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Music, Song, and Dance of the Blue Nile Borderlands Revivals in the Refugee Context

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The Blue Nile Borderlands, a region now largely in western Ethiopia but including hilly zones of the eastern Sudan, shows long-term coherence in its social and cultural practices. Despite recent decades of disturbance through internal and cross-national conflict, there has been a revival of 'indigenous' forms of cultural performance among displaced minority groups of the region. A case-study is presented of Sudanese Uduk-speaking refugees in SW Ethiopia.

'Tradition' re-emerges in displacement

Archaeological studies have recently proposed a set of connected practices in relation to the material culture of the region I term the 'Blue Nile Borderlands', over a span of perhaps four thousand years (Fernandez 2003). Traceable linguistic continuities are even longer than this, the Uduk language for example having its roots in the earliest forms of proto-Nilo-Saharan (Ehret 2001). Modern conditions of conflict and displacement have illustrated not only the practical capacities of the people for survival, but also the robust artistic and emotional appeal, even under conditions of hardship and suffering, of the old forms of musical and other embodied cultural expression. This study offers a glimpse into the long-term creativity of peoples in this region – a theme I have argued elsewhere is fundamental to anthropology (James 2003). Background on the impact on local people of civil war in the Sudan and political change in Ethiopia can be found in James (2007), and many of the songs, dances, and musical forms mentioned in this essay can be viewed online (James and Aston: www.voicesfromthebluenile.org).

I suddenly heard of the revival of a 'mythical' dance, the *barangu*[2], in the refugee scheme at Bonga in the Gambela region in 1994. Here were gathered several thousand Uduk-speaking refugees from the southern Blue Nile Province of the Sudan, whose villages (where I had originally worked many years earlier) had been destroyed in the late 1980s. I had been told firmly in the 1960s that the *barangu* dance was obsolete. It was quite a surprise, so many years later, to hear the music of this 'antique' form in Bonga and see the dance. A key lyric includes the lines 'The gourd of old, how was it broken? The gourd was broken by the *wutule.*' This catchy song can be 'read' on various levels. It is a lament for death in general, evoking the old myth of the moon oil, once used to revive people after temporary death, until the gourd was dropped by the *wutule* lizard in a silly struggle, so that death, once died, became permanent (James 1979: 74-5). It recalls, in particular, deaths from fighting, both in the old days and more recently. I found to my initial surprise that that this and other special *barangu* songs

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[2] For transcribing the Uduk language, I use here a simplified form of the orthography established by the Sudan Interior Mission.

were in circulation in Bonga, songs I had never heard, though I knew the mythical stories associated with them.

The very name of the dance was familiar too. I already knew the story of the *barangu*, evoking the beginning of time. Everybody came; the giraffe high-stepping *tuku, tuku, tuku*, the elephant calumphing, the tortoise waddling, etc; this happened, and that happened, people took sides, fire and language appeared with the help of the Dog, human beings began to hunt the other animals, and permanent death displaced the older cycle of a return to life, made possible by the Moon Oil (James 1988a: 31-41). There had been plenty of dance forms in vogue during the 1960s, but while they told these stories people said that the *barangu* dance itself was forgotten, except by one very remote group, from Pan Gayo to the north-west of Bellilla.

Those who resurrected the *barangu* in Bonga did indeed come from 'faraway' Pan Gayo, but here were huddled up in the settlement with everyone else and there was general satisfaction at the chance to join in. The musicians got out the new gourd flutes they were fashioning, shaping the mouths with sharp knives and tuning them by soaking and partially filling them with water. When the band got going, a crowd spontaneously started the hopping, skipping pattern of steps, whirling around the musicians and singing snatches of song. Young and old were also reminded, through song, of the ancient stories of fighting and death that went with the dance music. While death had become a more manageable matter since the settlement in Bonga, it had been a raw and appalling reality over the previous few years and on a scale, and in a number of manners, never before known, or even conceivable. There is a striking resonance between current experience and these old stories of the beginnings of death, and the lost hope of re-appearance afterwards. But to *play such music*, and to *dance along* with others in its rhythms, is even more a evocation, a re-creation of a sensed link with a particular, and shared, past. This was scarcely appreciated by the few international personnel who noticed the amount of dancing in Bonga. One comment I heard from a UN protection officer who used to visit Bonga was 'Dancing? *Dancing?* But they are refugees; they should be working, or doing something useful for themselves.'

