SUDAN

Interviews in Sudan were carried out within three distinctly different communities. The first interviews were conducted in villages around Shendi, to the north of Khartoum, on the site of SOS Sahel’s Village Extension Scheme. These were carried out in Arabic, among irrigation farmers, by Abdel Salaam M. Sidahmed and Awatif Sidahmed, both journalists. The second site was Wad el Hileau, a refugee camp in the east of Sudan administered by UNHCR. Rukia Abdullahi, a nutritionist, and Habte Abraha, himself a refugee, conducted interviews in Tigrigna, Tigre and Amharic with Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees of the Ethiopian civil war. Interviews at both these sites were coordinated by Rhiannon Barker. The third interview site was centred around SOS Sahel’s Natural Forest Management Project at El Ain, near El Obeid, Kordofan. Suleiman Haroun and Kaltoum Ahmed, extension workers from the project, interviewed pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and settled farmers in Arabic. Their work was coordinated by Gill Vogt, extension coordinator for the El Ain project.

Sayda Hussein Agag (F, 56 years), El Shagalwa, Shendi

I am the daughter of a boatman, who used to sail between Wadi Halfa and Aswan in Egypt. Later, he took up farming and moved to Shendi, where he was elected village sheikh. My family are members of the Konoz tribe, who came here with the Egyptian army during the war and settled.

My father had many cows, sheep and goats; he even had a horse-driven hantour. We hired a shepherd to take the animals for grazing. Today, our family has only one sheep and two goats for our daily milk supply. Animals have become very expensive. Twenty years ago, a sheep cost SI3; today one costs SI1,000.

My husband used to be a railway mechanic but he also took up farming later in life. People once grew a great variety of crops, including wheat, corn, sorghum, soya beans and oats. Today, fields are only full of onions and barsim. I don’t know why this change has occurred. Tormos, once a popular bean, is no longer grown because higher temperatures have
reduced yields. Traditional terracing systems were once used and sacks were filled with soil and put in lines to prevent soil erosion by the river.

Land shortages encourage crop rotation, but fertile land is being badly affected by shifting sand, by a creeping worm, and by the dramatic fall in rainfall levels over the past three or four years. Trees are drying up; date palms planted years ago have fallen down and not been replanted because so many young people have left. Up to one-third of the local population have migrated, though some do return to reclalm ancestral land. This was how my husband and my 50-year-old brother (recently returned from 15 years in Libya) got their land. In my tribe, land is passed from father to son, but never sold. Those not entitled to much land may have to rent from private landlords, often far afield, moving out of the village to plough and sow and returning home after harvest. Families finding it hard to eke out an existence from the soil may let their women work as cleaners and nurses in the village, but this is very much a last resort, as the Konoz disapprove of women working.

The SOS Sahel project arrived here a year ago to start a green belt. I know little about their aims and objectives, but I am suspicious of their activities. They will probably take our land and we may never see it again.

I have five sons and three daughters; four of them are working abroad. Looking back, I am fully satisfied. I have fulfilled my life’s goal to see most of my children with a university education and good positions at work. The success and stability of my children are the first and final priorities of my life.

Hajeya Jumà Ahmed (F, 80 years), Shendi

I was born in Khor Rahama, near the Sudan/Egyptian border. My father—a member of the Egyptian army—brought me to El Shagalwa when I was a few months old. I am illiterate, having had no access to any formal education. I had no children but if I had, I would have had a big family. Big families are better, because Allah may take some of them away.

When I was young, the grass was 3 foot high and included *siada, halfa, camal gesh* and *tabr*. There was no need to employ a shepherd to look after livestock. Rain doesn’t come now as before, and when it does, it just devastates our homes and farms. This is God’s will. What can we do?

There have been two bad floods in my lifetime: one 40 years ago, the other 10 years ago. I laid sacks filled with soil along the river banks to try to hold back the water.
I don’t support the recent adoption of cash crops: it is the decision of young people. They wear us out and don’t listen to any of our advice. When I was young, I used to work on my husband’s farm but now women are just sitting at home waiting for their husbands and sons to bring them money. Yet young people have more hope and opportunity than before. With new technology, their chances are better. Babor pumps can irrigate vast areas, whereas we used a cow to draw water and could only irrigate very small plots. Men stuck to their land and farmed it; now they migrate or are interested only in getting quick money from selling onions.

Nutritional needs are harder to meet now because fewer crop varieties are grown. Also, with fewer animals, the supply of milk, butter and meat no longer meets demand. Much of the family income is spent on buying gasoline for the water pump. I preferred the old sagia: it was made locally, could be hand-operated, and lasted for ever.

Firewood used to be easily collected from the wide variety of local trees nearby. But it is all gone now—cut by the nomads and sold to the kama’in. I have three trees in my yard, which I have often refused to sell to nomads pestering me with requests to buy them. I want to leave them as shade for everyone who needs them: the reward from doing this is bigger than money, because money doesn’t last.

_Taha Hussein el Kashif (M, 83 years), Shendi_

I am an agro-pastoralist with a family of eight and innumerable grandchildren. My father was a soldier in the Egyptian army. I cannot read and never had any formal education. The most significant events in my life were the 1946 floods—when the banks of the Nile broke and crops were swept away—and the 1950 drought, when grain was brought from India to supplement the scarce supplies. I am despondent about the changes in our quality of life over the years. Although pump irrigation has improved agriculture, material costs and foreign imports have caused inflation to soar. Education is the priority that people should struggle for.

In the past, the rains were better. With decreasing rainfall came the disappearance of trees in the area around my village, which was once thick with sellam, sidr, serreh, seyal, heglig and samreh. Now, almost no trees or wildlife are left. Recently, I was travelling to a distant place and, believe me, I couldn’t find a single tree under which to rest or from which to hang my sheepskin water container.

Today, orange, grapefruit, lime and mango trees are planted on
Foreign imports have caused inflation to soar
irrigated land close to the Nile. Date palms, common in the past, are now scarce. The emphasis is also shifting away from grains towards vegetables such as onions, and corn and barsim for fodder.

I am concerned about pressures on the land caused by rising population. Now we can’t leave any land fallow. Constant fragmentation by inheritance has resulted in over-intensive cultivation. This is why productivity has fallen. When I was young, 1 feddan yielded up to 5 tonnes of grain per year, compared to today’s yields of 3 to 4 tonnes in similar climatic conditions. Our only benefit today is from cash crops, such as beans. Although soil fertility has clearly deteriorated, I don’t blame wind or water erosion. Chemical fertilisers have been used to boost production and can be bought from the Agricultural Bank or the government for about $£85 a sack or $£120 on the black market. People prefer chemical fertilisers: they require less labour and are more effective in the short term. Manure makes vegetables tastier but is hard to find as there are fewer animals. My family only keep a few. Sheep and goats provide milk, meat and other products. Cows are used as draught animals; donkeys are ridden to and from the fields. Generally, animals are less important now than in the past.

I am resigned to the exodus of village youths to larger towns and cities. Although they then can no longer assist with agriculture, they can help by sending money. I have two sons: both have gone to work elsewhere.

S17  Adam el Iman (M, 98 years), El Ushara, Shendi

Like my father, I have farmed all my life. Today, I feel that the country is in better shape and life is easier. In the old days we lived a simple life, but food supplies were a problem in some seasons. We had to store millet throughout the year: now, we just buy enough grain for a few days.

