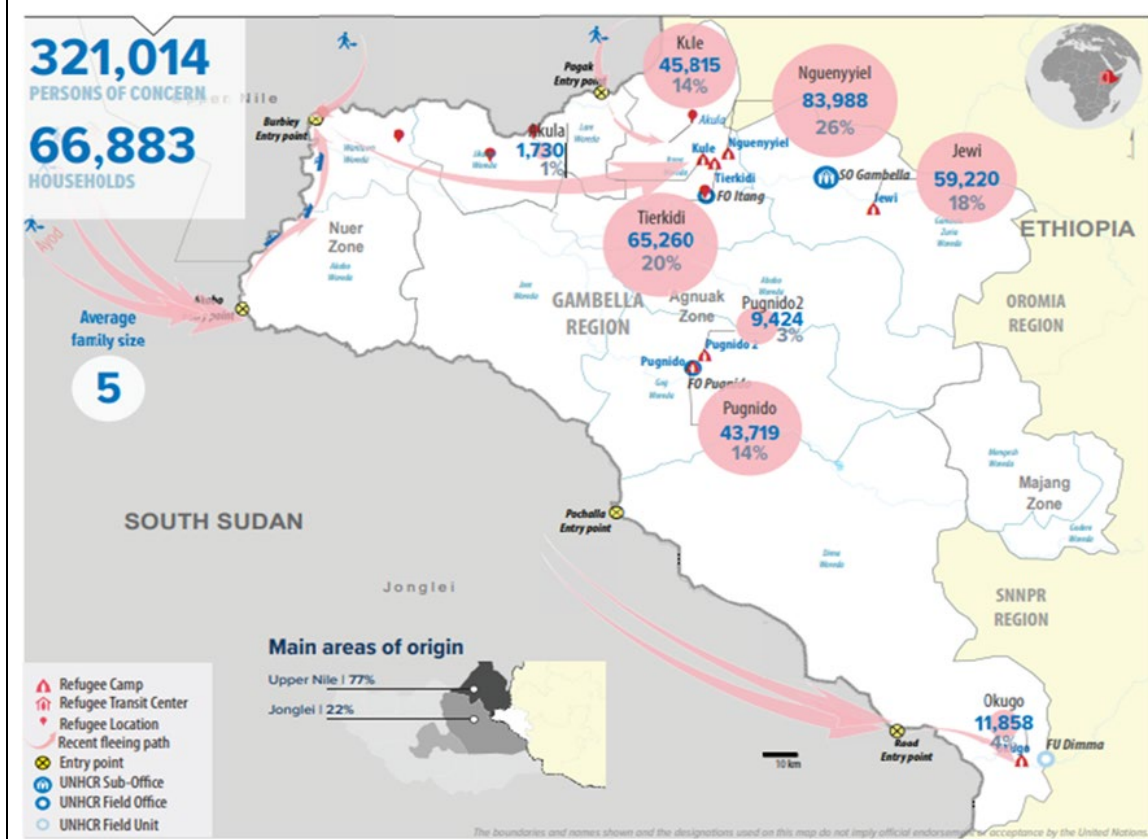
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13 Interview with a journalist from the Anywaa ethnic groups, 10 November 2019.

14 All camps were established in the Anywaa zone except the reception centres. A reception centre is a location with facilities for receiving and attending to the immediate needs of refugees or asylum-seekers as they arrive at Ethiopian borders. After going through the first level registration, the asylum-seekers are transported to refugee camps. The processes of transporting refugees to refugee camps can take from a week to a couple of weeks depending on the number of asylum-seekers and the logistic capacities of the UN agencies, the Authority of Refugees and Returnees' Affairs in Ethiopia (ARRA), and other NGOs working on refugee protection.

camps in Gambella constitute the largest refugee camps in Ethiopia and a large majority of these refugees live in situations of protracted displacements (Vemuru, 2020, p. 16).