Besides the *barangu*, I already knew of a considerable repertoire of anti-clockwise circling dances, frequently performed in the 1960s. These included the *athele* (with beaten logs and bamboo flutes), the *bolshok* (flutes only), and the great ceremonial dance of the diviners, around an ensemble of beaten antelope horns. There is plenty of evidence that choreography of the great moving circle was once widely established in the Blue Nile Borderlands generally, as it was remarked on by travellers and administrators (for Gumuz and Bertha, see Schuver, 1996: 194, 315; Cheeseman 1936: 336-7; 369-71). Various dances, including a 'Hill Burun band', were photographed in the Sudanese Kurmuk district by A.W.M. Disney in 1930. Lyre music also has a long history in the region; Salt noted, in the early 19th century, Gumuz memories of the beauty of this performance (Salt 1967 [1814]: 378-81]. The persistence of these forms today is, however, more than simply a left-over from the past. The circular form has a robust and lasting quality, which must be linked to the way in which it defines a special, inward space of its own, a centre to which participants orient themselves and through which they relate to each other. It is a self-referential pattern of movement, and those who take part turn their backs, literally and perhaps symbolically, on outsiders and mere spectators (James 2000).

A strong characteristic of the vernacular musical style of the region, on both sides of the international border, is the way that it makes use of percussive rhythm and wind

instruments. In the Uduk case at least, it is also very noticeable that the everyday working sounds of the village have a percussive quality. For example, a woman will prepare the surface of a (typically granitic) grinding stone slab by chipping at it repeatedly with a sharp stone, to produce a roughened, pocked surface, on which the grain can be effectively ground with the smooth oval hand grinder (typically basaltic). The sound carries far, a kind of resonant *tock, tock, tock.* Often two women will help at the task, chipping in a fast alternating rhythm on the same grinding slab, *tock-tick-tock-tick-tock-tick.* The alternative method of dealing with grain is to pound with a heavy pestle in a wooden mortar, a technique more easily adopted in the refugee camps where there may be no stone. This too produces a resonant beat, and the muscular effort is made much easier if two women are working side by side together, either pounding in turns in the same mortar, or in separate ones, when they always tend to calibrate their movements either in unison or alternation. Threshing the grain with a wooden paddle on a smoothed hard clay surface, and winnowing it by throwing it up from a wide basket, also have their distinctive rhythms. And grinding itself produces a satisfying 'washboard' effect, especially when a couple of women are working side by side. Young children learn to join in these working rhythms early, and to help make what in effect is a ensemble of sound. Across the village, especially at harvest time, there is a rich 'soundscape' of echo and counter-echo, as women within hearing distance of each other seem to contribute consciously to the overall 'musical' effect.

Young women, and quite small girls, also play with percussion for fun. In the early rainy season, it is possible to make a set of firm holes in the newly damp ground, and tune each one up by adjusting its depth and width, and pouring in a little water if required. The Uduk style is to make six such holes in a row, though I have seen and heard the same kind of music-making in a Gumuz village in Ethiopia where five holes are hollowed out, a square of four with one in the middle. Girls play this 'instrument' by slapping the holes with the palms of the hands, producing a light, bubbly music called *pumbulu*. Very often, other little girls will gather round and dance. After a few days, it rains again, the ground is turned to mud, and the instrument disappears. Another instrument played by women and girls consists of a bow, with a single string drawn across twice. It is played essentially for rhythm rather than melody, though pitch is altered by moving the thumb on the lower string and the chin on the upper. The sound of this *dumbale* music also draws a little group of dancers, as do some of the tunes and songs of the men's lyre instrument. Especially when the latter are playing fun songs from the dance ground, the gathering crowd can sometimes add to the percussive effect by slapping their feet or sandals on the ground.

