

## Kunama and Nara

### Profile

The southern part of the western lowlands, the Berentu area, is the dwelling place of the Kunama and Nara tribes which are of Nilotic origin like the inhabitants of western Ethiopia and southern Sudan.

### Historical context

The Nara were forcibly Islamicized, depriving them of the equality that had existed between the sexes. The Kunama remain matrilineal and approximately one-third are Christian. Tropical diseases and periodic slave raids from Sudan and Ethiopia diminished the number and significance of this agricultural society of Kunama peoples. They have had a deep distrust of the EPLF and have been repressed for years because they are seen to be close to Ethiopia.

During the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, some 4,000 Kunama fled as refugees to Ethiopia. The refugees were for the most part inhabitants of two villages along the border that had been occupied by Ethiopian forces; they feared Eritrean accusations that they had helped the invaders, feared conscription of themselves or family members into the Eritrean Army, and so withdrew with Ethiopian forces. The government in Asmara resettled war veterans and repatriating refugees, largely from the majority Tigrinya ethnic group, on the vacated land. Kunama land is in one of the most fertile areas of Eritrea. A government official told IRIN News of the Kunama refugees in 2002, 'As far as we are concerned they are abductees. People don't go voluntarily with an invading army. And if they did go voluntarily, in the midst of war, then they are not refugees. They must be sent home.' Ethiopia settled the refugees in a camp near the disputed border town of Badme, where they live in difficult conditions and without access to their pastoralist lifestyle.

### Current issues

In recent years the Kunama refugee camp in northern Ethiopia has swelled to a population of over 13,000 as Eritreans of other ethnicity seek refuge from their government's harsh military conscription policies.