**Figure 2: Map of refugee camps in Gambella, Ethiopia**



Source: UNHCR, 2020 (July)

Officially, the Ethiopian state grants refugee status to people from neighbouring countries, including South Sudan, *prima facie* (Abebe, 2018, p. 3).<sup>15</sup> The legal framework that basically governs the refugee situation in the country consists of international and regional standards (that is, the 1951 UN Convention, the 1967 UN Protocol, and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention) and the 2004 Refugee Proclamation, respectively its revision from 2019, which represents the major national law (Ayenew, 2021, p. 7). After the 2004 proclamation, refugees were required to reside in formal camps or semi-formal settlement sites with limited access to education and wage-earning employment (Abebe, 2018, p. 3). Since 2010, the government has been offering out-of-camp solutions for some refugees (the so-called OCP-policy). Initially, however, these were only granted for refugees that prove to finance themselves through their own means or through relatives and, for the most part, it only benefitted Eritrean refugees (Ayenew, 2021, p. 7).

<sup>15</sup> This means that the refugee status is granted on the basis of “readily apparent, objective circumstances in the country of origin or, in the case of stateless asylum-seekers, their country of former habitual residence” (Abebe, 2018, p. 9).

Since 2016, there has been a clear shift in Ethiopia's refugee policy. By signing the CRRF, the Ethiopian government has pledged to address the limbo surrounding humanitarian response and long-term refugee integration (UNHCR, 2020c).<sup>16</sup> The nine pledges, which focus on issues including education, social and basic services, out of camp-solutions, documentation, work and livelihoods, and local integration, envision bringing durable solutions to refugees and host communities. More precisely, Ethiopia aims at phasing out the purely camp-based approach towards a more sustainable response, which is aimed at improving refugee rights and supporting refugee self-reliance through socio-economic integration in the country (Abebe, 2018 pp. 3-4). In addition, in the course of the CRRF-implementation process, the refugee proclamation of 2004 was revised in 2019. Key changes in the law include freedom of movement, granting work permits, and access to education, health and financial services to refugees (Nigusie & Carver, 2019, p.8; UNHCR, 2020c, p. 5). With regard to host communities, benefits relate to employment opportunities through the creation of industrial parks and irrigated agriculture, as a large majority of them live in extreme poverty themselves (Abebe, 2018 p. 5).

While the new proclamation of 2019 has been referred to as the “most progressive refugee policies in Africa”, it is still only a starting point and various challenges remain (Abebe, 2018, Nigusie & Carver, 2019). For instance, according to Abebe (2018, p. 6), employment opportunities through industrial parks will not support refugee self-sufficiency due to very low wages, which are particularly unattractive in relation to the services in form of humanitarian aid. Under the 2019 Refugee Proclamation and in most situations, refugees will only have the right to work under the “most favorable treatment accorded to aliens” (Vermuru et al., 2020, p. 18). Furthermore, though since 2019 refugees have been granted greater freedom of movement, the Ethiopian government is still controlling the local movements of refugees strictly. According to the revised version of the law, ARRA (Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs) “may arrange places or areas within which refugee and asylum-seekers may live”. In the extreme case, this could mean de facto continuation of camp policies or elements thereof (Vermuru et al., 2020, p. 18; Nigusie & Carver, 2019, p. 8). Moreover, while temporary residence permits are generally issued to refugees, naturalisation and political participation are excluded (Abebe, 2018, p. 4). In the near future, it thus remains uncertain whether refugees will be able to find viable paths to citizenship and long-term economic livelihoods.

Beyond that, in the case of Gambella, multiple layers of ethnic tensions between the Anywaa, the Nuer and the highlanders represent further challenges to the regional implementation of the CRRF (Abebe, 2018, p. 8). Under the current system of ethnic federalism, the integration of Nuer refugees is highly sensitive, since increasing numbers in the Nuer population could change the political power dynamics in the region. Consequently, existing ethnic tensions with Anywaa host communities are becoming increasingly politicised (Dereje, 2014). Recognising this challenge, the Ethiopian government has recently started to relocate newly arrived refugees from South Sudan to the region of Benishangul-Gumuz (Abebe, 2018, p. 6; UNHCR, 2020d).