The major dance forms of the Uduk village are on a larger scale but consonant with these informal kinds of percussion music. The players themselves are adult men but all join in the whirling, encircling dance. There were several genres current in the 1960s. Most conspicuous was the *athele,* an ensemble of eleven men, each playing a short bamboo flute in the left hand while beating a specially-curved log, held between the legs, with a stick held in the right. Each flute had one note; each log had one resonant, drum-like pitch when struck, and the musical effect depended upon the collaborative rhythm of the whole. The set of flutes formed two five-note octaves, thought of as a matriline, the deepest one being the grandmother of the rest. Villages would take it in turns to hold the dance, each tending to start after the beginning of a new moon, playing one night and resting the next for several days. The sound of the evening *athele* band

would spread several miles across the moonlit, evening air, and people old and young would flock to it.

Another variant on the theme was the *bolshok,* said to have been learned from the neighbouring Berta, whose homeland was largely incorporated into the modern boundaries of Ethiopia in 1902. The *bolshok* flutes were quite long, also made of bamboo, and the accompanying percussion consisted just of short sticks beaten by a leader of the group. The music was more delicate and variable than the *athele*, the musicians suddenly dashing around the village from place to place, seeming to escape the dancers who had to rush after them.

The dances above could be said to have been quite ‘secular’, though libations were usually made over the instruments before a dance series opened. However, in the past there were special ceremonial celebrations and dancing after the killing of large animals, such as the elephant or leopard (I only heard about this among the Uduk, but I have witnessed a two-week leopard celebration among the Gumuz in Ethiopia). But one of the most spectacular events I witnessed several times in the 1960s was a grand ceremonial dance that formed part of the initiation rituals of the diviners. The instruments were horns of the kudu antelope, of which any number could be brought in. They were not blown for the dance, although the diviners did blow them as signals on some occasions – they were beaten, with soft short sticks of light wood, again by an ensemble of diviner-players. There seemed to be two main ‘notes’ – some horns gave the lower, and others the higher, resonance. Special songs were sung, usually on the pattern of a lead singer and choral response. Some thousands might gather for the horn dance of the diviners, which could last up to three days. Unlike the regular dance events, the diviners’ dance went on in the daytime, in the full sun. This occasion seemed to have a well-ordered, even military air, by comparison with the regular dance. Instructions were given, special places assigned to categories of people. Groups of young men dressed in feathers and body-belts of leather would advance, feigning attack, and leap and jump together on the outskirts of the main circle, evoking parties of fighters. This whole style of ceremony and dancing was said to have been learned from the Jum Jum to the north, along with the rest of the diviners’ activities (James 1988: illustrations, frontispiece and 10 (b), after 188).

Within the range of percussion styles, there was flexibility for innovation and one instrument would sometimes ‘imitate’ another. I noticed a vivid example one day when girls who had tuned up a couple of sets of holes in the damp ground for the *pumbulu* asked me if I would like to hear them play ‘the horns of the diviners’. They played this time in unison, catching the effect of the massed beating of the horns in quite an eerie and evocative way. I have also heard people imitating this rather special sound with their voices.

Not only did the pervasive styles of percussion-based music play off each other, and I believe also in a distinctive way interact aesthetically with the daily soundscape and bodily working rhythms of the village, but the vocal forms of song and chanting sometimes evoked the sounds of the natural landscape too. The shrill cries and whoops of women at the dance were evocative of various birds. And very specifically, people used to say that they learned their funeral chanting, the wailing for death which was never very far from one’s hearing, either close by or even far away, from the frogs. In the early rainy season, the frogs appearing from the newly flowing streams produce a striking chorus of their own, high, middling, and low croaks joining and leaving the chorus, combining into a sustained overall effect which could almost have been planned

– to match the way that men and women, young and old, enter the funeral village with a wail and the funeral hut with a cry, starting high and falling in steps to join the collective rhythm of the chant. Movements of the animals, too, provide suggestive models for dance steps and styles. The 'frog-dance' and 'tortoise-dance' I noticed were very popular among small boys in Bonga. Some songs are light and playful, attracting a foot-tapping audience who can add impromptu percussion by slapping their sandals on the earth.

