

THE MINNESOTA ANUAK: A LOST AFRICAN TRIBE OF THE MIDWEST

By Douglas McGill

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Rochester, MN -- The images on the gruesome video are all too familiar to anyone who watches television news from disaster-prone Africa: a filthy hospital packed with desperately sick, young men lying listlessly on cots, their bodies broken and thin, their bloody bandages flecked with flies, their eyes despairing.

We are sitting in a tiny apartment living room in Austin, six men scrunched close on a sofa and two folding chairs. The air is sweet with Ethiopian incense. In the nearby kitchen, African women prepare a meal as the men discuss the crisis shown on the video. One of the men, Omot Ochan, explains that the images show the survivors of a July 7, 2002, attack on his native tribe in northern Africa.

According to the United Nations, which runs several refugee camps nearby, 69 men, women and children were killed that day; 39 were seriously wounded, and 8,700 left homeless and starving. Nearly all the dead and wounded are members of the Anuak (pronounced AN-you-ack) tribe, the indigenous people of remote western Ethiopia.

In some shots in the video, the wounded men wince as they turn over to show bullet holes gaping in their sides. The men in the Austin apartment wince as they watch the screen. Like the men in the video, they are members of the Anuak tribe, but they escaped the violence in their land to come to Minnesota in recent years. Today they are meeting frequently to discuss how to help their relatives back home as the Anuak suffer an especially intense bout of tribal killings and ethnic cleansing.

They have formed a group called the Anuak Relief Committee to support and raise money for those left wounded or homeless by the July massacre. The committee, which also acts as an informational clearinghouse for the Anuak community in Minnesota, is based in St. Paul and has members from southeastern Minnesota and the Sioux Falls, S.D., area.

I look out the apartment window in Austin and see a group of American teenagers tumble out of an SUV and rush into a McDonald's restaurant. We're a long, long way from northern Africa. Yet in this living room in Austin, the fates of Minnesota and Africa intertwine. After all, some of the Anuak men have been here for more than five years and are U.S. citizens. What they are trying to do now is get the U.S. government to intervene to save their families back home.

Random Killings

Southern Minnesota is home to the world's largest community of Anuak refugees, which numbers about 1,200. Most arrived in the area in the mid-1990s, after the 1991

government change in Ethiopia triggered chaos in the remote western part of the country where the Anuak tribe lives.

"Our people are like the Indians in the United States," Ochan explained. "We are the indigenous people of western Ethiopia. We want to be independent and to run our own lives. But the Ethiopian government is suspicious of anyone who wants to be independent, and we have suffered from that."

Everyone in the Austin apartment, which is not far from the Hormel Foods plant where several Anuak people work, has a horror story to tell from the early mid-1990s, when they fled Ethiopia, first to Kenya and then to Minnesota.

"There was nothing to eat and nothing to buy," said Obang, who now lives in Rochester and asked that his full name not be used so that he could protect family members who still live in Ethiopia. "You could see many people dying in the street. You didn't know who your enemy was. If you saw a man with a gun, it could be an Ethiopian soldier, a Sudanese rebel, or someone from the former military. If they didn't like you, they could shoot you. So we ran."

According to accounts the Minnesota Anuak gave, in the two years following the takeover of the new Ethiopian government in 1991, the government sent troops into the Anuak's fertile and oil-rich territory to take control. Random killings, and sometimes massacres of the Anuak ensued. Thousands fled through the Ethiopian jungle, where many died from lion attacks, into refugee camps in northern Kenya.

Obang's journey began when he woke up one morning to the sound of gunfire and screaming. "I saw the soldiers shooting and I ran," he said.

Knife's Edge

"I was trying to think what to do, but there was nothing in my head. I could feel the bullets going between my arms and legs and around my head. I saw my friends fall down from the gunshots all around me. One was crying in the river where he had been shot. I crawled down to the river and I got into the water and the mud and I held him and I carried him. We stayed in the water for four hours before we could get away. Many people were injured and dying. Since that day, I have never worried about something they call dying. I never worry about what's coming because it's not in my power to change."

After living two years at the Ifo refugee camp in northern Kenya, a tent city of 70,000 where, at its worst, dozens of people a day died of simple infections and diarrhea, Obang was granted refugee status. The International Organization for Migration, an international aid group based in Geneva, relocated him. He worked as a dishwasher at a Chicago Hilton hotel and as a meat cutter at the John Morrell & Co. slaughterhouse in Sioux City, Iowa, before taking a job assembling computer cabinetry at the Crenlo Inc. factory in Rochester.

Obang studies English and is taking graduate-equivalency classes and studying English in Rochester. He hopes to attend college here one day. He became a U.S. citizen last fall.

Most of the Anuak refugees in Minnesota, like Obang, spent two or three years at the Ifo refugee camp before immigrating to the United States. They came to Chicago, St. Paul, Sioux City, and other Midwestern cities before following jobs into smaller cities like Austin, Rochester and Willmar.

"The United States is special," Obang said. "The best thing is that citizens give their opinions to the government, and the government listens to them. That's freedom. So we are asking the U.S. government to help the Anuak." Through USAID, the U.S. government sent \$58.8 million in foreign aid to Ethiopia in 2002, and has requested a budget of \$77 million for 2003.