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16 Specifically, Ethiopia signed the CRRF during the UN's Leaders' Summit on Refugees in New York in September 2016. In November 2017, the government launched the Roadmap for the implementation of the CRRF (Nigusie & Carver, 2019, p. 7).

## 4 Political power dynamics

The analysis of political power dynamics is complex and goes beyond power distributions at different layers of government administration. It involves multi-dimensional issues, ranging from political representation at various administrative levels to the strategic enforcement of political entitlement claims and rights by different interest groups and minorities. In African democracies, a broad political representation of diverse ethnic groups has important implications for stability and inclusion (Teorell & Lindstedt, 2010, p. 435; Beza, 2013, p. 6). For instance, at the heights of the conflict between different ethnic groups in the 1990s in Burundi, both the parliament and the various government administrative offices became spaces of major ethnic rivalries. Over a decade, the political groups were locked in political power-sharing disputes that encompassed the executive as well as the legislative wings of the government (Lemarchand, 1994, p. 68; Vandeginste, 2009, pp. 63-86). Similarly, competition for political power at different levels of the government administration is one of the main sources of instability in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia (Dereje, 2011, p. 147). In particular, since the introduction of ethno-federal structures in 1991, political parties have been incentivised to organise along ethnic lines and new issues of indigeneity and citizenship have shaped the political dispute between the Anywaa and Nuer in Gambella. While the Anywaa communities have been advancing their political entitlements based on their settlement history (Dereje, 2011, p. 150) and by employing the discourse of “real citizenship”, Nuer communities have been using alternative citizenship as a strategy to enforce claims (Dereje, 2010, pp. 315-316). In the following, this paper will focus on these entitlement strategies in the context of the changing distributions of power at the administrative level following the arrival and integration of South Sudanese refugees in Gambella.

### 4.1 The emergence of Anywaa and Nuer elites

Since the self-settlement phase in the early 1960s, refugees in Gambella have been involved in the political life of their villages. For example, refugees were allowed to set up local refugee committees to be able to deal with their own problems (Klinteberg, 1977, p. 62; Regassa, 2010, p. 210). Although still required to maintain close contact with the local administration of the host communities, refugees enjoyed relative freedoms and gained self-determinations rights at an early stage of integration.<sup>17</sup> In addition, refugees had the opportunity to acquire Ethiopian citizenship once a permanent settlement site had been established. That is, at the lowest level of the state administration (*kebele*), refugees could apply for the so-called Kebele ID Card. Upon receipt of the ID Card, refugees received a birth certificate from the sub-district administration, which allowed them to apply for an Ethiopian Passport.<sup>18</sup> In the past, this process enabled many refugees, including those of the Nuer, to officially gain political participation rights and actively take part in political decision-making processes (Regassa, 2010, p. 137).

While both local communities and refugees participated in the administrative affairs of their local villages, provincial affairs of the Gambella Region were left to a few elites from the

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17 Interview with an elder from the Anywaa community, 16 November 2019.

18 Interview with a civil servant in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, 16 November 2019.

northern part of Ethiopia during the 20th century. These elites, which represented the interests of the central government at that time (that is, the imperial and Derg regime), had the last say in the overall administration of the province of Gambella (Dereje, 2011, p. 126). Integration of some individuals from both the Anywaa and the Nuer communities into the elites that were wielding power over the national and regional political affairs of Ethiopia had – at most – taken place sporadically. However, with the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991 and the official establishment of the Gambella Regional State, elites from both communities were increasingly represented in national and regional councils. Political influence even extended into the executive bodies of the regional government, which were eventually led predominantly by Anywaa and Nuer elites.

