CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF INDEPENDENCE AND DEPENDENCE:
CONFLICT IN THE RESETTLEMENT OF SINGLE ETHIOPIAN MALES

Lucia Ann McSpadden*, Ph.D.

The vast majority of Ethiopian refugees are rural, poor, and illiterate, reflecting the reality of their country. However, most Ethiopians who have reached the U.S. and Canada are well-educated by Ethiopian standards having, at a minimum, an 8th grade education. They come from a small segment of Ethiopian society, the urban or semi-urban elite. Typically they left for political reasons, fearing arrest, imprisonment, torture and death. Some were caught up in the civil war either as combatants or suspected combatants (McSpadden 1989)

The number of Ethiopian refugees in the U.S. and Canada is quite small. In the U.S., for example, in 1979 only 169 were admitted as refugees. The ceiling for African refugees in the FY 1987 was 3,500 and later was reduced to 2,000, most of whom were Ethiopians (World Refugee Survey 1988:4). By the end of 1989 approximately 17,500 Ethiopians had been admitted to the U.S. as refugees. The number admitted to Canada is substantially smaller. The vast majority of these refugees are single young men, here without families and often without previous friends from Ethiopia.

This paper is based on a larger analytical study of the psychological well-being of Ethiopian refugees. It began because of reported high levels of depression and suicide among Ethiopian refugees, especially young, single men. Over 100 refugees were interviewed in Northern California, Seattle, Washington, and Reno, Nevada using open-ended interviews and two structured questionnaires: the short form of the questionnaire developed by Goldberg (1972) to identify and assess non-psychotic mental illness, and the Self Anchoring Striving Scale developed by Cantril (1960; 1971) addressing the hopes and fears of the respondent. Participant observation was also used in my profession as a refugee resettlement coordinator in Northern California and Northern Nevada.

Characteristics of single male Ethiopian refugees which puts them at increased risk are as follows:
1. They represent an age group likely to experience special difficulty in satisfactory resettlement—19-35 years old (Charron and Ness 1981).
2. They represent the class level most likely to experience immediate downward social mobility, i.e., middle-class, well-educated (Smither 1981).
3. They are single or here without wife, away from a supportive family structure, yet from a culture in which family is strong and especially supportive for single young males (CAL 1982; Levine 1965).
4. Due to the small resident Ethiopian community in the U.S. and Canada, they have a very small ethnic support community. Social contacts are pervasive indicators of mental health for refugees (Verwey-Jonker and Brackel 1957).
5. Ethiopia is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country with social/economic/political status and power associated with such divisions. These divisions continue to be important in the U.S. and Canada and weaken supportive community relationships when the numbers are so small (Haile: personal communication).
6. They have high aspirations and the basic technical skills necessary to achieve them, i.e., English language and

experience with formal education. However, their job skills/experience are essentially non-existent due to age, their social status in Ethiopia, and the disruption of the refugee experience.
7. Besides the common refugee experience, Ethiopians face additional discrimination due to being Black.

The single male Ethiopian refugee is also at an important but unstable stage of his life, the transition from childhood into adulthood, from dependence to independence. He is "moving into his future" as many Ethiopians say. Normally, this is the time to enter a vocation and develop an economic place in the society, to form one's own family and to develop a supportive network of friends.(Erikson 1959) It is a time to begin to put together aspirations and achievements.

The basic difficulty is that this normal world is not the one in which they are existing at the moment nor will be for the foreseeable future. This is true of all refugees, but for Ethiopian refugees this situational ambiguity is coupled with the role tasks and uncertainties of the single young adult male resulting in a high level of anxiety and discontent, in large discrepancies between aspirations and actual achievements. They are additionally confused about how to strategize and behave in order to close that gap and bring achievements in line with aspirations, to regain their expected life plan and former status.

It is the attempt to develop a strategy, to follow a plan to minimize this discrepancy between aspirations and achievements which becomes the basis of intense, often volatile, interactions between these Ethiopian refugees and their sponsors, either

*Director of Research and Refugee Concerns Coordinator, California-Nevada Annual Conference United Methodist Church, P.O. Box 467, San Francisco, California, U.S.A. 94101

NOTES:
1. I will be using the term "Ethiopian" to refer to both Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees. In the context of the war situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea that can be taken as a political and partisan statement. I do not mean it as that in any way. It is strictly in the interests of time since the social situation of both Ethiopians and Eritreans can be understood as part of the same phenomenon.