Making receipt of this foreign aid contingent on the Ethiopian government's improved actions toward the Anuak is their goal, Obang said.

Frantic Phone Calls

As the smell of garlic from the kitchen intensifies toward the dinner hour, the horrible videotape turns and turns. The tape was made by a Minnesota Anuak who was visiting his family just after the July 7 massacre. It shows the remains of two Anuak villages, Elea and Pinyman, burned to the ground; once clusters of round straw huts, the villages now are nothing but black circles burned into the ground. Inside the circles are the shattered ceramic urns and gourds that once stored corn flour and oil. A mass grave is shown at one point as the video's narrator explains there was no time to bury victims in individual graves.

In western Ethiopia where the Anuak live, life still balances on a knife's edge. Every nightfall brings the dread of another possible massacre. So every night here in Minnesota, after finishing their jobs at the meatpacking plants or factories, the Minnesota Anuak frantically telephone loved ones in Gambela, the Ethiopian town where many of the homeless have congregated. They collect the latest news. They have done this every day since July, buying fistfuls of telephone cards, with a different person calling home each night and then all the next day sharing the news.

The Anuak Relief Committee has met in emergency session in a different apartment every weekend since July to strategize how to raise money, how to raise awareness of the Anuak's plight outside of Africa, and how to find other ways to help.

Among themselves, the Minnesota Anuak have raised \$20,000 to send to friends and family who survived the July attack, Ochan said. The money is wired to a bank in Gambela, where a friend on the telephone can immediately confirm that the money has arrived and been deposited.

The group has also launched a letter-writing campaign to the U.S. government, to the Ethiopian government, and to Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other human rights groups to raise awareness of the troubles in their land. In these letters, the Anuak call upon the Ethiopian government to conduct a full investigation of the conflicts and to strongly consider relocating the refugee camps, the source of the recent violence, to the fringes of Anuak territory. So far, there has been no substantial reply.

Endangered Culture

The best source of information about the Anuak tribe is Cultural Survival, a 30-year-old research and activist organization based in Cambridge, Mass. Founded in 1972 by Harvard anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis and funded then by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Ford Foundation, the group since 1981 has published a half-dozen reports detailing the Anuak's tragic story. The report titles alone tell much of it: "Ethiopia's Policy of Genocide Against the Anuak," "Anuak Displacement and Ethiopian Resettlement," "Oil Development in Ethiopia: A Threat to the Anuak" and "Armed Struggle and Indigenous People."

In 1986, Cultural Survival put the Anuak on its list of "endangered cultures," citing the Ethiopian government's clearance of Anuak land for resettlement as the major threat. Many Anuak were dying, the report said, when farmers tried to fight off Ethiopian soldiers with only their rakes and spears. Estimates of the number of Anuak living today range around 100,000, with perhaps one-tenth of that number having fled the country and now living in exile.

As the indigenous people of western Ethiopia and southeastern Sudan, the Anuak have reaped much greater than its share of the sorrows brought by the civil wars, droughts, and famines that have plagued both countries over the past 30 years. The tribe's rich but remote territory has absorbed wave after wave of refugees from its eastern, western and northern borders. From the north and the east, the Ethiopian government has sent more than a million famine victims to resettle on Anuak land since the early 1980s. From the west, hundreds of thousands of Sudan civil war refugees have poured in. These waves of settlers and refugees have overrun and destroyed much of the Anuak's traditional farming, hunting and fishing grounds, and brought to a boiling point deep tribal rivalries that had long remained at a simmer.

Thanksgiving Day Massacre

The current crisis erupted in the refugee camps. Most of the camps' refugees are members of the Nuer tribe of Sudan, with whom the Anuak have had bitter relations for more than a century. The July massacre, according to the telephone reports gathered by the Minnesota-based Anuak, started with a garden-variety Anuak-Nuer shouting match, but turned deadly when a gang of Nuer left and then returned to settle things with AK-47 assault rifles.

Tragically, a Thanksgiving weekend massacre, which resulted in 33 deaths, was possibly caused by Anuaks taking revenge for the July slaughter.

"After so many years of being killed, and being killed, and being killed, it may be that an Anuak just burst," Ochan said. "We don't know the full facts yet. But after the July massacre, the Anuak may have thought, 'Unless we do something, they will just kill us again and again.' But now, of course, more violence is all the more likely to happen. It's so tragic."

At the meeting in Austin, the young children of the somber adults run through the cramped living room on their way to a bedroom, where, laughing and giggling, they jump up and down on the bed.

In the living room, where the serious talk is happening, every one of the adults has a lot going on besides the troubles back in Africa. After all, they have lived in their new country for more than five years and some of them, like Obang, are even citizens. They lead lives indistinguishable from millions of Americans.

Yet these days, dark images of death are impinging on the paradise the Anuak are trying to create for themselves in Minnesota. Delivered by videotape or by telephone calls back home, these nightmares violently thrust the past into the present, bringing urgent tasks and responsibilities.

"We have finally escaped to America," Ochan said. "But when we see our families back home getting killed we say, 'Maybe we should have stayed and suffered with them. Maybe that is the right way.' It's easy to feel hopeless. But we will keep on. We believe that if we can express and share our suffering with the world, we can make some change."

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