With the transition to ethnic federalism and more decentralised self-determination, nationwide peace and stability were to be created (Lie & Borchgrevink, 2012, p. 143). At the same time, however, ethnic tensions and power conflicts between both groups were now held in the political scene.<sup>19</sup> The fight over who controlled both the executive and legislative arms of government at regional state and district levels has continuously destabilised the Gambella Region. Since the mid-1990s, the Gambella Region is engulfed in vicious cycles of tense rivalries about resources, ethnic boundaries and political power.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.2 Political entitlement claims

### 4.2.1 Claims based on settlement history and citizenship

The Anywaa justify their entitlement claims to political leadership in the Gambella Region by referring to its settlement history and “real citizenship”. Historically, the Gambella Region as it exists today was established by the Anglo-Ethiopian Boundary Agreement of 1902, which drew the international border between Ethiopia and Sudan. At that time, the majority of the Anywaa communities were placed within the Gambella Region of Ethiopia whereas most of the Nuer were located within South Sudan (Dereje, 2010, p. 317). Because of this historical event, the Anywaa consider themselves as an indigenous group of the Gambella Region, whereas the majority of the Nuer are Sudanese citizens (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 26). Ever since, the Anywaa have been referring to the Nuer as “foreigners” and some Anywaa even consider all cross-border migrations of the Nuer to the Gambella Region after 1902 as “illegal” (Dereje, 2010, p. 317). Furthermore, political claims based on “real citizenship” refer to lived experiences as a (genuine) citizen of Ethiopia that affirms loyalty to the state (Maru, 2017, p.7). Put differently, citizens are not expected to adopt alternative citizenships, as has been the recent practice of the Nuer. This concept of self-identification excludes cross-border ethnicity as well as political participation in Ethiopia’s internal politics.

In contrast, the self-identification of Nuer elites is not fixed (Dereje, 2010, p. 173). Individuals can adopt alternative forms of self-identification in such a way that they can arbitrarily identify as citizens of a particular country. Specifically, individuals can switch between Sudanese and Ethiopian national identities. Thus, the Nuer’ self-identification

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19 Interview with a civil servant in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, 16 November 2019.

20 Interview with a scholar from the Anywaa community, 28 November 2019.



transcends colonial boundaries. This has contributed to the emergence of cross-national clan networks and communities on the Sudan-Ethiopia border. Moreover, in the political sphere, alternative identity allegiances serve as an instrument to negotiate marginality on both sides of the border. In consequence, the Nuer elites have been enabled to participate in the political processes of both countries and even to run for political offices in both states.<sup>21</sup>

As long as the government allows the refugees from South Sudan to settle in the Gambella Region locally, then they have the right to be included in the political process. (A politician from the Nuer ethnic groups, Gambella, 20 September 2019)

The Nuer perspective of the state border can be described as a political vision that does not envisage demarcated territories and allows for the existence of cross-border communities. However, the instrumentalisation of an alternative citizenship should be understood in the context of Nuer settlement history. The 19th century eastward expansion of the Nuer as Nilotic societies who make their living through cattle herding was primarily driven by the search for river land. However, in the 20th century, access to social services and modern goods alternately provided by both Ethiopia and the South Sudan State, had become increasingly motivational factors (Dereje, 2010). For instance, in the 1980s, international aid agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provided health and educational services to the refugees in the camps. At this time, it was more advantageous to identify as a South Sudanese refugee than as an Ethiopian citizen. After the regime changed to federalist ethnicity in the 1990s, however, it was more rewarding to be an Ethiopian as services and goods were increasingly delivered to peripheral areas in Gambella (Dereje, 2013).

While the Nuer have been using the alternative citizenship as a strategy to take advantage of fluctuating opportunities, the Anywaa's border perception similarly involves a strategic dimension. Against the backdrop of the historical expansion of the Nuer at the expense of their resources, the Anywaa insist on a rigid Ethio-Sudanese border. Thereby, Anywaa try to restrict further cross-border movements of the Nuer by simultaneously justifying its political dominance in the regional state (Dereje, 2010).