What happened to musical performance on the long and complicated trek from the Kurmuk district to Bonga?

It goes without saying that the 'traditional' musical arts depended also on the forest and cultivations as a source for all their instruments: wood, bamboo, calabash, antelope horns, twisted grass for the strings of the *dumbale*, animal sinews for the lyre strings, leather for the soundbox. The question arises on several levels: what has happened to their music-making as the people have endured the treks and deprivations of the long road? And closely linked with instrumental music too, the life of the dance-ground and the songs that it used to generate? Even the solo songs of the lyre-player, are they still sung, and if so, have their lyrics changed? And while church participation, or at least lip-service to Christianity, has spread to become almost general in the refugee population, is there any sign of the old aesthetic creativity livening up the standard mission hymns and forms of worship?

A number of important points can be made in considering what happened to the musical traditions of this particular, but representative, group of formerly 'indigenous' people of the Blue Nile Borderlands over the last generation, which has seen so much displacement (see for example James 2002). In the Uduk case, to simplify a complex story, they had to leave their homeland in the Kurmuk district of the Sudan in 1987; they spent nearly three years in a camp near Assosa in Ethiopia; then had to leave for the Sudan again, but much further south than their homeland. By mid-1991 they joined the large refugee camp at Itang in Gambela region, back in Ethiopia; they had to leave this a year later with the fall of the Derg regime and move downstream to Nasir in Upper Nile, southern Sudan, being settled across the river at Nor Deng. But in mid-1992 the SPLA split, and they made a dash back to the Gambela region, to Karmi where a transit camp was set up, until eventually in 1993 they were granted a safe haven by the Ethiopian government and UNHCR at Bonga, upstream of the town. Following the 2005 peace agreement in the Sudan, plans for repatriation were put in hand, from Bonga and from the later camp set up in 1997 at Sherkole near Assosa. The move back 'home' began in 2006 and is now well under way (James 2007). With respect to music, song, and dance, the first point to emphasize is that there has been an extraordinary creative response, especially in the long years spent in the relative safety of Bonga. The second point which runs through my material is that contact between groups in the course of the displacement has really stimulated this creativity. I have mentioned above the fresh contact between 'core' and 'remote' village groups of the Uduk themselves as in the re-emergence of the *barangu* dance, and in several other ways intensified contact with speakers of neighbouring languages on both sides of the border, as well as Arabic, has fed through into musical performance. The verbal content of songs in the 'traditional' form has also been a rich source of reflection and shared experience in the course of the displacement.

With respect to the actual instruments, the heavier antique antelope horns had been abandoned when the refugees left home, and because of hunting bans in Ethiopia obviously could not be replaced. The heavy carved logs of the *athele* too had been left behind, and only after a few years, first in the refugee camp at Sherkole and then much later in Bonga, were beginnng to be made again. Many other instruments could be improvised more easily from calabash, bamboo and grass. But the musicians soon gathered up some of the bric-a-brac of international aid supplies, and made quite spectacular use of old plastic jerry-cans. In various of the camps for refugees and displaced through which they passed, many new songs were emerging with the jerry-can music at the dance-ground.