Farming is the men’s work here. Women never work in the fields. Intensive cash cropping employs some seasonal labour. This was not needed in the past, as farming always provided enough to satisfy family needs. We didn’t have to supplement our income, though some people grew a little cotton, which women spun and men wove on looms made locally from sunut wood.

I used to cultivate about 10 uds of land—quite enough then, because our family was smaller. We grew grain in the summer, harvested it, then took care of our animals. We prepared for the winter season as soon as the river water changed colour and started to rise, flooding the land. That
was about 40-45 years ago. We cultivated land once or twice a year, depending on the river, land and sagia capacity. The new pump irrigation was too expensive for me; the sagia was much better.

Today, cash crop incomes have raised us out of poverty. In the past, after paying taxes and the share of crops due to blacksmiths and sagia carpenters, we were left with just enough to survive. I did not replace my animals after they died in the drought. They had been a valuable supplement to our food supply, but now we have to manage without. A few villagers keep camels for herding cattle in distant pastures, but this is not as common as it used to be.

**The disappearing forest**

There used to be many trees: taleh, samreh, sellam, sunut, heglig, tundub and further away kitr and laut. Thick forest surrounded the village. Stronger woods were used for making water wheels and roofs. Women used acacia wood for the “smoke bath”. Married women make a hole in the ground, in which they put a small pot containing smoking wood and coal. They then sit over the hole, covered only in a heavy blanket, until their body has soaked up enough lingering scent from the wood smoke to treat their rheumatism. Other local remedies include garad from sunut to treat colds and fevers, and lalob from heglig for stomach pains.

When I was young, we planted date palms, but we do so no longer as their shade would inhibit our crops. Trees disappeared because the pump scheme encouraged people to clear land for agriculture. Also, nomads—eager for extra income—supplied brick manufacturers with many sunut trees. Now, only a few sunut and taleh trees are still standing, near the river. Since independence, people have planted fruit trees and a few date palms. Trees prevented soil erosion, sand movement and acted as a wind barrier. Due to lack of water, we cannot plant more trees. Rainfall has declined because of the loss of tree cover: in turn this affects the wind, causing clouds to move away and reduce rainfall.

In my lifetime, I estimate that the population here has increased tenfold. Many migrate seasonally for work in the fertile areas around Kassala, eastern Sudan. Others work on the railways in Atbara and Khartoum. Three of my sons have moved away; one is in the army, another is a merchant in western Sudan and the third is a merchant in Shendi. Relatives who migrate for seasonal or permanent work remit a lot of money back here.

The change which has had the greatest impact has been the widespread introduction of improved education—though I am not satisfied with what the government has provided for us in this area. This village has no
government-sponsored development schemes; sometimes survey officers come and go, without us knowing anything about their work and its purpose.

Mohamed el Awad Ali (M, 70 years), El Ushara, Shendi

I was born here and have been a farmer most of my life, except for a short time as a soldier with the Middle East forces during the Second World War. I married in 1942. I can clearly remember the floods of 1946 and the drought in 1960. I have four sons, one working in Saudi Arabia, one in the UAE and two others are traders in southern Sudan.

Since the Second World War, I have concentrated on agriculture, which is better now than in the past, because it yields money. My main crops are onions, okra, courgettes, tomatoes, grain for animal feed, and beans, which are grown on the cooperative agricultural scheme. Weeds sometimes pose a problem in vegetable plots irrigated by private pumps. I feel I have gained little from new agricultural and technical innovations: no tractors or other mechanical facilities are provided by the Agricultural Bank, as we have only a small landholding and it is too expensive. During the harvest, I employ people and that is also expensive. Labour was not needed in the past because people worked together, which benefited those without grown-up sons. The introduction of cash crops has changed things. The region is the biggest producer of onions and beans in the country. I used to grow cotton but found it no longer profitable.

Desertification and wind erosion are two major problems here. Wells around the village successfully irrigate new mesquite trees as they need little water, and these protect the soil from desertification and wind erosion. We didn’t know of the advantages of mesquite before its introduction by the development project.

Knowledge of the stars
The stars play an important role in our agricultural calendar; certain stars help identify the seasons, which have their individual cropping patterns. El Dhura is the name given to the constellation indicating the coming of summer. The other seasons recognised by the stars are known as El Tarfa, El Natra and El Habha. Forecasting winds and rains is also done by the stars, but this is specialised knowledge, practised only by a few. The stars may even provide information about dates for important events, such as marriages and circumcisions. The accuracy of such knowledge is shown by a local old wise man, who was troubled by omens in the sky one night.
as he was going to sleep. Asking who would be married that night, he then prophesied that the marriage would produce no boys. Villagers show no surprise that, to this day, nine girls have been produced from the marriage.

Sheikh Ahmed el Sigaydi (M, 70 years), El Meseiktab, Shendi

I was a nomad, displaced by the 1983-85 drought—the final blow to our already depleted herds of cattle, camels and sheep. Nearly all have perished now. I was born in a neighbouring region, Bir el Sigaydi, and spent most of my life moving around desert regions with cattle herds. I support a big family: two wives and many sons. I am chief of my tribe, a branch of the Hasaniya Arabs. I am well respected and settle disputes among my people. All my settlement’s 57 households (each averaging eight people) moved here after 1984.

I long to return to life as a desert nomad but, in order to pay taxes and obtain basic necessities, we have had to sell some old livestock, while trying to keep a high ratio of females in the herd for breeding. As soon as I have built up my herds, I will return to my nomadic life. My son
expresses grave doubts that this will ever be possible. At present, we have no real means of saving. We survive by doing small unskilled jobs for the villagers.

Wells fall into disrepair
We are nomads, and I fear we do not know enough to start up settled farms. We used to practise rainfed farming in such valleys as Hawada in the Butana plains, and those with pack animals still go there in the rainy season. Last year, my sons and I couldn’t go, because we no longer had such animals. We have problems with our valley wells becoming covered with sand and earth and we have no animals to help dig new ones. The last drought affected the water table, so that wells are now too deep to dig. We asked the government for help but have received nothing yet. Wells once lasted for many years but today, falling ground-water levels and relentless sand movements mean they are harder to maintain. Desert wells used by the whole community have to be dug to a depth of 15 men; each settlement has its own and does not share it with other tribes. Water is drawn up in a bucket with a long rope attached to a donkey, led by a child. I want the government to help me build a diesel-powered artesian well, like those in western Sudan, which use long tubes and diesel pumps to tap artesian water into ponds from which livestock can drink.

In my first settlement, there were samreh, sellam, heglig, sidr, seyal and arak trees and the vegetation was very thick. We still have a few trees, mainly used for sheep, goats and camels to browse, as well as for firewood and tent construction. We nomads are not used to planting trees. The deforestation problem arose because the drought seriously depleted our

S22 Muzamil Abdalla (M, 96 years), Shendi
I spent my early working life as a merchant, trading goods all over Sudan, travelling long distances in camel caravans. I bought beans and other products from western Sudan and transported them to Port Sudan, from where they were shipped to Saudi Arabia. Twenty-five years ago we decided to give up these adventures and to settle into agriculture. In my lifetime, the quality of life has changed enormously. In the past, our life was simple in every respect. Today, by comparison, people are living in paradise.
animal wealth, so we sold wood to villages and towns. One impact of reduced tree cover is the windier weather—which causes much more soil erosion than in the past.