The contrasting notions of state borders, which are closely related to the different visions and structures of the two political communities (see subsection 3.1), also shape present interethnic tensions in the Gambella Region. To put it in the words of a journalist belonging to the Anywaa community:

The adoption of alternative modes of belongingness has been causing discomfort on both sides of the border. (A journalist from the Anywaa ethnic groups, 20 November 2019)

As one of the interviewees complained, people will continue to change their citizenship to their advantage unless an official policy is put in place by the government.<sup>22</sup> Although the Nuer have been trying to enforce alternative modes of citizenships, the Ethiopian State has officially prohibited the dual citizenship of individuals seeking public office since 2003. The so-called 2003 Proclamation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia allows revocation of citizenship if a person acquires another citizenship (Manby, 2010, p. 54).

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21 Interview with a journalist from the Anywaa ethnic groups, 10 November 2019.

22 Interview with a scholar who lived for some time in Itang as a refugee, 26 November 2019.

However, the government does not further constrain changes in citizenship status (for instance, based on political opportunism).

The former head of the Gambella Regional State Supreme Court, the most influential person in the region, left Ethiopia in 2011 to join the South Sudanese political process. He is now working as a director of the South Sudan Law Review Commission after shifting his citizenship allegiance back to South Sudan. (A former refugee from Itang, 26 November 2019)

The former governor of the Gambella Region used to be a registered South Sudanese refugee at Dimma refugee camp in the mid-1990s. (A former refugee from Itang, 26 November 2019)

Collectively, interviewees stressed that the practice of alternative citizenship affiliations could spark further political rivalries in the Gambella Region, exacerbating instability in both Ethiopia and South Sudan in the future.

#### 4.2.2 Claims based on population dynamics

Despite the continuous eastward expansion of the Nuer in the 19th century and the “spontaneous settlement” during the early 1960s, the Anywaa were by far the largest ethnic group in the Gambella Region until the late 1970s (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 32; Kurimoto, 2005). However, this quickly changed in the mid-1980s (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 32; Human Rights Watch, 2005, p. 7). With the sudden influx of refugees due to the second Sudanese civil war and the resettlement projects of the Derg regime, the demographic composition developed gradually in favour of the refugees. In consequence, by the time of the first census in 1984, Nuer communities had almost caught up with the Anywaa population (Kloos & Adugna, 1989, p. 33). At that time, the Anywaa population accounted for 30,499 people, while the population of Ethiopian Nuer communities was 27,827 (CSA, 1984). A decade later, at the time of the second census in 1994, the Nuer constituted 40 per cent of the population of the Gambella Regional State, while the Anywaa made up only 27 per cent of the population (CSA, 1994). Referring to the last census in 2007, by now the Nuer even represent 46.66 per cent of the Gambella Region, followed by the highlanders who represent about 27 per cent of the total population of 307,096 in the region. Hence, with only 21.16 per cent, the Anywaa are now only the third largest ethnic group in the region of Gambella.

Based on the 1994 and 2007 censuses, Nuer elites and highlanders have claimed proportional political representation at various levels in the Gambella Region. In particular, since the legalisation of ethnicity as a unit of political action in 1991, the relative population size of an ethnic group has become a strategic political resource. Yet, according to the current constitution of 1995, state political offices in the Gambella Region can only be held by individuals that the government recognised as *indigenous* to the region. Ethnic groups that the government considers indigenous include Anywaa, Nuer, Majang, Komo and Opo. Thus, while the political representation of the Nuer is officially recognised by the government, political entitlement claims of the highlanders, most of whom were brought to the Gambella Region as part of the Derg’s resettlement programme in the 1980s, are legally limited (Dereje, 2011, p. 151).

