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The Anuak are a Nilotic people who live in southwest Ethiopia and adjacent areas or southeast Sudan. In 1958 it was estimated that they numbered 30,000 to 40,000, of whom two-thirds were living in Ethiopia.

Originally the Anuak lived on land near the Pibor and Sobat rivers south of Gambela and near the Adura and Mokwau rivers to the north. They were forced out of these areas by other groups and today they are found mainly in areas near the Baro and Akoba rivers, in two villages on the Sobat River near Nasser, and at Ajungnur near the mouth of the Pibor River.

The Anuak are an agricultural people, although most families have either a few cattle or some sheep and goats. They also fish from the rivers, and it is common for them in normal times to set up small temporary villages in good fishing areas. They also hunt wild birds. The Anuak diet consists mainly of sorgum flour, fish meat, and fowls.

Most of the Anuak are evangelical Christians, although they traditionally believed in an almighty spirit known as Gwok. Trees played an important part in their religion and even today there are villages which include "holy" trees.

The Anuak live a tight-knit community life in villages that are self-contained and do not have much communication with the outside world. The villages are run by headmen, but these can be removed if their behavior or judgment is considered unsatisfactory. Unsatisfactoriness includes being dictatorial, as according to Anuak philosophy there are no "God-men." All family and other disputes are resolved democratically within the village.

In the past Anuak traveled widely, hunting or looking for beads and other goods for marriage dowries. Many of those who left their villages for these purposes "disappeared." Anuak men were often captured by the Abyssinians and taken as slaves; young Anuak girls were also abducted and forced to become concubines. In the Imperial and other wealthy households Anuak slaves were used to fetch and carry water, food, and heavy goods.

Slavery was abolished when the Gambela area came under British rule in the early twentieth century, but was restored when the region was ceded to Ethiopia after the Second World War. Even after slavery was officially abolished, however, many Anuak were illegally abducted and enclaved in Abyssinian households. Today the Anuak are still looked down upon as "black" slaves.

Their history of disappearance and enslavement, coupled with their social structure based on family and community life, has made the Anuak very suspicious of outsiders. They say that they only wish to live in peace. They understand, indeed practice, communal living but they reject collectivization and have no concept of an "Ethiopian" state. Thus they are hostile to the Dergue, the ruling junta of the Ethiopian Empire.

In March, 1983, the Dergue announced general mobilization of all males in Ethiopia and are now carrying out an intensive search for recruits all over the country. The Anuak are also opposed to army service; it is against their moral code to fight people they do not know and who have done them no personal wrong. They have, therefore, strongly resisted recruitment into the militia. Many young Anuak have fled either to Sudan or into the forests in order to escape forced conscription. Widespread evasion of recruitment has made the lives of those who live in settled villages even more insecure and has led to a breakdown of traditional social life.

It is in fact where they live that has made it impossible for the Anuak to pass the peaceful lives they seek. Occupying fertile lands near the Baro, Akobo, and Sobat Rivers, they were early victims of the Dergue's policy of establishing settlements in the more fertile areas of south and southwestern Ethiopia. This was called agricultural development.

Colonial settlements served two purposes. On the one hand, settlers from northern Ethiopia were being deported from politically sensitive areas (such as Tigray) to the south where the existence of ethnically distinct populations helped to break up the homogeneity of equally distinct and politically troublesome nationalities. On the other hand, settlers are workers who do not have to be paid and who can be forced to carry out the massive clearance of land and forest, making way for big state-run agricultural projects. There are already a number of settlements of this nature in southwest Ethiopia, including camps at Asosa, Angolit and at another site near Nakamte in Wollega Province. Refugees from Angolit camp who have fled to Sudan estimated that 75,000 workers were at that site alone.

These agricultural development schemes do not, therefore, employ or in any way benefit local people. Produce is taken from the schemes by the Agricultural Marketing Corporation, a state body, either for the army or for sale or export. Those living locally have to purchase grain through the local Farmers' Associations. The Farmers' Associations themselves cannot buy food from the state agricultural farms but have to purchase food from local traders at high prices.

Sites for agricultural development are chosen for their fertility. Therefore, it is virtually certain that local peoples are already using the land. It is also inevitable that these people will be displaced by such development. Indeed, the landholdings have been taken and the farmers driven from the area. Some have fled into the bush where, for the time being, they will not be harassed any further by the authorities; several thousand have also fled to Sudan as refugees.

The Anuak homelands near the Baro and Akobo river were first designated for clearance and agricultural development when the United States was still influential in Ethiopia prior to 1975. The plans included the building of barriers along the Baro river (apparently to keep out large, wild animals which could destroy crops) and involved the removal of the local inhabitants. The FAO were originally interested in the scheme but later withdrew. It was then proposed to the European Economic Commission (EEC) and in 1978 an agreement was signed between that body and the Ethiopian government. At the end of 1980, following a formal protest to the EEC by the Anti-Slavery Society, which was concerned about the expulsion of the Anuak from their lands, the EEC suddenly announced that they had been requested by the Ethiopian government to transfer the funds allocated to the Baro scheme to another project.

In 1979 the Dergue started recruiting for the militia in the Anuak areas and a number of men were kidnapped from their homes. By July of that year many Anuak were fleeing from the Dergue's forces in order to avoid conscription. The recruitment of militia coincided with the clearance of Anuak farmers from their villages to make way for the Baro river scheme. Anuak crops and animals were seized by the army and villagers were driven from their homes at gunpoint. Many of the Anuak resisted eviction and tried to fight off Ethiopian troops with spears, sticks, and agricultural implements; some, who had old Italian rifles left over from the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, also used these to oppose the army. During the fighting many Anuak were killed. On August 7 there was a battle between the Anuak and Ethiopian troops near the village of Qodago during which 27 Anuak were killed; the survivors fled to Sudan. An earlier group of refugees who were not armed had been wiped out when Ethiopian troops forced them into the Baro river and drowned them.

Survivors of the evictions who reached Sudan in August, 1979, reported that several hundred had been killed in the evictions and round-ups for the militia, with thousands still hiding in the forests.

These events caused a great deal of alarm in the Anuak community, who saw a threat not only to their traditional way of life but to their very survival.

Many Anuak have joined the Gambela Liberation Front, formed to protect their homelands and to evict the Ethiopian army from their areas. During 1983 Anuak partisans made several attacks on units of the Ethiopian army in the Gambela area, where they have recruited other minority groups as well.

Anuak leaders say that their numbers have been seriously depleted by forced recruitment and killings by the Dergue. It is unlikely therefore that there are now as many as 30,000 left. Indeed, some Anuak believe that the population is now less than half what it was at the end of World War II.

The future of the Anuak is in serious doubt. Those who have been forced to leave their villages near the rivers are eking out marginal existences in the forests and inaccessible areas. There is a shortage of men as a result of the killings, recruitment to the militia, and

the flight of many either to the Gambela Liberation Front or to Sudan as refugees. The Anuak are, however, a tenacious people who have, over the years, been able to keep their language and customs alive in the face of extreme hardship and pressure. This, coupled with their ability to hunt, fish, and live off the land, may help them survive. The Anuaks in Ethiopia, however, must be regarded as an endangered people.

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