

The Kunama

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COR Center Backgrounders provide key information about new refugee groups for U.S. resettlement workers.

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The Cultural Orientation Resource Center (COR Center) at the Center for Applied Linguistics works to increase the capacity of overseas and U.S. refugee service providers to orient refugees to their new American communities and to inform U.S. communities about refugee orientation and new refugee groups.



The United States has agreed to resettle a group of Kunama refugees who have been living in Ethiopian refugee camps since fleeing their homes in rural Eritrea more than 6 years ago. The refugees, who live in Shimelba Refugee Camp near the Eritrean border, are not able to return safely to their homes in Eritrea and cannot settle permanently in Ethiopia. As a result, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) referred more than 1,200 of them—out of a total Kunama population in the camp of 4,000—to the United States for resettlement consideration. The rest of the Kunama refugees in Shimelba—about 2,800 individuals—chose not to be included in the UNHCR referral.

This Backgrounder provides Reception and Placement (R&P) agency staff and others assisting refugee newcomers with an overview of the Kunama to help them prepare for the refugees' arrival and resettlement needs. The Backgrounder looks at the experiences of the Kunama in Eritrea, their lives in Shimelba Refugee Camp, and their cultural practices and preferences.

Who Are the Kunama and How Did They Become Refugees?

The Kunama are one of the smallest groups in Eritrea, with a population estimated at between 60,000 and 100,000. A distinctive people with their own culture, the group speaks Kunama, a language that is unrelated to the major languages of Eritrea and Ethiopia. They are considered to be among the original inhabitants of the region.

In Eritrea, the Kunama are a marginalized minority populating the remote but fertile regions between the Gash and Setit Rivers near the border of Ethiopia. Formerly nomadic, today they are farmers and pastoralists.

The plains the Kunama inhabit have been called the “breadbasket of Eritrea,” and recent years have seen increasing conflict over land between the Kunama and the Eritrean government.

According to Alexander Naty, an anthropologist at Asmara University in Eritrea, settlement of non-Kunama groups in the Gash-Setit region was limited before Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1994. But settlements “increased alarmingly after independence,” intensifying competition for scarce resources. The agricultural policy of the state, which encourages large commercial farms (mostly owned by members of the majority Tigrinya ethnic group), has also undermined the economic position of the Kunama, Naty notes.

In 1998, war between Eritrea and Ethiopia broke out in a conflict over Kunama-inhabited border lands. Over the next several years, the Kunama left the area in fits and starts. The first groups crossed into Ethiopia shortly after the outbreak of war, with more fleeing later to avoid conscription into the Eritrean army. Others chose to remain in the area under Ethiopian occupation, prompting Eritrean suspicions that the Kunama were siding with the enemy. In 2000, when the war ended and the Eritrean government regained control of the area, the Kunama became fearful of government reprisals for their alleged disloyalty, and more fled into Ethiopia.

Refugee Camp Life

The Shimelba Refugee Camp is located about 45 kilometers south of the Eritrean border in a semi-arid and rocky landscape dotted with trees and shrubs. Today about 14,300 Eritrean refugees live in the camp. The Kunama make up about 30% of the camp population; the rest are Tigrinya.

UNHCR reports that the Kunama are a more vulnerable population than the Tigrinya because they generally lack the outside financial support from family and friends that many Tigrinya enjoy. On the whole, the Kunama have less formal education than the Tigrinya and are less familiar with modern amenities.

Refugees in Shimelba typically live in houses made of mud bricks or mud and tree limbs. The Kunama often construct circular houses with conical roofs made of thick grasses. There are neither toilets nor running water in the houses. The United Nations World Food Program provides food rations to the refugees.

Because employment opportunities for the Kunama in Shimelba are limited, life in the camp offers little in the way of productive activity for most men, who pass their time playing bingo, discussing issues, and drinking *arake* (locally brewed liquor), beer, or tea. Women prepare food, wash clothes, gather water and firewood, and take care of the children.

The Need for Resettlement in the United States

The Kunama have been referred to the United States for resettlement because there is no other durable solution to their plight. The human rights situation remains poor in Eritrea in general and for the Kunama in particular, and for this reason the UNHCR is not promoting repatriation. Nor does the organization consider local integration in Ethiopia a viable option, given Ethiopian government policy, which prohibits the Kunama from working for wages and restricts most of them to the refugee camp. Refugees found outside the camp without permits have been arrested and imprisoned.

Cultural Attributes Languages

All Kunama speak Kunama, a Nilo-Saharan language that few non-Kunama speak. The language has its own written form, a Roman-alphabet-based script first developed by Swedish missionaries in the late 19th century.

A small number of educated Kunama also speak Tigrinya, the dominant language of Eritrea that is also widely spoken in Ethiopia. Some can communicate in Amharic, Ethiopia's official language, and Arabic. Very few know English.