However, from the Anywaa's perspective, the Nuer's entitlement claims based on two censuses are not sufficient as the bases of political power distribution in the region since the Nuer population increases are primarily based on refugee movements from South Sudan into the Gambella Region (Dereje, 2011, p. 151). Along with this, the governments' migration policy in recent years, which facilitated the establishment of almost all refugee camps in the Anywaa zone while simultaneously setting up reception centres in Nuer zone only,<sup>23</sup> has raised eyebrows and caused grave concerns:

The establishment of refugee camps which have been hosting a refugee population, which is nearly equivalent to four times the size of the population of the host communities of the Anywaa zone is a controversial decision. (A scholar from the Anywaa community, 28 November 2019)

Similarly, the government's current plans have been renewing controversy over the impact of refugee integration on the stability and the political power dynamics in the region around Gambella. To put it in the words of a scholar from the Anywaa community, these range from the provision of land-related resources to the access to social services and simplified pathways to naturalisation of a population of refugees that is larger than the entire population of the Anywaa Zone.<sup>24</sup>

### 4.3 Instrumentalisation of political alliances

The formation of strategic alliances with the Ethiopian government is part of the political power dispute between the Anywaa and the Nuer. Over the past century, the Gambella Region has seen shifting alliances of the various regimes with both the Anywaa and the Nuer. These political alliances have played a pivotal role in the region's management of South Sudanese refugees.

Since the outbreak of the first civil war in South Sudan in the early 1960s, the Ethiopian imperial regime has considered Sudan as a political ally. Besides advancing foreign policy interests, the Ethiopian emperor aimed at restraining rebel activities in the common border areas (Aalen, 2014). Basically, the Ethiopian government's support to the Sudanese rebels – predecessors of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement Army (SPLA) – consisted of refugee protection and assistance. The emperor believed that this "surrogate" form of supporting the Sudanese rebels' movements will be tolerated by all government institutions (local and national) as long as it deters Sudan from opening its border for rebels fighting the Ethiopian government (Regassa, 2010, pp. 88-90). In the 1970s, the alliance even included arming refugees with machine guns, who then roamed throughout the villages, arresting village headmen of the Anywaa communities and establishing their own courts in the Gambella Region (Regassa, 2010, p. 95).

According to interviewees from a member of a *nyie* (noble) family, Haile Selassie's refugee management had not been based on a humanitarian act. Rather, the strong bondage between the imperial government and South Sudanese rebels in their fight against the Northern Sudan

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23 Again, see Figure 2 (UNHCR, 2020b).

24 Interview with a scholar from the Anywaa community, 28 November 2019.

forces played a significant role in shaping the incorporation of refugees into the local administration in the Gambella Region.<sup>25</sup>

Instead of trying to find an amicable solution to the “refugee crisis” in the Gambella Region by involving both the local host Anywaa communities as well as the regional government in discussions, the federal government of Ethiopia tolerated the evictions of the Anywaa communities from the ancestral villages. (Family members of *nyieya* (nobles), 19 November 2019)

After the ascendancy of the military regime of the Derg in the 1980s, the relationship between refugees and the host Anywaa communities further deteriorated. Accepted by the Derg, the SPLA dominated the region around Gambella (Aalen, 2014). During this time, educated Nuer elites were increasingly integrated into the regional administration and party structure of the Derg regime. This reinforced the political alliance between the elites from Nuer communities and the Derg regime (Dereje, 2011, p. 141) that favoured the political position of the Nuer over the Anywaa in the region (Kurimoto, 1997; Byazen, 2011, p. 88). The Nuer refugees were allowed to integrate and establish permanent settlements locally in both Itang districts and the surrounding areas of Gambella town without the consent of Anywaa communities (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 31; Tadesse, 2007, p. 8). Hence, while the cooperation between the politicians from the Nuer ethnic groups and the Derg regime paved the way for further expansions of the permanent settlements of refugees, Anywaa elites were further marginalised from the political process of the region. During this time, the Derg regime had been continuously challenging Anywaa’s traditional structures by labelling and treating them as bandits (Dereje, 2008, pp. 137-139; Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 20).

The introduction of federal structures during the transition period from 1991 to 1995 regenerated new hope for the Anywaa (Tadesse, 2007, p. 5). After a series of fights with the Derg regime and the SPLA troops, the Gambella Peoples’ Liberation Movement (GPLM), dominated by Anywaa elites with the backing of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had successfully taken control of Gambella in May 1991.<sup>26</sup> With the support of the ruling EPRDF, the Anywaa had been able to restore their political power. Besides controlling the regional council and administration, politicians from the Anywaa ethnic group regained leadership in the Itang District.