2. All the names and locations of these refugees have been changed; the situations are accurate.

agencies or church congregations. It is this interaction and the cultural understandings behind it which I wish to address.

I am focusing specifically upon refugees during their second stage of resettlement, the last half of the first year and the second year, a time of great stress and confusion. Initial coping strategies are developed, tried and altered if necessary. The need for guidance from

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and interaction with the sponsor is most significant (Stein 1981:328).

Interviews revealed several consistencies: (1) levels of stress were strongly and directly associated with their employment/self-sufficiency situation. Those employed at what they considered a job with a future or in training/schooling which appeared to lead to appropriate future status and a "good job" had lower stress than unemployed or under-employed English-speaking refugees; (2) Their hopes and fears were explicit, i.e., the marker of a good life in this country was to "succeed by my own efforts," to be financially self-sufficient, to have a good job, frequently after some time in schooling or college. Their fears can be summed up in such phrases as "to be a beggar," "not to stand on my own feet," "to always be on welfare," "not to be able to take care of my mother."

Their American and Canadian sponsors would heartily endorse and support such goals and would understand such fears as being motivational for sustained effort. They are the same goals as the sponsors have for the refugees. Therefore, one might logically expect that interactions between refugees and sponsors would proceed relatively smoothly toward common goals with common fears behind the goals.

However, cultural models which refugees have for achieving goals and cultural models sponsors have for appropriate tactics are significantly different. The salient concepts around this "split screen" (Stein 1981) are those of independence and dependence, as both a goal and a tactic, and the concept of the roles of the institutions of education and the family/sponsor/patron.

Negussie's experience serves to illustrate this "split screen" (Stein 1981:327) interface between sponsor and refugee. Negussie, a second year student at the University in Asmara, Eritrea, fled Ethiopia after being jailed along with his father and brother. He has not seen nor heard of them since. His mother is living in Asmara, caring for his two younger siblings, and in a difficult economic condition. He was sponsored by a church which was delighted to help a refugee who was obviously well-educated and who, they assumed, was highly motivated to succeed. At first his sponsorship went well, He lived with an American family, enjoying the personal interaction and obvious concern.

However, the situation soon degenerated as Negussie was given a job as a gas station attendant. After one week he quit saying the work was "too hard." Several other jobs were found, minimum wage, full-time, obviously easily within Negussie's capabilities. Negussie refused to take them. They were not "good jobs"; they were too menial. He wanted more prestige, more pay, more appreciation for his skills. He wanted to go to school rather than work at such jobs. His sponsor was outraged. She found Negussie a job at a Christmas tree lot, rented him a room at the YMCA for a month, and told him he was on his own. She didn't want any more to do with him! He was demanding, lazy, stubborn, and unworthy of more effort from her. Her reaction is similar to the head of a resettlement agency who refused to interact with an Ethiopian refugee who turned down a reasonable job offer. She will no longer make the services of her agency available to him until he is willing to accept whatever job is offered.

I submit that the conflict illustrated by the tense, confusing, and degenerating interaction is due to the difference in operational cultural models rather than to the difference in actual resources available to the refugee. The difference in the understanding of independence and dependence and the difference in what are considered culturally appropriate tactics to reach the same goals are the key elements. In contrast to American or Canadian society every Ethiopian has a clearly defined place in the social structure. An individual does not, indeed cannot, change that social position by hard work or individual initiative under normal circumstances.

In Ethiopia one's job is an extension of one's family and social status. In a society of rigid social hierarchies it is not possible to move from the status of the "server" to that of the "served". In recent years the role of the educational institutions is to train a small percent of persons to move into a basically guaranteed social status in Ethiopian society. Young people are "obsessively aware of the value of further schooling,"