Religion

Kunama from rural areas practice their own religion, a monotheistic set of beliefs without the formal hierarchies and practices of Islam or Christianity. During traditional celebrations, the Kunama slaughter a cow, goat, or sheep as part of a blessing ceremony. Those who practice the traditional religion also loosely practice Christianity. Kunama from urban areas are usually Christian (Catholic and Protestant) or Muslim. Interreligious marriage is common.

Though there are churches and mosques within the refugee camp, the Kunama do not appear to be as devout as other ethnic groups. When asked the question, "What is your religion?" during interviews with staff of the Overseas Processing Entity, applicants often discuss their responses with other family members before answering noncommittally. "Christian, Muslim, whichever you want to write" is a common response.

Community Life and Leadership

In their villages in Eritrea, the Kunama carry out many tasks communally, including house construction, firewood collection, farming, and burial rites. The Kunama have a special reverence for their elders, whom they rely upon to govern their small villages in Eritrea.

Although elders still retain a great deal of respect in Shimelba, camp life has seen the emergence of a new form of leadership, known as the “central committee.” Made up of elected members of the community, the committee makes decisions for the group and mobilizes the community. Both men and women belong to the committee, although men outnumber women. An English-speaking member of the committee serves as a liaison between the community and the UNHCR.

Role of Women

Women hold traditional roles, cooking, working in the home, and delivering and rearing children. They do not typically work outside of the home. Girls are given fewer opportunities for schooling than boys. Interestingly, however, when a mother dies, her children join her mother’s relatives, even if the children’s father is still alive. Elderly women wield a great deal of authority over younger family members.

Food and Dietary Restrictions

The Kunama eat *injera*, a kind of pancake, along with a sauce, usually *shiro*, made from chickpeas. They sometimes eat millet. They add variety to their diet through carrots, tomatoes, onions, and garlic. The Kunama generally do not eat pork, apparently for cultural reasons. When asked why they do not eat the meat, the Kunama typically respond, “Our culture does not permit it.”

Traditional Practices That Might Conflict With U.S. Customs

Though in general the Kunama seem to have only one spouse, many men and women have children with multiple partners, even after their marriages. It is common for girls as young as 13 or 14 to be married to men much older than themselves.

Female genital circumcision is widely practiced among the Kunama. Health care workers in the camp report that young girls from 6 months to 5 years are circumcised. As a result of this practice, infections and inflammations are common among young girls in the camp.

The Kunama practice traditional medicine. Common traditional health practices include slashing eyelids in the event of an eye injury and burning the cheeks in the event of chronic headaches. Traditional herbs are also used. Traditional healers are mostly women.

The Kunama do not object to Western medicine, but treatment should include clear instructions—for example, on how to take prescription medicine. Women are not uncomfortable being examined by a doctor.

Resettlement Considerations

Family Composition, Size, and Relationships

The Kunama do not have typical families by American standards. Single-parent families are not uncommon among the Kunama, and single women often have children from multiple partners. Women generally have between two and four children. Single adults who left their families behind in Eritrea are common in the camp. Although Kunama families take different forms, many are made up of a mother and father (not necessarily married to each other), one or two of the mother's adult siblings, and three to four children.

The Kunama place a strong emphasis on relationships with the mother's extended family. Children typically live with their mothers. If the mother dies, children will live with a maternal grandmother, aunt, or uncle, if there is no older sibling to take them in.

Health

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that of the approximately 250 Kunama refugees who have completed the mandatory pre-departure medical screening, the great majority showed no significant medical problems.

Education and Literacy Levels

UNHCR estimates that about 40% of the school-age children in the camp attend school. Both boys and girls attend, although boys outnumber girls.

Most Kunama adults have not been formally educated beyond Grade 2 or 3. UNHCR estimates that roughly 20% of the population can read and write in Kunama. Those who are literate in Kunama may also be able to read and write in Tigrinya and Amharic.

Limited opportunities for adult training in the camp exist in embroidery, tailoring, printing and dyeing, leatherwork, silk-screening, and computer skills. The Kunama do not appear to take up these activities as eagerly as do the Tigrinya.

Work Experiences and Skills

In Eritrea, most Kunama worked as farmers and cattle herders. A UNHCR profile describes the group as skilled in "agriculture, sewing, weaving, and repairing."

Before fleeing Eritrea, a small number of Kunama were shopkeepers, masons, or skilled construction workers. A few young men have been trained as teachers and journalists.

Employment opportunities for the Kunama in the camp are limited. Educated adults may find work in camp schools or other programs. Those without formal education sometimes find work in food distribution and building construction in the camp. Although not legally permitted to work outside the camp, some refugees do so.