However, the alliance between the national government and the Anywaa ethnic groups had lasted for a few years only. As political visions were increasingly diverging, the two parties have found it difficult to maintain their partnership. Basically, the Anywaa’s demand for more self-administration displeased the government, which sought a more centralised political system. Thus, with the goal of curtailing the Anywaa’s political influence, the national government shifted its support to politicians from the Nuer ethnic groups. Aiming to further strengthen their alliance with the national government, the Nuer mobilised thousands of youths and former refugees to serve in the national army during the border conflict with Eritrea in the late 1990s (Dereje, 2009, p. 645). Through these actions, the Nuer were able to build mutual trust with the political leaders of the national government (Dereje, 2011).

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25 Interview with one of the family members of *nyieya* (nobles), 19 November 2019.

26 Interview with a civil servant in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia, 16 November 2019.

Since then, Nuer politicians have sought to instrumentalise the close relationship with the federal government to advance their demands for proportional representation in the region. In 2005, the national government conceded to Nuer demands and implemented an equitable and quota-based power-sharing system based on the 1994 census that particularly favoured the numerically superior Nuer group. As a result, the Nuer have been able to secure additional legislative seats at both regional and district administration levels (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 49; Tadesse, 2007, p. 12). Moreover, encouraged by political networks, some politicians from Nuer ethnic groups have requested that the federal government bestow citizenship titles to the Cieng Reng clan and endorse the territorial claims of the clan around Itang district. 27 People from the Nuer Cieng Reng clan in the Gambella Region are among the refugees who crossed the border from South Sudan into Ethiopia in large numbers in the early 1980s and settled in the best rangelands in the Itang district (Dereje, 2011, pp. 88-91; Hagos & Winczorek, 2018). In late 2008, the government granted full recognition and integration into the political dispensation of the region (Hagos & Winczorek, 2018, p. 50; Tronvoll & Hagmann, 2011, p. 42). In consequence, politicians from the Nuer Cieng Reng and other refugees were able to achieve 50 per cent of the seats in the district council and as many cabinet members in Itang district. The fact that the government supported the process of increasing political power in favour of the Nuer has led to considerable distrust among Anywaa towards the central government (Tadesse, 2007, p. 13).

The contested relationship between the Nuer Cieng Reng clan and the Anywaa communities exemplifies the challenges to the region's refugee management and integration. Basically, with the increasing integration of Nuer refugees, the Anywaa are inevitably experiencing a loss of political power due to the proportional power-sharing system implemented in the Gambella Region:

Their integration as refugees resulted not only in the establishments of permanent settlement sites in the areas which used to be inhabited by Anywaa communities but also this affected the political power distributions in favour of the Nuer. (One of the family members of *nyieya* (nobles), 19 November 2019)

Overall, critics argue that, despite the introduction of multinational federation structures aimed at decentralising the state, the 1991 Ethiopian central government has become stronger than any previous Ethiopian state. That is, it has developed structures of central control and top-down rule over the past three decades that preclude local initiative and autonomy (Abbink, 2011, p. 1; Vaughan, 2004, p. 1). However, the recent conflicts between the government and the regional forces in its northern Tigray region that have caused thousands of deaths in the past two years may question the actual strength of the federal government (see, for example, EPC [Emirates Policy Center], 2020). Nevertheless, when it comes to the Gambella Region, it is not difficult to imagine that, without the blessings of the national government, it is impossible to facilitate the integration of refugees into local communities, thereby tipping the distribution of political power in favour of one group such as the Nuer. Thus, these days, the political alliance with the national government rather than

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27 During the process of data collection, the following documents were reviewed: minutes of a meeting with the then president of the Gambella Regional State; a letter written to the Itang district by the then president of Gambella Regional State; and the minutes of the cabinets of Itang district. They all provide a rare glimpse into how the regional administration requested that the federal government recognise the Cieng Reng clan as Ethiopian citizens and endorse the territorial claims of the clan in the Itang district.

the de jure citizenship status of refugees has played a pivotal role in the local integration of refugees and their involvement in political processes in Gambella.