Education is the major advantage of settling in one place. The younger generation sees a future in the new settlement, with chances for education and a better life. Yet children are not so healthy as before. Perhaps this is because they no longer tend animals, which gave them fresh air and plenty of milk. Livestock also suffer from a poor diet: unable to graze freely, they have to live on gathered grass.

**Awad el Karim Ahmed Masa’d (M, 91 years), El Sayal, Shendi**

I started life as a farmer, turning to commercial activity when I was 27. I employed labourers to work on my land, while I concentrated on buying and selling goods in Khartoum. Now my sons work my land, though one left to find employment in Yemen. They are quite unusual in that respect, as most of the young generation is educated but not useful.

My family and descendants alone amount to 50 people. The pressure on the land, however, is not as great as might be expected, since many migrate for work or education. The lucky ones are those with sons or close relatives working abroad.

I have vivid memories of the 1946 flood, when many of my crops were swept away. Also the bad drought years of 1930-31 and 1960 meant I was unable to feed from my land the 10 to 12 members of my family whom I support, and I was forced to buy grain from Abu Dilayq and Shendi markets.

**Irrigation**

Until 1977, I irrigated 2 feddans of land using both a water wheel and Nile flood water. I grew beans, soya, onions, millet and wheat. In 1977, the new government El Sayal Irrigation Scheme increased potential farming capacity: my sons extended our farmland tenfold. We all agree that new methods of mechanised farming are beneficial. The government scheme has been a great help to us. Taxes and water dues are moderate. I must also praise extension workers, who have taught us about the value of trees. My family also practises some rainfed cultivation of millet in the valleys. We do not leave land fallow unless rainfall is low, in which case we limit the area planted. We use manure and chemical fertilisers wherever possible.
I once had four or five camels and some donkeys to carry food and other goods, but most died in the drought, as did my neighbours’ animals.

Reduced tree cover has not only caused firewood shortages but also reduced grazing. Natural vegetation used to be thick, the mixed forest trees included seyal, sellam, taleh, sidr, haraz, sunut and samreh. Most of these have now disappeared. Nomads cleared pastures and, as they desperately needed other income, sold wood to villagers, who used it in house building and as fuel. I fear the reduced tree cover will affect the environment. The drastic reduction in vegetation has resulted in soil erosion and accelerated desertification. Now 2 metres of sand cover some of the houses and the level is still rising. Although rainfall seems to have decreased in recent years, it still falls heavily sometimes and forms gullies in the soil. Usually water stays in well-worn channels but new gullies formed in last year’s floods and damaged houses.

I do not regret the 1969 abolition of the traditional administration system—Idara Ahliya—whereby hereditary sheikhs were appointed and given administrative and judicial power to collect taxes and maintain law and order. Throughout the colonial period, “mayors” were appointed to local courts to preside over trials and law suits.

Nebiat (F, 50 years), Wad el Hileau

Nebiat is a refugee from Eritrea. The walls of her home are lined with photos of her dispersed offspring and motifs declaring solidarity with the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF)—a testimony, perhaps, to her two children killed at the front.

I am one of the traditional birth attendants in this settlement. During my life I have gained much fascinating knowledge. I have just returned from visiting my home at Deki Shehai in Hamasen, Eritrea. The journey, partly by armed convoy and partly on foot, has been arduous. I need to rest. I made this difficult journey to pay my condolences to 38 relatives, who had been burnt in one house by an enemy bomb. Their bodies were found one month after the tragedy; some of the dead women still wore their gold jewellery. I was devastated by the sad scenes that confronted me in my home country. War has destroyed everything. There are mines everywhere and people are scared to farm their land.

I am employed by LALMBA, the American agency, who run the only clinic on the camp. Midwives at home have different practices to those I have learnt here. I used to watch them during delivery. When the baby’s
head started to appear, they began to pray and continued until the baby had completely emerged. I believed that this was the correct way, until I was trained to be a midwife by LALMBA and realised that there is more to it than praying.

Women used to be happier to have boys than girls. These days it matters less, though some still prefer boys. With 14 children of my own, I am not exactly short of personal experience in giving birth! Six of my children are fighting with the EPLF; two died while fighting; others are married and living in Eritrea. Only two remain with me: a girl of 16 and a young boy. The war, not the drought, forced me to move to Wad el Hileau. You can’t leave your area just because of one or two years’ drought.

In Eritrea, we grew dagusha, ifun, barley, t’ef, intatie, dura and beans. Vegetables included adri, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes and hot peppers. Trees with edible fruit included sagla, mileo, aaye, daero and chekomta. We even used to eat fruit between our main meals. There was also plenty of milk and meat from the animals we kept.

**A harsh environment**

I used to get up very early every day to prepare the morning and evening meal for my husband and children. After that, I went to the field, one child on my back and one on my stomach. I would clear the land, preparing it for ploughing. On my way back, I gathered wood for cooking. I was strong in Eritrea because of the balanced diet: if you eat good food, you are healthy and can work properly. Here, I find even my basic necessities harder and harder to meet. See how my eyes have become sunken in this place! In Eritrea, mountains and trees stopped dust moving about; here it affects us badly. It is hard to adapt to this hot and harsh environment.

In Eritrea, we never had to buy anything. The soil was good and the harvests plentiful. Even our plates and dishes were made from free wood. We made clay saucepans and storage pots for water and milk and as much as four to six sacks of grain could be stored after harvest in kofos and used during the rainy season. We never sold any, but if somebody was poor and needed grain, I gave it to them out of my store.

**Herbal remedies**

I believe in using plants for medicinal treatment: for example, leaw could be smoked, infused—though it tasted very bitter—or simply bathed in, as a cure for fever or stomach problems. Popular herbal remedies often included kihe and tambukh leaves. Cows with blood in their milk are treated with smoke from tambukh and shitora plants. Inchichi and shibti plants are dried, powdered and used as cleansing agents.
Halima Ahmed (F, 43 years), Wad el Hileau

I was born and raised in Eritrea. I was married at twelve years old. Nowadays, people marry at seventeen or eighteen. It is better to get married when you are mature. In 1979 the war forced me and my family to come to Sudan. I cannot compare my old life with the life I lead now. We were happy and simple then. Things that we used to get cheaply have now to be smuggled into the camp at a high price. Those who sell milk try to justify its price by saying it is expensive to get fodder for their animals.

The effects of war

Our self-sufficiency came to an abrupt end with the escalation of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Acroplanes began a bombing campaign in the area and we were forced to adopt a completely different life. We worked during the night and hid underground in daytime. After much bombing, the enemy started a new tactic: they came with tanks and buried mines, which killed both grazing animals and humans. It was because of these atrocities that I decided to seek refuge in neighbouring Sudan.

I disapprove of contraceptives. Our youngsters are away fighting, so are not able to have a family: it is therefore up to us to continue to have
children. Divorce used to be rare, but the increasing difficulties men face in finding work create conflict between men and women. Women often resort to working in town, leaving their children to fend for themselves.