The lowest point for civilians on the long trek from home was in 1991-92 at the muddy, flooded camp of Nor Deng on the south bank of the Sobat river, and the severe hunger which followed even when the people were permitted to cross back to the Nasir side. There was no dancing at this time, and very little music making. Materials for the instruments were simply not available, quite apart from the fact that people were weak and many were dying. The one example of group music I heard was from a group of lads, led by Rima Puna Basha, who had brought small lyres with them, and were singing popular lyrics, mainly in Arabic though also in Uduk. The particular style in fact was well known in the Sudan as ‘Kaloshi’, popularized by a number of singers from the Blue Nile. They are often in Arabic, but also in local languages such as Bertha, and often include reference to places and events in the southern Blue Nile. I am indebted to Akira Okazaki for background on this style, played on the lyre, accompanied by drums and sometimes women’s voices, which he has heard recently in Damazin and among the Ingessana (Gamk) people. It was circulating in early 2006 in the form of cassettes, both ‘home-made’ copies and more professional formats, in markets in the region. Okazaki mentioned that he was ‘very impressed by Kaloshi; danceable for anyone, sounding familiar to the people of southern Blue Nile, a mixture of ‘Arabic’ and ‘African’ elements, and, above all, powerful rhythmic drive and something of a very local and confident way of vocalization’ (personal communication). A typical lyric I recorded in Nor Deng, sung in Arabic (and with no particular message from exile) went as follows:

Amuna, don’t cry
Amuna, we could be happy living on our own
My true love
You are the most beautiful
Before all others
Alone in heaven
You are like a lovely bird
You and I could survive in the world
You are so hard to win

Another was an Arabic-language lament for the home country (*al watan*), originally composed by a singer from Roseires:

Here we are in Ethiopia,
While Roseires is our homeland.
We must return one day to the Sudan,
Let’s return to the eastern Sudan!

Roseires is our homeland,
We must move back to the Sudan
Oh when shall we return to the homeland?
We must go back to the Sudan,
Oh let's return to the eastern villages[3]

The group in Nor Deng were using plastic jerry-cans as percussion, lacking the small hand-drums which would otherwise have been the right instrument. They sang in Bertha, as well as Arabic and Uduk.

Inventive ways of incorporating sounds, and moving between languages, is also found in the numerous lively children's songs which can be heard in even the most depressing of camps for the displaced. Little kids can be heard imitating the drone of Antonov bombers (*diling diling*), mocking military terms in Jum Jum, or echoing the flirtatious greetings of Nuer guerrilla soldiers in Uduk pronunciation (*Nyama, Male!* And the response, *Mal Magwar!*)

Typical dance songs are teasing and flirtatious (though some stronger variants I heard in the later years in Bonga would be more accurately described as being about sex and drink – the Ethiopian 'honey-wine' being by this time available in the market which had grown up nearby the Bonga refuge scheme, along with disco tapes and karate videos). A very popular example moves between two voices. The suitor tried to approach a woman separated for at least a year from her husband, but was scared off by the family dog; he teases her on her preference for fashionable white socks just like the Majangir people of the nearby forests, and she counters by asking why he looks at her so; he asks what her real feelings are (in English idiom, 'heart', but in the Uduk, 'Liver'), and in an aside to others, wonders why she is still waiting for her long-gone husband.

I was told that *athele* music and dancing proper had resumed soon after the people first settled in the first Assosa camp. Wood for the logs, and bamboo for the flutes of both *athele* and *bolshok*, were available there, though not in Itang or Nor Deng. By the time the people reached the transit camp of Karmi, variations of the old circular dancing re-appeared. The spatial and musical *form* of the *athele* resumed, without the forest-made instruments. Old plastic jerry-cans and other debris of the international aid scene were appropriated on a large scale, and those few men who still had or had recently made lyres were roped in to help out with the songs and music. This 'baga' (jerry-can) dance continued on an enlarged and enthusiastic scale in Bonga, but the *bolshok* soon appeared there too, with the proper flutes (from nearby bamboo in the hills). Sukke Dhirmath also played her *dumbale* instrument for me, something she took up in Bonga after many years without playing. Later on, however, the old musical tradition was being revived in a very substantial way. In Bonga itself, by the year 2000 the 'real' *athele* logs were being prepared for use at an early date, and I was told that in the new refugee camp at Sherkole there was already real *athele* dancing. Beyond that, and even more surprising, a recent visitor to Sherkole had seen the diviners' horn dance.