## 5 Conclusions

The Gambella Regional State draws on a long history of periodic displacements, drastic regime changes and multi-layered ethnic conflicts. Besides being exposed to two South Sudanese wars, the region has experienced political transitions that have affected the migration management in the region to varying degrees. Moreover, the presence of refugees has profoundly altered the social and political context. Along with this, unresolved ethnic tensions and violent confrontations between Anywaa and Nuer have become increasingly frequent in the last two decades. Most recently, violent escalations around Itang have reignited the public debate about the mechanisms and the design of refugee integration in the region.

Against this backdrop, the focus of the present paper has been to understand the context, nature and evolution of the interethnic tensions between the Anywaa and the Nuer. By considering the broad historical context, the paper outlined two important developments:

Firstly, the relationship between the Anywaa and Nuer was not always shaped by disputes and violent confrontations. Instead, the early 20th century represented a period characterised by cooperation, interethnic marriage, and trade. During that time, refugee integration practices were locally organised and based on traditional arrangements of the Anywaa communities. Despite differences with respect to livelihoods and political organisation structures, the Nuer settlement phase took place largely peacefully. The tipping point at which the situation fundamentally changed was the 1980s, with two extreme events: the unabated influx of refugees during the second South Sudanese war; and the state-run resettlement programme of the socialist Derg regime, which sought to take an active role in the migration management of the region.

Secondly, the conflicts between the Anywaa and the Nuer were transferred to the political realm. Whereas until the late 1980s the traditional rivalry had been primarily centred around territories, access to natural resources and socio-cultural reasons, as of the introduction of ethnic federalism in the early 1990s, competition had been particularly about the control of political structures at lucrative administrative levels. Incentivised to organise as ethnic political parties, Anywaa communities have been justifying their political dominance in the regional state by referring to their settlement history and the concept of “real citizenship” which officially excludes Nuer people. In contrast to that, Nuer elites have been advancing entitlement claims based on their relative population size of an ethnic group. In 2005, the political power dynamics between Anywaa and Nuer were further politicised by the implementation of a new power-sharing formula that primarily favoured the demographically superior Nuer group. Since then, the new arrival of Nuer refugees and their integration have been directly and inevitably linked to a loss of political power on the part of Anywaa groups.

So far, the current government in Ethiopia has failed to find amicable solutions to the deteriorating relationships and rivalries between Anywaa and Nuer groups. On the contrary, with the introduction of the new power-sharing quota, the national government has actively

supported the Nuer, raising scepticism among the Anywaa. In consequence, for the Anywaa, it is not so much the *de jure* citizenship status of refugees as the political alliance with the national government that has played a central role in the local integration of refugees and their inclusion in the political processes of the Gambella State. Moreover, the Anywaa's traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have been disrupted. For a long period in the history of Gambella, these have ensured peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities. Instead of replacing the void through efficient, innovative conflict mechanisms, the central government has left a breeding ground for the evolution of new dispute constellations. Meanwhile, the government has acknowledged the importance of a local and sustainable approach to refugee integration by signing up to the CRRF. However, given the complexity of ethnic conflicts in Gambella, many questions and challenges regarding the practical implementation remain. Not least because integration policies targeting Nuer refugees – whether within the scope of the CRRF or not – remain highly sensitive.

Overall, political entitlement claims based on demarcations to include or exclude individuals from local politics have become an integral part of contemporary political debates in Gambella's regional politics. As long as not all groups currently living in the region can negotiate equally on political representation and power distribution, ethnic tensions will intensify. New political claims will be formulated, and political groups will increasingly try to build on strong alliances with the central government to enforce their claims, which will then trigger further conflicts in the future. Therefore, the only way forward is to bring the host communities on board and discuss the issues on an equal footing.

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