**Zahra Idris Mohamed (F, 70 years), Wad el Hileau**

I was born in Amnayet village, near Hykota town in the Eritrean lowlands. I am a pure nomad of the Tigre-speaking Maria Telem tribe. In 1984, after all my animals had perished in the drought, I came to Sudan. Until then, we had only ever known a diet of milk, butter, meat and *dura*. Now, our diet has changed; we suffer from stomach problems and always seem to be ill because we can’t eat what we are used to. Our skin is very dark now, but it used to be light. In our country, people died not from sickness, but when their time of death approached, a time known only to Allah.

We sold our animals to buy sorghum and other things, but we didn’t have to buy wood, meat, milk and water. It was taboo to sell milk or meat. If we slaughtered animals, we had to give to those without meat or milk. We used to have goats, camels and cows. Camels ate big trees, goats ate almost anything, and cows would graze *almet* grass.

**A milk-based diet**

My family’s diet was based on milk, which was put in an *amur*, which had been smoked both to give it a pleasant smell and to sterilise it. The milk was then transferred to a *hawat*, where it solidified into a mixture which was then shaken well to separate the curds from the whey. The curds—known as *zibdet* in Tigre or *likhay* in Tigrigna—were used as a hair oil or made into *hesas* by adding spices. *Hesas* was particularly important locally in the treatment of malaria. Sweet cows’ milk often caused malaria and *hesas*, with its bitter flavour, was an effective cure for that and for constipation. An infusion of the *swhi* plant smeared on the body cured measles. *Sihnet* smoke ensured good, healthy eyes and head, and prevented vomiting or diarrhoea in children. Even the husbands of women who stood over smouldering, sweet-smelling *thahat* wood became strong and healthy.

The drought wiped out most of my cattle: the rest were taken by Ethiopian soldiers. I now have to depend on food rations. Many people are dying in Wad el Hileau because they have not adapted to the heat and the poor diet. I am thankful for my one remaining donkey. I let my neighbour’s young children take it to the river to gather water and firewood for me; in return, they collect enough for their own family.
When I was young, I used to grind sorghum by hand for the family. The boys tended the animals with my father, while the women cooked, prepared hesas or zibdet, and collected water and wood. Girls do as their mothers, and boys accompany their father: this is important preparation for later life. Girls are also taught to weave palm leaf mats, mattresses, prayer mats and decorations. After marriage, a girl is not allowed to go and fetch water or firewood. She stays indoors and should not even do any grinding at home. Her mother or mother-in-law does all the domestic work until she has had her first child—however long that might take.

When we couldn’t read, we were honest and in peace; we respected our parents and all our elders. These days people are educated but dishonest and untrustworthy. However, education is important because one must know about the good and bad things in the world.

**S52 Khedija Issa (F), Wad el Hileau**

I am an Eritrean of the Baria tribe. I came to Wad el Hileau from Gelu with my husband, three daughters and son. We were forced to leave by the war. Because my husband was Sudanese, we were given special privileges. Unlike other refugees in the area, my family were allocated farming land, which I had to work myself after my husband’s death. Farming needs money, so although I can farm some land myself, some I have to give to other willing refugees, taking half of their produce.

Besides farming, I make *kisra*, the local bread, which my daughters sell in the market. In Eritrea, my father grew millet and sorghum and owned cows, goats and sheep. Whenever there was any sickness, we went to the local *sheikh* and we got better because we believed in him. We also used traditional medicines: for measles, we dripped an infusion of millet and *leet* into the sick child’s eyes. These days, our daughters prefer to go to hospital. We believed that if a boy was breastfed for too long, he would not grow up to be intelligent and would be slow at school. We breastfed boys for 18 months and girls for two years. Girls are not born to go to school and are naturally stupid.

Eritrean refugees have benefited the local Sudanese community, for they arrived during a drought, when there was no food in the local markets. They used some of their food rations to buy other goods in the market, so increasing the supply of food as well as encouraging sales of goods. In addition, Sudanese villagers now receive free medical treatment from the Eritrean refugees’ health centre.
Gezae Tewldemedhim (M, 50 years), Wad el Hileau

Tukul, near Seraye in the Eritrean highlands, is where I was born. Before becoming a farmer, my father was a soldier in the Italian army. I began farming at the age of 14, but after a few years I left Tukul for Antore, in Gash province, in the lowlands. In Tukul there had been a seven-year drought; in Antore there were huge forests full of lions, tigers, elephants and monkeys. It was good new land to farm, although few did so, because there was gold to find and employment in a small factory run by an old Italian. Here I worked until he returned to Italy. Then we took up farming.

Farming was a lucrative business. I built up four pairs of oxen and hired men to act as share-croppers on my land. I took two-thirds of the harvest for myself and the rest was divided between the workers. Erosion was avoided by building fences around the fields, using piles of wood and large stones: wind storms were less of a problem than here because of the surrounding trees and mountains, although we did cut down small trees. I used no fertilisers. I grew mashela, dagusha, t'ef and simsim, rotating crops to increase productivity. My land was not irrigated. The only irrigated farm I know in Eritrea is Italian-owned, at Ali-Geder.

Women played an important role in farming activities around Gash: weeding, scaring birds, harvesting and cleaning seed. Weeds were a major problem, especially hareze and muchuku.

That area has changed little over the years. Vegetation is plentiful and wood readily available. No wood is sold because no one would buy it. Claiming land in Eritrea was easy, simply involving the payment of a government tax and an assurance that no important trees, such as arcobcobai and gasa, would be cut down.

Sudden changes in temperature, strong winds or sandstorms are given to us by Allah: we can only prevent them by praying to stop His anger towards His slaves. In Antore, however, the only problem we had was with weeds.

People at home used to give their land over to share-cropping and go to towns for a better life, to find schools or clinics and work in the offices or factories. However, when the war started, people left the towns because of threats of bombardment and persecution. In 1983, fighting between the Dergue and the EPLF intensified and I was forced to leave for the refugee camp in Wad el Hileau. The war disrupted all aspects of normal life.

In Wad el Hileau, my problems have increased: this place is the hottest hell in the world. There are neither mountains nor trees. When we came, the only tree we could see was usher—with its thick leaves and poisonous
white sap, it cannot even be used as animal food. The soil is very light, has no water-holding capacity and needs a long fallow period. The only crops grown are *dura* and *simsim*, planted in alternate years. The village is affected by sandstorms and *haboubs*, which destroy the huts.

I am surprised that despite war, famine and epidemics, the population is growing. Perhaps it is because people now live to be 70 or 80 years old.

**S58 Mohamed Salih (M, 60 years), Wad el Hileau**

I came from a family of agro-pastoralists based in the Eritrean highlands at Adi-Keyih, Akulugezai area. I spent much of my time moving around with my herds. My family joined me if I was moving far and as long as the animals were healthy; otherwise they stayed in their summer camp.

The most serious animal disease was *gulhay*, recognisable by skin spots, diarrhoea and persistent bleating. Before the Italians brought veterinary immunisation, the disease was treated by marking the animal’s abdomen with a hot iron and giving it an infusion of *klaiba* tree leaves.

My home was very rich in forest. You could not see from one end to the other because it was so dense. Lions, tigers, monkeys, snakes and other animals roamed around. The forest is still there but the animals have left because of the war.