[3] Both sung by Rima Puna Basha, Nor Deng, 7 October 1991.

Dance, 'modernity', and church practice: changing relations

Many years ago I wrote of the strange gulf that seemed deliberately maintained on both sides between the practitioners of 'village' musical styles – rhythmically complex, polyphonic, shifting and innovative – and the strait-laced formality of the hymns taught by the missionaries at Chali (James 1988a: ch. 4; 1988b). Most vernacular music and song had been banned by the SIM, it is true, as being part of the world of dancing and drinking, and moreover associated with the rituals of village life they dismissed as evil. In the course of the flight from home and years of exile, and their evident embrace of Christian practices, the people have embraced ever more firmly the stately rhythm of the mission hymns in their various temporary camps, chanting them in strict unison under the trees. Perhaps they were afraid of straying too far from the discipline of the church, as did in fact happen at least once in Itang.

For some of the church people I talked to in Bonga, however, the *barangu* was no longer banished as immoral and devilish, but had now become reframed as 'Uduk custom and tradition'. The idea that such a thing as 'Uduk heritage' existed had recently been stimulated by a trip up to Addis Ababa for refugee musicians and dancers, organized by the UNHCR. The occasion was World Refugee Day, 1994, and performances (mainly by Somali, Nuer and other well-known groups) were staged not only for a distinguished audience in the capital city but also broadcast on Ethiopian Television. Uduk lyre players were present, and performed. The circular dance was thus re-created in exile in a way that allowed it to be classed even by Christians as 'heritage and custom'. At the same time it still represented – to all and sundry, and not only the Christians, who today tended to join in -- the pole of immorality and the slippery slope to Satan. The formalities of style had softened up; the crowd was much bigger and louder than it had even been in the old village days (you could scarcely hear the instruments); dancing started in the daytime and beer was often available, sometimes actually for sale, and I think it fair to say that women were more exposed and vulnerable to unwanted advances than before. The old polarity between church and dance ground was marked again, but not as a matter of total separation – it had become an internal moral polarity. The community were by now as good as a hundred per cent acknowledged Christians, but nearly everyone seemed to cross the line without qualms. This was one theme running through the documentary film I helped to make in Karmi (MacDonald 1993). The dance ground was marked by a sort of flag pole, with fragments of cloth and paper attached; this appeared to mark, as it were, the 'place of evil', and we learned from Christians in the film how fragile relations between men and women had become, how tempers could flare, and how it had been agreed that the dance should stop at sunset. When I was in Bonga in late 1994, one or two quite serious fights blew up at the dance, and eventually the Committee (I think in conjunction with the representatives of the Gambela police) tried to set rules and regulations.

Some puzzles have arisen in respect of the church's attitude to music and song. As against the free flow of new songs and music from the dance-ground, and also as I shall show below from the flourishing men's tradition of muscular topical and political songs for the lyre, Christian songs and music have been carried forward in a static, almost fossilized or encapsulated form. The first edition of the Hymn Book in Uduk, published in 1963, included 92 hymns, and a second edition of 1982 added a further sixteen (James 1988b). This corpus has remained the almost exclusive mainstay of Christian worship ever since the heyday of the Chali mission in the 1950s. The actual tunes have been sung regularly by all the small church groups right through the succession of

refugee camps that has marked the history of the last generation, and indeed sung at resting points by the wayside as they trekked back and forth on the long road. My tape recordings of these hymns as sung over the decades suggest a hardening of the style, and an almost uncomfortable uniformity of voice. There are some 'new' Christian songs, but these are extracts from the scriptures, and from my own brief recordings they were sung to a simple tune in unison rather like the existing hymns, quite unlike the polyphonic, multivocal, and catchy lyrics of the 'traditional' genres.