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for it is the surest way to a well-paying job (Levine 1965:109). Under modernization, schools are a vehicle for some social mobility, a mobility which would have been unknown a generation or two before (Levine 1965:115). Thus the traditional hierarchical image of a superior and privileged status group is perpetuated. "All Ethiopians who have graduated from secondary school may...be considered members of a secular elite, those with college and graduate degrees enjoying correspondingly higher status within

this elite" (Levine 1965:190). However, such education is a scarce resource which further adds to the selectivity of this group. In 1962 less than 1% of the eligible population completed elementary school (Levine 1965:193)! Along with coming from high status, well-connected families, education is *the* essential element in ensuring high status, economic security and influence. With this comes one of the most important results - respect. The journey toward self-reliance and independence is shaped by status considerations (Levine 1965:81-82). Unskilled manual labor is traditionally relegated to slaves and servants from "inferior" tribes. Ethiopian moral order rests on two pillars; Christianity and "the institution of respect". This means that all people in higher social positions must be shown fastidious deference. Not to do so is a sign of *balage*, "rudeness" (Levine 1965:104-105).

For a well-educated, high-status Ethiopian to do manual labor or low-status work is almost incomprehensible. The family focuses its energy toward enabling a young man to be a student so that he is able, as an adult, to fulfill the social status position of the family as well as his own. The role of the family is to free the young man from all other obligations so he can direct his energies to his education. Students' lives are filled with going to school and meeting their friends "for tea and talk." They are not expected to work to put themselves through school nor to help their families. Rather, all the family and personal energies are directed to enable the student to be as successful as possible. Thus, the student is enveloped in the protection and expectation of the family: protection from outside demands and the expectation that the student will be part of the educated elite, a person of high status and secure position, a person who will be served.

The young Ethiopian man moves in a predictable manner toward independence and full adulthood. First comes education, then a good job followed by marriage and family. During the time of education, the young man lives at home and is cared for. Only

after establishing himself as an adult does he move away and become independent. Therefore "dependence" is a logical, respected and expected situation leading toward subsequent and predictable "independence." In fact, Ethiopian young men speak of being independent and free to go to school. Independence is, at this stage of life, equated with freedom to work intensely toward one's future; to be independent is

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to have one's physical needs cared for so that one's education can receive total attention. Success is then assured: a job of perceived high status is the mark of success—with this comes respect.

For the American or Canadian, however, independence is solely connected with being financially self-sufficient (Stewart 1972). To be dependent financially or even emotionally is shameful for an adult. Success is achieved by hard work and is the responsibility of the individual alone. We are status-by-achievement societies, whereas Ethiopia is essentially a status-by-ascription society. We see America and Canada as lands of opportunity, not lands of the "free handout". As one sponsor stated when informed that two Ethiopian refugees wanted a loan of $1500 to buy a car to go to school, "I wouldn't even do that for my son!".

It is possible and expected to move in the U.S. and Canada from the status of the "serving" person to the status of the "served" person, to use Ethiopian categories. Education, training, and

experience are the keys to doing this, institutionally. Job switching, up-the-ladder, is customary. One is supposed to appreciate this opportunity to advance and thus to work to be economically self-sufficient (Stewart 1972). No job is too menial nor too hard if it will enable a person to be independent financially. Beginning jobs and/or part-time jobs for a young adult are understood to be temporary and not related directly to eventual status in U.S. and Canadian society. Future success and a good job are not assured: they are understood to be dependent upon hard work and upon perseverance.

Thus the stress is exacerbated and confusion reigns. The Ethiopian single male refugee is supported financially for a one to three month period during which a job search is conducted by the sponsor. He is expected to take any job and be grateful for that...for he is now independent and, therefore, a self-respecting adult. However, the Ethiopian says "but what of my future?" "I must be free to go to school", or "My sponsors must find me a good job (translated—a high status job)." Mebratu literally screamed as he explained his refusal to attend a meeting with his sponsors, a refugee committee of a church: "They are all *dumb, dumb, dumb.*" "When they suggest a dishwasher's job, they look at me as if I were an animal. They see a dishwasher. I am *not* a dishwasher. I am a *good* man. I must have a *good* job."

One young man summed up the cultural tensions:

I never tell my parents what I am doing! My mother would be so ashamed. We are all the same. We don't tell our mothers what we are doing. These jobs we have—never in Ethiopia—never! It is a shame. Only if you are poor do you do what we do here. To work in a restaurant—ooh! But here it is what we have to do so we can live, so we can go to school. But we never tell our mothers.

And so the essential dichotomy is played out, the interaction of two disparate cultural models of moving from childhood into adulthood, of moving from dependence to independence, come into direct clash.