**A respect for trees**

Trees were highly respected in Eritrea and had many uses: as shade for man and beast, and as an essential source of food and medicine. The *klaiba* tree was an effective prophylactic for malaria and yellow fever, while the milky sap of the *adgi zana* stops wounds bleeding. Trees were cut only when absolutely necessary: to provide wood for building or to clear land for cultivation. A place without a tree is like an ugly person without clothes. Trees brought water and protected the land from being eroded by strong winds. When we chose land for farming, we only went where the trees are small and useless. A forestry man in our area looked after the trees and wildlife, because where there was forest there was richness.
Our highland soil, called dukha, was fertile, rich in minerals and retained water well. The land was ploughed by oxen: tractors were no use as too many trees and stones got in the way of the machinery. In my area, women do no farming or work with men, in line with Islamic law.

I cleared land for cultivation and marked my patch with a fence made from wood and stones. *Dagusha, mashela* and *nihuge* were grown for food and oil. A system of crop rotation was followed, as this enhanced soil fertility.

I moved to Wad el Hileau in 1984, forced away by the disruptive effects of war. Here, it is very hot and we suffer from terrible sandstorms: there are no mountains or trees to provide shade or shelter. I think refugees have had a positive impact on the Sudanese economy, providing a cheap labour force for many large eastern Sudanese farms—yet receiving little in return. The one thing I am thankful for is that, in Wad el Hileau, my children can receive a good education.

**Girmay Gebray (M, 60 years), Wad el Hileau**

I was born in Tigray but when I was a child, a major famine forced my family towards the more fertile Gash province. I tended a herd of animals and farmed some land and was quite able to look after myself. Then the war came and the Ethiopian government claimed everything: men, animals, buildings, companies and the land itself. I was left with no more than a beggar. Because of such poverty, many have turned to armed robbery and theft has increased. When the military situation grew too unstable, I moved to this refugee settlement. I found evening work as a guard and, when available, some labouring in the morning.

Traditionally, women worked in the home, tending to children and cooking. They also helped on the farm by terracing, scaring birds and weeding (the worst weeds were *muchuku, kakito, kuanti* and *kurumtia*). Women’s position in the household has undergone a dramatic change as a result of the economic situation refugees have been forced into. Women have found more ways of supplementing income than men: now they sell tea, beer and food in the market and even become prostitutes. Times are better for women than for men. Some even become head of the family.

**Urban learning**

The number of people in Sudan moving to urban areas astonishes me. Urbanisation is largely caused by people moving away to be educated. Rural people are saying that a person without education is like an animal without a skin.
If we were given a letter saying “kill him”, we would carry it to our murderer, because we are uneducated without a skin. My sons and daughters all go to school. I don’t want them to be ignorant like me and their mother. If we were given a letter saying “kill him”, we would carry it to our murderer, because we are uneducated.

The climate in Eritrea was gentle and constant, protected by mountains and trees. It was not subject to the many fluctuations experienced in Wad el Hileau. Here, the temperature can change 10 times in 24 hours. Moreover, in Eritrea, there was plenty of water for washing and bathing; here we have problems simply finding enough water to drink.

There are three main soil types. Whalaha is the most fertile, though the Eritrean and Sudanese varieties differ. The Eritrean type is very heavy, strong, not easily eroded and retains water well, whereas the Sudanese variety is good but very light. Keychtai is used to make dishes and pots. Husa retains little water and is relatively infertile. At home, I used no fertiliser on my soil. I could cultivate one patch of land for 10 consecutive years, without suffering reduced yields. Each decade, I left it fallow for two years. I grew a wide variety of crops, including dagusha, simsim, nihuge, corn and different varieties of mashela, wheat and sorghum.

Soil erosion was no problem in Eritrea because the mountains and trees protected the land. In Wad el Hileau, haboubs cover fertile soil in sand. Herding is also more problematic in Sudan: neither man nor beast can find anything to eat. At home, cattle and sheep grazed green grass and dry kancha. Goats browsed on leaves and branches, and herdsmen took no espeza to eat when they went away, because there was enough food in the forest. Among the tree species were awlea, haseba, anistayeti-andel, tebatay-andel, gollos and edible species such as sagla, leham and hawri.

The Gash area was so thick with tree cover, it was difficult to move from one area to another. When checking a distant farm, we had to walk right to it: it was impossible to see through the trees. Wood collection was easy. In Wad el Hileau, by comparison, one has to travel many kilometres to find wood, and even that is useless for building or making charcoal. Wad el Hileau is like a bald man!

**S69 Ahmed Salih (M), Wad el Hileau**

Logoni Zogololo (M)

Mohamed Awed (M)

All three men were extremely jolly, laughing loudly every time they were asked a question. They were all fairly young, though they would not divulge their exact ages in case only the eldest was interviewed!

We came to Wad el Hileau as refugees from Niger when we were young.
There was thick thorn scrub with lions, elephants and monkeys here. People worked more as pastoralists than farmers. Now their pastures have been claimed for farming and other businesses. When we arrived, we had no experience of pastoralism and did not like the idea of being permanently on the move, having to leave wives and children. Instead, we settled by the Tekeze River, which became our most valuable source of income. The river was clean and full of crocodiles and fish. People did not have to worry about gathering wood because the river was like a train or cargo truck transporting large trees and branches to our door—now it just brings dead bodies....

Fishing was a lucrative and easy business then: no government regulations restricted us. We fished all day in a small sumbuk and sold the fish in the market. Like all other commodities, it was cheap. The widened river has become yellow and muddy. Fish cannot live in mud and most have disappeared, so fishing has decreased by about 70%. Even crocodiles are rare, yet a few years ago, if you just touched the shore with your leg, hundreds would run towards you.

Alternative trades
Many people have abandoned fishing. Some have become merchants, smuggling goods between Ethiopia and Sudan. They are happier and richer now than they were before. A few use their boats to ferry people across the river from Showak to Wad el Hileau. Others, like Ahmed Salih here, work as drivers. We two make our living from agriculture. When we first came to Sudan, we bought a sizeable strip of fertile land along the Tekeze River for £300. Throughout the summer, we grow gargir, bamia, bambei, cotton, mulukhia, green peppers and corn. If the river rises and covers the farming land, then we cultivate sorghum further inland. We still use selukas to plough. Tractors can do a hundred times as much work in the same time, but the quality and taste of the dura is not as good as that grown in fields ploughed with a seluka.

When we first came to Wad el Hileau, there were no habous. The

S71 Yahya Ebrahim Ferez (M), Wad el Hileau
The world today is not suited to pastoralism or farming, but to education. An educated person can get a job wherever he goes at whatever time. But a farmer has to wait for the rains.

S32 Mohamed Fadelalla (M), Abdutab, Shendi
Environmental problems are not recent phenomena. As far back as 1946 our settlement was forced to move because of extensive soil erosion. Since then the village has been forced to move twice because of moving sand.
Now, trees protected us from these sandstorms; we only heard the movement of the branches and saw leaves falling. Now, haboubs attack us because people have taken the place of trees.

I am proud of our position in the community. We are considered as neither refugees nor pure nationals—quite self-sufficient, yet not troubled by the government, being left to do as we please. Our land is rich with produce and the people of Wad el Hileau depend on us. I sell my produce on the free market, tomatoes being particularly profitable. With some of this profit, I spend time travelling around other African countries to see how they live. This is a luxury of which my neighbours in the refugee settlement, just a kilometre away, can only dream.