Lyre songs: politics and memory

The five-stringed lyre is played solo by a quite a number of men. There is both a well-known corpus of 'old' historical songs and a burgeoning repertoire of 'new' and topical songs growing from the older forms, even in Arabic. A song I recorded in the 1960s looked back to the late nineteenth-century raiding from the Ethiopian border hills, naming and blaming the 'Bunyans' there, and appealing to 'Mis Mis' (Kaimakam Smyth Bey, a British officer; see the historical introduction in James, 2007) to redeem the country. Today's equivalent songs, in the same musical style, name and blame Sudanese leaders and soldiers, appealing to John Garang to give them freedom and redeem the country. Song cassettes from the refugee communities in Africa now circulate in the global diaspora, their sad words but catchy tunes enlivening the routine drive to work in American cities.

The Uduk language songs are usually a little indirect in their targets. But some of the plainest and most direct cries for a lost homeland, and the need for continuing struggle, are expressed in colloquial Arabic. These 'political' songs for the lyre are sung in strong repeated pleading phrases, quite different from the subtle allusions and lilting phrases of the Arabic love-song *(daluka* or *kaloshi)* style already quoted. Several by Buha Dharas, for example, are in circulation in the United States, where I heard them recently. This example presents no difficulty in translation.

The Upper Nile is soaked in blood
The land of Kurmuk's soaked in blood
Kurmuk mountain's soaked in blood
We need a new beginning
The land of Ulu is all blood
Where shall we go?
Where is our land?
The land is soaked in blood

The songs in Uduk tend to be more local, more personal, referring to immediate incidents and personalities rather than national ones. Although always, to my knowledge, put to the lyre by men, the words can also originate from women. Many tell of the sufferings of the long road, and appeal for salvation, or even calls for a return home, such as the following example appealing to the then Chairman of the Bonga Refugee Committee (Emmanuel Mola Jajal). The alternate voice is his, suggesting people stay calm.

Omer, why do you deny us our homeland?
Oh my, oh me, oh my
We are refugees in Ethiopia, but let us look back to our country

You are the one at fault
The world's powers should find a way for us
Our homeland was destroyed by Omer, it's our home no longer
The grandmothers and the children are crying to each other
Oh, my people

Let us just eat the free food, but stay quiet, don't complain
Just take your mouthfuls

Omer, why do you prevent our return?
Ask our leader, ask him carefully
We've had enough of travelling, as if to the end of the world
Flocking to and fro like this, all together
As refugees in Ethiopia
Ask the leader, ask Mola, ask him carefully
Would he agree that we should go back home
We are weary of the long road, with the children too
Ask our leader Mola
The country is destroyed by Omer, but he says it is our home[4]

Some songs are explicitly those of the battle scene, in the voices of men. A recent example is one which relates to the 1999 struggle for the hill of Ulu, in the north-west of the Kurmuk district, just beyond the Khor Sama'a. The SPLA here managed to take Ulu from the Sudanese forces, partly through their deployment of anti-aircraft guns. Note the way that the two armies speak to each other in the song (the commander Tayeb here had previously been in charge of the main garrison in the homeland and was blamed for much that had happened there in 1986-87).

Where are those guns sounding?
My brothers, look, the fighting has arrived
Wayyi! Oh, my mother!
Oh 'Uduk', why are the guns sounding?
My brothers are dying in the grass like dogs
Wayyi, wayyi, wayyi
That name of Tayeb is heard all over
That name of Tayeb is now famous
....
SPLA put up the flag!
Oh Ulu, Oh! I swear by my mother!
The whistle's blowing, blowing, why's the whistle blowing?
Something's calling in Ulu
Why are the big birds calling like that?
In the name of my mother!
The rats are scrambling into their ground-holes[5]

[4] Composed by Timothy Kola Rehan, here sung by Hosiah Dangaye Chalma, Bonga, 18 August 2000.
[5] Composed and sung by Hosiah Dagaye Chalma, 29 August 2000.