The Ethiopian refugee is, of course, far away from his natal family. There are few, if any, Ethiopian adults to take a parental role. He looks to his sponsor (church or agency) to fill the role of family or patron institutionally and emotionally. He expects the sponsor to appreciate the horror of the refugee experience, to protect him, to support him, to listen to him, to send him to school, to find him a *good* job. The sponsor, on the other hand, moves quickly to make the refugee financially self-sufficient. The Ethiopian's familiarity with the English language is often mistaken for familiarity with the culture and system. The refugee is left alone, as an independent adult, once the initial job is found. The sponsor is thus "successful". It is implicitly assumed that the refugee will be able to build his future from this financially secure base. It is his personal responsibility to do that. Efforts by the refugee to be financially dependent to pursue schooling full-time, or to wait to find a "good" job are strongly discouraged and/or made impossible. In the U.S., for example, many states will not allow a person receiving public assistance to be a full-time student, and a part-time student cannot receive federal student aid.

This difference in cultural models of how to move into adulthood is all the more serious for these young men as other life tasks are either very difficult or actually impossible for the moment. The ethnic community is fractured by language and political difference; people are suspicious and do not form new friendships quickly or easily. Affectional needs are postponed or appear impossible. The number of single women Ethiopian refugees admitted to the U.S. and Canada is very small. Consistently, when asked about getting married, these young men answered, "I cannot think about that now. I have to think about my future, about a job, about school. A family will have to be later."

Given this severe reduction in cultural inventory (Scudder 1982), for the Ethiopian single refugee and the strong differences in cultural models as to how to become an independent adult, the sponsor as both change agent and

culture broker becomes extremely important, perhaps even more important than for other refugee groups. In the analysis of stress levels among these men, the intensity and style of interaction of the sponsor (either agency or individual) was a variable strongly related to relative satisfaction with one's current situation and progress, to having an appropriate job and/or going to school. Those refugees who were closely involved with their sponsors, who had Americans to turn to for advice as "their family," had a lower level of stress. These sponsors tolerated an "un-American"

Enabling personal interaction, developing short-term plans which are realistic in the U.S. and Canada but which take the educational and employment goals of these young men seriously is essential in order to reduce stress and promote appropriate and successful activity.

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level of dependence, emotionally if not financially. They encouraged a high level of personal interaction, gave advice directly and openly, took the concerns of the refugees seriously even if they could not meet all of them, worked strongly to open doors of opportunity including education and/or training and were clear about steps needed to reach goals. Yohannes (who is going to school full-time in the day with a Pell Grant, a money gift from an American friend of Yohannes' and Yohannes' own money from his full-time job on the swing shift doing electronics assembly) said:

> I could not have had all this happen without so much help—so many people helped me. The woman at the college helped me get my registration changed to a resident: I had to fight a lot to get that to happen; they kept telling me 'no'. A man showed me how to get a Pell Grant. One woman gave me $750 of her own money as a gift so I could go to school. A man at

the church got my transcript translated from Russian to an English official translation with a seal. The college accepted it then and transferred my 61 units. I am a junior now. See this apartment—everything here is from the church. I haven't had to buy anything. I have had so much help. I couldn't do it by myself. By myself I would give up with all of this. It is too much to do alone (McSpadden 1989: 190).

Such sponsors fit the Ethiopian cultural model of the family, or of the parent, or of the patron. As one agency director said, "I am like their Godmother. I tell them what to do and how to do it. I let them know what I will do and what I expect them to do." A personal connection perceived as caring is developed. Nejmadine said of his church sponsor. "I owe her my life: she sacrificed so much for me, got me in school, found me a place to live."

Refugees with the highest level of stress were either underemployed or unemployed although their English was adequate for employment and/or schooling. They were left alone by their sponsors, asking advice from other Ethiopian refugees, looking through the newspapers for jobs. They were left to go for job interviews on their own even though, in the research, every refugee who was employed needed someone to intervene for him in that first interview. When asked if they knew how to plan toward their idea of a good future, they said", go to school and get a good job." When asked if they knew how to do that, typically they said "no" or "keep on putting in applications." The sponsors often said "they know where we are; if they have problems or questions, they should come in and get help." These sponsors expected personal independence, active problem solving, and individual responsibility. Most often these sponsors appeared to consider a college education to be a luxury for a refugee and did not offer help in pursuing higher educational goals.