Although not born in Sudan, we look on this as our home and have no plans to return to Niger. We will stay here by the river until we die.

S72 Hamed Adam Ali (M, 57 years), Wad el Bacha, Kordofan

It was difficult to find a good time for this interview as Hamed is very busy: not only is he employed by a United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO) project as a forest guard and worker in the tree nursery, but he now has extra duties, which include calling the village to prayers, and serving meals and tea to the numerous policemen presently stationed at Wad el Bacha. Hamed was happy and animated throughout the interview. We discovered the reason for his good spirits: at the close of our meeting he was off to his home village of Gaghrur to see his family.

I was born in El Rehaid village in 1933 and I belong to the Gawama tribe. My parents had three daughters and five sons. One of my brothers has been working with the National Water Corporation and I work with the National Forests Corporation. We now live together in this village of Wad el Bacha, though my real home is in Gaghrur, 20 kilometres or so from here, to the northeast.

I moved to Gaghrur with my family when I was only seven months old. We left my birthplace because my family was of a different tribe from the El Rehaid people and my grandfather, Ali el Daw, decided to establish a new settlement.

The community hierarchy
I have been the sheikh of Gaghrur for 10 years now. The role was passed on to me partly by inheritance and partly by the votes of the villagers, though it is the tradition for sheikhs to be elected from one family line.
My responsibilities include collecting livestock taxes from the villagers and sending the money to the government, as well as controlling the division of available land between village farmers. All the land belongs to the government and therefore cannot be sold, but the sheikh receives a small amount of money for supervising land allocation. There are certain boundaries to each sheikh's area of control; knowledge of these is most important, in order to avoid land conflicts with neighbouring sheikhs. However, such conflicts do still occur, in which case the government is called in. If maps are available these are used to define people's territory; if there are no maps, disputes are generally solved through discussion and cooperation between neighbouring sheikhs and elders who know the boundaries well. The government, represented by the uma and nazir, are responsible for the keeping of the boundary maps, as well as for settling any other legal issues which cannot be settled by the sheikh.

The legal system works in the following way: each village has a sheikh, or an assistant sheikh if there is more than one village involved. Above the sheikh is the uma, who controls the settlements over a larger area. He is the first person any sheikh will approach during bigger disputes or issues. The uma is installed by agreement between the local people and the district level government. One uma may have as many as 400 or as few as 20 sheikhs under him, depending on how populated his area is. Usually he divides his area along tribal lines. A location takes its name from the majority of people living there. Higher up the scale of local government is the nazir. Nazirs have greater authority than umas and are responsible for everything that happens over a very large area.

Movement forced by drought
In my lifetime this area has suffered three major droughts. During the first drought we moved to Nawa to be close to water. During the second, my family stayed near Hamadan. With the third, in 1984, we came to Wad el Bacha. I have stayed here ever since for work, although my family move seasonally between Gaghrur and here.

Before I came to Wad el Bacha I was a farmer in my village. My own family come and stay with me during the dry season, after the January harvest, and return to Gaghrur in June at the start of the rains. Sometimes I visit my village for a week or so. As the sheikh, I usually have to attend to many problems during these visits. My work is officially from six o'clock in the morning until midday, although if there is still work to be finished we have overtime.

I came to Wad el Bacha because of the drought. Wad el Bacha always has plenty of water because of the dams which supply the town of El
Obeid. Fortunately, I was then asked to join the UNSO Gum Belt Restocking Project, so I live here mostly. My job is to patrol both inside and outside the forest reserve of El Ain, to prevent people cutting down trees. Although people are allowed to cut or collect dead wood for their own domestic use, any that is cut for sale is confiscated. In the past we just used to confiscate any forest products illegally removed and release the person involved. But nowadays things are tougher: the person is sent to the court in El Banjidid or El Obeid and charged. The forest in this area has changed a great deal as a result of drought and tree-cutting.

I have been married for 30 years and have had 10 children: six daughters and four sons, two of whom have died. My remaining sons work, one with the army and the other in Port Sudan. Four of the girls are married and the others are still single and live at home. I haven’t seen my sons for three years, but although they don’t come home, they regularly send us money.

There are about 200 people living in Gaghrur village now. They are farmers who cultivate crops such as millet, sorghum, okra, groundnuts and water-melon and keep some livestock. Some people also move to the Gezira Irrigation Scheme during the early dry season, from November to February, to look for work, mostly bringing in the harvest.

*Cultivation*

In normal years autumn begins in June and continues until November. The cultivation season begins with land clearance and dry-season planting in May. Usually we weed our land twice a year, but if necessary three times. If the rains in autumn are good we only need to plant once, but sometimes the rains are poor or late and we may have to replant as many as four times in order to get any harvest at all. Millet is the only crop we plant early, before the rains, as it needs as much water as possible to grow well.

In Gaghrur we keep 250 goats, 200 sheep, six or seven camels and many donkeys for transport. During the rains, the livestock stay around the village but during harvesting they are moved farther away from the village and surrounding agricultural land. We keep the millet and sorghum for our own consumption and sell all or part of the other crops.

Our lives have really changed since I was young. In the past, sorghum was plentiful. I think this was because there were a lot of trees and grasses and the land was not tired, as it is now. The trees have been cut down or died from drought. With their disappearance, good grasses have also become scarce. Now it is difficult to find species like *el dambalab, el hasharat* and *abu asabeil* which were once plentiful. This area was
famous for its *tebeldi* trees but there are not many now; those that remain are very old. *Kitr* trees have suffered in the same way. We use *kitr* to make *sha’abs* and charcoal, and for firewood and building. *Sidr* trees are useful because we sell the fruits in the market for a good price.

**Village buildings**
The village buildings are mostly round huts, constructed from millet stalks and *hatabs* made from trees such as *kitr*, *babanous* and *underab*. We make the frame for the sides and the roof from the *hatabs*, and use millet stalks and grasses for thatch and to fill in the walls. These huts can last for a few years, with repairs every so often. Usually we build a new one every four to eight years, depending on circumstances, such as how much material is available. Sometimes we only need to renew the stalks or grasses, as the *hatabs* can last for 10 years or more.

For its water supply, my village relies on the *khors* and *fulahs* which fill with rain and last until around December. After these two sources dry

![Image](image_url)

*S35 Hawa Filli (F, 76 years), Wad el Hileau*
When the military situation began to deteriorate in Eritrea, I moved to Sudan with my sister. I came originally from Maado village in Eritrea. At the age of thirteen, I married a soldier and spent many years moving around the country with him. In 1945, my husband died, leaving me to look after four daughters. With the help of my in-laws, I returned to my husband's land. Whilst living with my in-laws, all my daughters married. After the last one left, I was asked to leave my home. In our culture, a woman without a son is not entitled to inherit her husband's property.
up, some people move from the village to live near a good dry-season water supply. By this time—January—all the crops have been harvested. People usually return to Gaghrur around June, depending on the rains. Those who choose to remain in the village have to travel long distances to fetch water from permanent water supplies.

There is a small shop in the village selling some basic, everyday items, but we tend to go to Um Humeira market to sell crops and buy other items. As Gaghrur is small we do not have a grain mill ourselves. To grind the millet and sorghum into flour we go to El Gafeil or Um Humeira, both of which have mills.

The 1984 drought killed all our livestock; only a few goats remained. Luckily, the government was able to supply us with food. This food was divided and distributed by councils according to the village population.