Exposure to Modern Life

Having spent their lives in some of the most remote areas of Eritrea, most Kunama have had very little direct experience with modern urban life. In their villages, Kunama traveled by foot, camel, or donkey cart. Most have seen vehicles passing through the camp, and they know about television and electricity, even if they have had little direct experience with either. Most will be unfamiliar with running water and electric stoves and ovens.

Camp life has exposed the Kunama to Western medicine. Kunama women readily use the services of a midwife and a medical doctor in the camp.

Cultural Orientation

As is the case for other refugee groups, Kunama approved for resettlement will undergo an intensive 3- to 5-day pre-departure orientation that prepares the refugees for their first months in the United States. Training will take place in Shimelba Refugee Camp and will be provided by the IOM cultural orientation team. The refugees will also receive an additional day of training shortly before departure that reviews the information they previously learned, with a focus on what they can expect during their long journey to the United States. The additional day of training has been found to be of great benefit to refugees who have had little or no previous experience with modern amenities and air travel.

Family Ties to the United States

Very few Kunama have relatives or friends living in the United States.

Caseworker Considerations

The first choice for a caseworker would be an ethnic Kunama, but a Tigrinya caseworker from Eritrea or Ethiopia should pose no particular problem. The personality and competence of the caseworker is more important than the person's ethnicity. Many Tigrinya enjoy good relationships with the Kunama, and Tigrinya social workers in the camp work closely and effectively with the Kunama refugees.

Other Considerations

Because the Kunama are not used to city life, they may find it easier to adjust to a small town or suburban environment. When placing the Kunama in residential neighborhoods, agency staff should keep in mind the history of conflict between the Kunama and Eritrean Tigrinya people.

Resettlement services will need to take into account this group's low level of formal education, rural background, and lack of employment experience. English language and literacy classes will be critical. The Kunama are a particularly vulnerable group requiring special patience and attention.

The content of this Backgrounder draws from *Eritrea: Information on the Kunama Ethnic Group*, an online UNHCR publication (retrieved April 21, 2007, from <http://www.unhcr.org/home/RSDCOI/3f520a484.htm>).

Additional information about the refugees and refugee camp conditions was provided by the following people: Overseas Processing Entity staff in Nairobi, under Director Anne-Marie Winter; Pindie Stephen, Cultural Orientation Coordinator, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Nairobi; UNHCR staff, Addis Adaba; and International Rescue Committee staff in Ethiopia (Field Coordinator Tesfay Aregawi in Shimelba, Education Coordinator Shewaye Tike in Addis Adaba, and Country Director David Murphy in Addis Adaba). IOM's Migrant Health Department staff in Nairobi and Ethiopia provided information on refugees' health, and the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System provided the statistics used in the section "The Kunama: At a Glance."

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At a Glance:

Total Cases: 474

Total Individuals: 1047

Average Case Size: 3

There are many linked and cross-referenced cases.

Country of Origin:

Eritrea

Refugee Camp:

Shimelba Refugee Camp, Ethiopia

Native Language:

Kunama

Other Languages:

A small number speak Tigrinya. Some can communicate in Amharic and Arabic. Very few know English.

Literacy:

20% can read and write in their native language. Literate Kunama may also be able to read and write in Tigrinya and Amharic.

Exposure to Modern Amenities:

Most have had very limited exposure to modern amenities.

Work Experience:

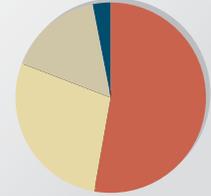
Most have had little work experience other than farming and cattle herding. A few have worked as shopkeepers, masons, or skilled construction workers. A small number have been trained as teachers and journalists.

The Kunama

Gender: Male 57% Female 43%

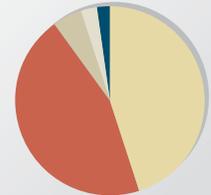
Ages

Up to 4	16%	●
5-17	28%	●
18-59	53%	●
60+	3%	●



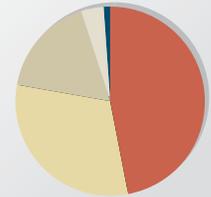
Marital Status Ages 18-59

Single	45%	●
Married	45%	●
Divorced	5%	●
Separated	3%	●
Widowed	2%	●



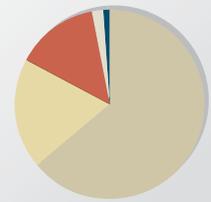
Religion

Catholic	47%	●
Protestant	31%	●
Muslim	17%	●
Orthodox	4%	●
Other	1%	●



Education Ages 5-17

None	14%	●
Kindergarten	19%	●
Primary	64%	●
Secondary	2%	●
Bio-Data unknown	1%	●



Education Ages 18-59

None	49%	●
Primary	30%	●
Secondary	15%	●
Technical School	3%	●
University	2%	●
Bio-data unknown	1%	●