Many of the songs have a 'conversational' structure, one person's words answered or echoed in the next line by another's. This is clear in the following song where a woman, Ala, mother's sister to the singer Dangaye, is mourning her brother, who was one of the SPLA soldiers transferred to assist the Mengistu troops as they evacuated Gambela in 1991 following the fall of the government. He was one of those who died far inside Ethiopia. In death, he asks after his sister, Ala, who escaped with the majority of Uduk SPLA fighters and civilians downstream towards Nasir.

The vultures are spreading their talons over the slopes of Dembi Dollo!

They sold my brother to the war,
But there's only the wind blowing in my eyes as I look back.
The Red Cross found the boys,
Found them on the Dembi Dollo mountain.

'Who will tell Ala where I've gone?'

John, come and tell me where to go!
'Look down, forget your hope of his coming'[6]

I asked Dangaye, widely regarded as a first-rate young singer, but one who had been blind from birth, when he learned to play the lyre. He told me that as a child he used to play with his father's lyre, but had not played in the first Assosa camp, or Itang, or Nor Deng, or Karmi. It was only here, in Bonga in 1994, that he started to play. He did not play his father's songs, only those of Wel Ragab, and his own compositions, often putting phrases suggested by women to music. He certainly had an acute ear for goings on; here is a satirical song from 1994 which pokes fun at how the chiefs (leaders of the Blocks) were too scared to stand up to the Chair and members of the Bonga Refugee Committee, positioned as they were between the Block chiefs and the national and international agencies. The people felt the Committee was beginning to behave too much like a mini-government, imposing fines and punishments, and exacting a share of the proceeds that could be made from the sale of empty UN sacks. The term *kayid* – a teasing use I translate 'Boss' – properly means *Qa'id al-'Amm*, 'Supreme Commander'.

Look out, you chiefs!
The Boss is making a mess of things
And you chiefs behave like new-wed brides!
You tremble with nerves in front of the Committee
You daren't even blow your noses
You shyly hang your heads.
But the Boss is making great mistakes!
While your mouths tremble, mutter mutter
And you don't know how to speak.
The Boss has got it wrong but he can be replaced

'You gather people up but can only speak of prison!

[6] Hosiah Dangaye Chalma, using words originally composed by Ala, Bonga, 18 August 2000.

You don't know how to handle the chiefs!'

The chiefs are afraid of the Committee

'Why can you only threaten people with the prison?'

The chiefs are stuttering in their words
But why must the Boss make these mistakes?
Look out, you chiefs!
You daren't clear your noses
You don't know how to speak
Don't you know what a meeting is?
Ay! Have a proper meeting!
Ay! You, Mola, you have these meetings but you don't know
what to say
You don't know what a meeting is![7]

It was David Musa who also composed a very confident and seemingly carefree song about the original arrival in Bonga, the promised 'safe haven', after some six years of suffering on the multiple treks between north and south Sudan, and between that country and Ethiopia. He compared the people to a flock of hungry birds at last coming upon a scene of fruiting trees. With this song, which I also recorded from Dangaye, I can conclude this essay on an upbeat note:

The harvest birds are flocking to the red-barked trees
which fruit in Bonga
They're looking for the red-barked trees
You birds are flocking!
Aren't you like the 'Uduk'? Oh!

Yes, they say the birds are searching out the trees in Bonga
So why should I trek back to Itang for my food?
Should I go and peck around for beans in Itang?
Are you going back to look for food in Itang?

The children too are coming, to find the red-barked trees
which fruit in Bonga
Oh yes, I had to take the Itang road,
To find some food! For I come from far away.
The birds are twittering jege jege*,*
Looking for food.

You're just like the 'Uduk', flying to the trees
Flocking all the way from Nasir
Chattering in a hungry chorus jege jege![8]

[7] Composed by David Musa; here sung by Hosiah Dangaye Chalma, Bonga, 20 November 1994.
[8] Composed by David Musa, sung by Hosiah Dangaye Chalma, Bonga, 20 November 1994.

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