The only [development] organisation that has ever visited our village was the UNSO Gum Belt Restocking Project, which started in 1985. When they first came they asked the people if they owned their land. Then they registered the names of some people and gave them hashab seedlings when the rains started. They give us 12 ratels of oil, 5 kilos of milk powder, 3 kilos of sugar, 1.5 ratels of tea and a large amount of sorghum once every two months, after they have ensured that the hashab has been planted. They now also give us training in planting the seedlings correctly, which they didn’t do before. Unfortunately the hashab seedlings have all died because of the lack of rain. This year, 1990, is our last with UNSO as they stay in one village for only five years.

**Customs and change**

I don’t think that our traditions and customs have altered very much at all. However, one big change is that now most young people tend to leave the village to try for work in the towns. Some settle there permanently, though others may return to the village after a long absence.

We still follow the traditions of circumcision for boys and girls, and of inheritance. According to Islamic tradition, your land and wealth are divided after your death between members of your immediate family, if you have not already distributed them during your lifetime.

For happy occasions such as weddings, births and other celebrations we organise everything ourselves, using what is available at the time. Usually we invite people from neighbouring villages to attend. They stay as guests in our homes, so we must supply them with all their needs until they decide to return to their own village. The relationship between my village and neighbouring villages is good and we share both happy and sad occasions.
Marriage
In a marriage celebration, the bridegroom supplies the bride’s people with everything. If you want to get married, the first thing is that your father and some friends from your village go to the father of the girl you want to marry and ask him for his daughter on your behalf. If he agrees, the custom is that there are certain things that you must pay for: the bride’s mother tells you the type and quantity of gifts she requires in return for the loss of her daughter. After that you must take many things to the family of your bride, in certain traditional quantities—for instance, one sack of sugar, two tins of oil, 1 or 2 gallons of diesel, 45 pieces of soap for washing clothes, 15 pieces of body soap, 10 packets of shireya, 10 kilos of wheat flour, 10 kilos of rice, five cartons of cigarettes. These things help the bride’s family to prepare good wedding celebrations to which many people, friends and relatives, will be invited. In addition, the groom must provide new clothes for the bride, such as two pairs of shoes, two skirts and two tobes, and some money—between S£1,500 and S£5,000—for her bride-price. While all other items are essential for the wedding, the quantity and type of clothes you provide for the bride is your own decision and made according to your means. The gifts are presented to the bride’s family during a special ceremony known as sheyella.

Looking back at my own life, I am sad that I was unable to have enough education, but I thank God that my sons have had the opportunity to be educated in schools. I wish that all the members of my family were close to me, instead of all living apart...but life’s circumstances have not made that possible.

Asha Mohamed Ibrahim (F, 70 years), Gahawa Hasabsidu
Zeinab Mohamed Ahmed (F, 42 years)

The interview took place in the early morning before breakfast, in the house of Asha’s youngest son. As Asha was preoccupied with family problems and had difficulty concentrating, her husband and six other women, mostly family members, also sat with us to give her moral support and jog her memory. Asha’s husband himself is reckoned to be at least 100 years old and, although frail, is still a lively member of the community.

I belong to the Dago tribe. My mother, who is still alive, is from the Gelaba Hawara tribe but her children all took the tribe of her husband, which was Dago. My mother is 150 years old and lives with us in Gahawa Hasabsidu.
For the past 30 years or so she has been very frail and can hardly leave her bed, but she can still eat and speak and up to now has had few health problems despite her very great age. However, for the past week or so she has not been very well and I am worried about her.

My parents had four daughters and two sons. We have all married and had children of our own. I myself had five sons and four daughters and they in turn have their own families now. I live with my middle son, and one of my daughters still lives here.

One of the major events in my life was when I had food poisoning. I was very sick and my family took me to the doctor in El Obeid. I still have a problem eating hot food because my stomach is sensitive. Later I started having very bad headaches and eventually the doctor had to remove all my teeth in order to help me.

I didn’t go to school when I was young because there were very few schools around here for boys, let alone girls. No one had much education unless they were boys and were lucky enough to enter the khalwa, a special school for education in the teachings of the Qur’an.

**Village buildings**

In the past, all village buildings were made from wooden poles and cereal stalks or grasses. They haven’t changed much, although if people get the chance they try to build with mud and make durdur, which are round huts with thatched roofs, and jalouse, which are square with both walls and roofs of mud. These last longer and don’t need so many wooden poles.

Before we moved here, we lived in a village called El Dar, which is 11 or so kilometres to the north. The first person to come to this place was my son Adam, the present sheikh of this village. This area belongs to the tribe Gelaba Hawara, but Adam first used to come here just to herd our animals, because at that time it was a huge forest with good grazing and lots of water in the khors and fulahs. Many years ago, Adam’s grandfather in El Dar, Mohamed Ahmed el Mistour, advised his family to split up and settle in different locations around the boundaries of our area so as to be able to control it in the future. As a result some of the family settled here and established Gahawa Hasabsidu in 1966, while others went to places like El Ain and El Hegena. I think there are about 220 people living here now, all from the Gelaba Hawara tribe. It is a good village and we have easy relations with neighbouring villages. Because of its rich resources this area was very attractive for settlement and the forest at the time was so dense that we had to clear the trees from a large area around our huts to avoid surprise attacks by wolves.
Water supplies
In the past, we used to collect our water from a place known as El Ain well, close to here. That well has now been abandoned because it was not very accessible and we had to work hard to dig out the sand every time. We also dug wells in the bed of the khor. But we used to take our livestock to El Banjidid and Khor Baggara during the dry season. Nowadays, we have two handpumps near El Ain railway station, supplied by UNICEF. We would have preferred these pumps much closer to the village but unfortunately when UNICEF tested this area, they found that there was no water under the ground. Although the supply from the handpumps is cleaner than from Khor Baggara, we still have many problems as they are far away and, worse still, inside the forest reserve. Recently the governor passed a law preventing us from entering the forest to take water, even for our own personal needs. The Forest Department now says we can enter the reserve with donkeys to collect our water but that livestock is still banned. So we have to take the animals to El Banjidid, Jebel Kordofan and El Jibna and this is a big problem. The handpumps belong to us, and two village men—Adam and Saed—are responsible for repairing and maintaining them.

In the past, we had very good grazing here and were able to keep many cows, goats and sheep. Most of our cows and sheep died in the last drought, in 1985, and though we now keep sheep and goats, we have few cows. They are expensive to replace and we no longer have the grasses to feed them. We have milk from our goats but we miss the old days when we had cow’s milk.

Fires were a common occurrence here in the past but much less so now because there is no forest and few grasses left in the dry season. The last big fire I remember was about 50 years ago and it was started by some hunters who made a cooking fire in the forest.

At this stage in the interview it seemed that Asha was becoming tired and unable to concentrate well enough to remember things. As well as thinking about her mother, she was still mourning the recent death of her daughter’s son who had died after being bitten by a dog. One of the women listening, Zeinab Mohamed Ahmed, who had previously been acting as Asha’s prompt, continued the story.