Thus, the ability of the sponsor, church or agency, to utilize some aspects of the cultural model of the Ethiopian refugee in the resettlement process is

crucial, i.e., to utilize a cultural pluralism rather than a host-conformity approach (cf. Gordon 1964). Enabling personal interaction, developing short-term plans which are realistic in the U.S. and Canada but which take the educational and employment goals of these young men seriously is essential in order to reduce stress and promote appropriate and successful activity. The young Ethiopian refugee, "away from his mother" as he frequently says, without a cohesive ethnic community, without a realistic way to build or rebuild a family, without the financial resources to act out his own cultural model of moving from dependence to independence, from childhood to adulthood, depends, often unrealistically, perhaps inordinately even for a refugee, upon his sponsor for understandable cultural guidance and concrete help. Hopefully, he will then develop a functional, transitional third cultural model which will guide his movement into a psychologically and economically satisfactory independent adulthood.

With this goal in mind, the energy of the resettlement personnel should be devoted to developing access to the economic and social resources of this society to enable social and economic mobility rather than just self-sufficiency. This is an approach that fits with the Ethiopian aspirations as well as being effective in incorporating the Ethiopian into a hopeful social/class position. This would mean access to the following:

1) credentials that Americans and Canadians recognize and respect (not just refugee-related credentials).

2) information that will allow culturally-appropriate choices to be made, e.g., what is required to enter into a course of study at the local college; how a part-time job can be put together with financial aid so that a person can attend college; what training/experience is necessary to obtain the sought-for job.

3) access to appropriate training that Americans and Canadians understand and recognize and that will be likely to connect the refugee to a valued job.

4) access to regular, not just refugee-related, schooling. This is especially important for Ethiopian refugees who speak functional English.

5) access to jobs with an acceptable status and which provide the opportunity for social mobility.

As Finnan (1981) notes in regard to Southeast Asian refugees, the category "acceptable status" can be redefined by the refugee to alleviate social and cognitive dissonance and subsequent distress (cf. Rumbaut, 1986). An "acceptable job" may be understood as one that will allow the Ethiopian to pursue important long-term goals, rather than be an end in itself. A janitorial job is much more acceptable as a function enabling enrollment in college than it is

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For many refugees resettlement processes determine future experiences and options that will be available, that is; what will "independence" finally mean for the Ethiopian in the U.S. and Canada?

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as an adult job a person will pursue for the rest of his life. The primary self and social identification is then that of "student".

Although the resources that the refugees bring vary, the actual resettlement process is a prime incorporating mechanism. Its operation can effectively direct the refugee toward a particular class membership in our society. Such class membership, and the opportunities it provides, are initially a function of the access to resources that the resettlement entities provide.

For many refugees resettlement processes determine future experiences and options that will be available, that is; what will "independence" finally mean for the Ethiopian in the U.S. and Canada?

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ANNOUNCEMENT

TOWARDS PRACTICAL EARLY-WARNING CAPABILITIES ON REFUGEE FLOWS

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For the last two years, *the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University and the Office for Research & the Collection of Information (OCRI) of the Offices of the Secretary General of the United Nations* have been discussing the possibility of working together to develop an early-warning network to help determine areas where refugee-flows are likely to occur. Recent events in the Gulf have heightened our awareness of the need to develop a better system of coordination for the determination of these flows in order to respond to crises in a more timely manner.

This interest has been generated by the expanding numbers of refugees and displaced persons worldwide. There is also the realization by all those involved that co-ordination and planning require some ability to anticipate refugee flows. This anticipation, based on informed analysis, will allow governments and international agencies to respond to emerging crises more effectively.

Growing attention from concerned international governmental organizations, states, NGOs as well as the diplomatic and scientific community has resulted in the realization that they need to get involved in the elaboration of a global early-warning network.

As part of this process, the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, in co-operation with ORCI, is hosting a workshop on the topic *"Towards Practical Early-Warning Capabilities"* to be held in Toronto on May 29-31, 1991.

Representatives of organizations involved in Early-Warning work have been invited to attend.

For further information, please contact:
The Centre for Refugee Studies
York University
4700 Keele Street
North York, Ontario
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