We have many uses for trees, especially for local medicines. We use tebeldi fruits against diarrhoea and garad against malaria. Women use subakh and taleh as a perfume, especially if they have just given birth to a child. We burn kelto wood for people suffering from ratoba.
The last drought caused great suffering among the people, some of whom moved away from this area permanently. Although things were very bad, I did not move from the village. I came here originally to establish a gahawa on the main road that used to be close to the village, to earn some income for my family. We used to make tea, coffee and food for the many lorries which passed by during the dry season, but in the end we had to stop because fewer and fewer vehicles came by and we found that much of the food we prepared was just going to waste. Nowadays the old road between El Obeid and Kosti is hardly ever used because there is a new tarmac road to the north. Women don’t go to the new road to work as it is too far from the home.

Food aid
At the time of the 1985 drought, one mid of sorghum, our staple food, cost S£5 and even that was too expensive for us. We received food relief from the USA which included things like rice, sorghum and milk. Later the price of sorghum dropped again to S£2.50 because there was enough on the market. Today, one mid costs S£50-60 and people are really suffering. Their crops have failed this year and they find it impossible to buy at that price. During the drought, the distribution people took special care of pregnant women and gave them milk, oil and yellow wheat flour mixed together. The children and babies were also weighed and if they were too light they were given extra milk and the mixture.

The area which is now called the forest reserve, belonged to our grandfathers in the past. In the 1950s the government Forest Department came along and took it, although they did agree to allow the people here to take firewood and building materials from it.

People in this village mainly work as farmers and livestock herders, though a few people now have work during the dry season at the new gahawa. In the past, during the dry season, we used to make charcoal and sell firewood by the road but that is forbidden now by the Forest Department.

A farming life
We cultivate the land by hand. Our main fields are mostly on sandy soil to the northwest of the village. However, we women have special, smaller fields in the small khor near the village. One family can cultivate 15 mukhammas for their main field. The crops we grow are different types of sorghum, sesame, karkadeh and okra. We also used to grow groundnuts, but we have stopped planting these because there never seems to be enough water for a good harvest. We sell our crops in the market
and use the money to buy clothes, livestock, perfumes and our basic necessities. The sorghum is stored in pits in front of our houses, which keep it good and safe until we need it. There is enough land here to grow sorghum on a very large scale but we lack the capital to hire tractors and other machinery, so our fields are limited to what we can cultivate and weed by hand. We have no grain mill and have to take the sorghum to El Obeid, El Banjiddid or Nawa to grind any large quantities. In the past, it was easy to catch a vehicle on the road to take us to El Obeid or Nawa in the dry season, but during the wet season the lorries could not pass this way and often we had to travel by donkey. For everyday amounts we used our own grinding stones, and sometimes still do so.

We keep the seeds from this year’s harvest for next year’s crop. Last year the government gave the farmers in this area special sorghum seed but it was not successful because the rains failed, so we don’t know if it is good seed or not.

To the east of the village, we have some old hashab gardens where we tap gum arabic. We have tried to plant more hashab seedlings but the settled Hawawir nomads, who live on the Jebel, destroy the young trees. Our fields are about 3 or 4 kilometres from the village and our livestock pens, so we do not have any fencing around them.

Diet

In times of drought like this, when there is no sorghum to eat, the people collect the fruit of the krusan and make food from it. We have to prepare it by soaking it in water for three days to get rid of the bitterness. After that we leave it for some time to dry in the sun before grinding it into flour. We make our staple foods, asida and kisra, from it in the same way as we would with sorghum.

When there was good grazing and lots of livestock, we had a pleasant diet and ate mostly milk with other things such as rice, eggs, chicken, wild plants and fruits. It was good food and kept us strong and healthy. These days we miss the milk a lot though we still have some goats, and we eat sorghum, okra, vegetables and other things from the market when we can.

The clothes people wear have changed a great deal over the years, especially for women. When Asha was young, she would have worn only a skirt of leather and another soft leather skin as a shawl. Later, people stopped wearing skins and used cloth instead, though women still wore nothing over their breasts. The cloth that was wrapped around your waist like a skirt was called a tanoura, or furka if it was special cloth for celebrations. Another long piece of black cloth, called zarag, went over your head and covered your whole body, just like the many-coloured tobe
Nomads stay here longer, because of fighting in their grazing areas, and so compete with us for resources. Does today. The furka is still worn for special occasions today and is made of beautiful material: red, black and yellow with gold or silver threads running through it. Women wear it after giving birth, for their marriage and for circumcision, and it is very special and shows how proud she is at that time.

As well as working in the home and the fields, women are responsible for milking all the animals and looking after the young calves and lambs.

The war in the south has made life more difficult for us though we are not near any fighting. My sister's son was in the army but he was injured and now he is very sick indeed. The other problem it has caused is that the nomads stay around here longer than usual, because of the fighting in their traditional grazing areas, and so compete with us for grazing and other resources. Usually we have reasonable relations with them, but problems arise when they decide to settle or when their animals invade our fields.

Health care
I am one of the traditional midwives in this village and learned everything from my mother when I was young. At every birth I stay with the women in labour while all the other women wait outside the hut. As soon as the woman goes into labour I use a special knife called a moos el gadim to cut open her circumcision stitches and enable the baby to come out. Every now and again I feel the woman's stomach to make sure that the baby is in a good position and all the time I am comforting her and encouraging her to push. To give birth, the woman squats on a clean sheet on the ground with her legs apart. To help her push she holds on to a rope suspended from the roof of the hut. When the baby is about to come, I stand behind her with my arms held quite tightly below her breasts and above her stomach and I also squeeze to encourage the baby downwards. Once the baby is born, I use another round-bladed knife called a moos to cut the cord and then we bathe the new child with a mixture of oil and flour. Immediately after the
birth we give the new mother coffee and nesha. After she has rested a little, the woman washes her body with water in which habeil has been boiled. If there is no habeil available, we use tea instead.

I suppose the strangest case that has ever faced me as a midwife was when a baby was born with one leg and both hands coming out first. I kept hold of his hands and put my fingers inside to get a grip on his mouth and turn him round into a good position. He came out quite easily after that but unfortunately he was born dead.

As well as being a midwife I know how to treat broken bones in the traditional way and many people from villages around here come to be treated by me. If someone has a broken arm, for example, the first thing I do is check if the broken bone has made a wound. I feel the limb and decide how best to manoeuvre the bone into place again. I gently press and stretch the broken bone until I am satisfied that it is sitting well, after which I bathe it with oil and warm water. Then I bind the limb with clean cloths and place several sticks around it, which, when tied on with more cloths, help to keep the bone in place and allow it to heal nicely. If it is an arm that is broken, I make a sling to hold it safely against the body. With a broken leg or something like that, the person has to avoid movement for some time. Usually, after three or four days the sticks can be removed and the person just needs to take care not to do anything to hurt the bone for a while. Sick people with broken bones have to eat good food such as chicken, eggs and soup. According to our traditional custom, chicken bones left from a sick person’s meal are not thrown away. Instead, we keep them and put them together under the shade of a green tree in the hope that this will ensure that the bone mends nicely.
Country Profile: ETHIOPIA

Human Development Index (UNDP): 141st out of 160 nations
Life expectancy at birth (1990): 45.5 years
Population per doctor (1984): 60,000
Adult literacy (1985): 66%
Labour force employed in agriculture (1985-1988): 80%
GDP from agriculture and livestock (1988): 43.4%
Principal exports: coffee, hides and skins