

The Bridge of ~~SATAN~~ has been broken

A Tale of Transformation Among the Sheko

Harold Kurtz and Caroline Kurtz

Editor's note: as we seek God for the peoples of Chad and Sudan (see pages 8-13), we can gain encouragement from reports of God at work among peoples elsewhere. Here is one profile in transformation that can feed biblical hope. Lord, do it again and again!

In November 2004 we spent a fabulous three weeks in Ethiopia, visiting outreach projects that take the Good News of Jesus to unreached peoples. Our sister church in Ethiopia, Mekene Yesus (The House of Jesus), has grown by four million members in the last fifty years! Yet unreached people groups still remain in this country.

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Four times in our travels we literally came to the end of the road, each time continuing by car on a bone-shaking track so that we could connect with a different people group. It was like driving back into the Book of Acts, for the gospel is "out of control" in that area! It was thrilling to hear the stories of Jesus coming into lives in power and signs and wonders. We heard stories of Jesus appearing in visions and dreams, of miraculous healings, of deliverance from demon possession. We heard stories of biblical blessing transmitted from one people to another.



Harold Kurtz

For example, after Ethiopia's socialist regime expelled Presbyterian missionaries from the area in 1978, the Church among the Bench people was forced underground in persecution. Yet – nurtured by the Bible translated into their language during that season – Bench Christians grew in number and emerged from the crucible seasoned and committed to Jesus.

After they experienced God's care and sustaining presence during hardship, the Bench Christians became relentless evangelists, and some became cross-cultural missionaries. They headed out to share the Good News with neighboring tribes, including the Sheko, an isolated, forest-dwelling people living in remote settlements and with pockets of population dispersed by the invasion of larger tribes into their traditional area. Bench missionaries spent days in the forest with the Sheko.

Finally, seven years ago, a Sheko woman accepted Jesus. Her transformed life made the gospel come alive, and a people movement began, with profound influence throughout this tribe of some 30,000. For example, so many Sheko have become followers



Caroline Kurtz

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Ato Haile, a Bench leader from Mekane Yesus, plays the local instrument, the Kirar, as the Sheko sing, "The bridge of Satan is broken and now we cross on the Bread of Life."

of Jesus, and the gospel has had such an effect on their lives, that when elections are held to choose representatives for community and government service, only Christians are elected. Even non-Christians, they say, will only vote for a Christian because they know the Christians will be honest, won't steal money, and won't abuse their power.

The Sheko have been an abused people and a quarry of slaves for others. They spoke to us of three times in the last century when they thought their tribe might disappear. During the occupation in the Second World War, the Italians abused them; then a disease decimated them and they scattered into isolated settlements in the forest to escape contagion. Then, as they learned to market their forest coffee, a more insidious affliction spread among them: with their newfound wealth they began to buy forms of locally-made alcohol. The tribe erupted into internal violence, with brother killing brother, daughters and mothers killing one another, and fathers and sons involved in bloody brawls. They were being destroyed from within.

Yet now that the gospel has come, the century-old tradition of revenge killings (both within the tribe and between the Sheko and other tribes) has stopped. The Sheko declare, "Jesus has saved our tribe and given us peace."

The remote Sheko are illiterate and without a single school (government or private). In Gurfarda, the largest and most populous Sheko center, there is only one Bible and one reader, a 12-year-old boy who can read and write in Amharic, the language of his education. When the

Christians gather, this boy reads the Bible to them, and those who are bilingual discuss the Word of God and translate it into their mother tongue.

When someone is sick, the Sheko call for the elders to come and bring the Bible. The elders gather around the sick person, open the Bible as a symbol of God's presence and promises, and pray for healing in the name of Jesus. Miracles happen. "We have no clinics," they told us. "We only have God."

The Sheko village we visited is a new one, a settlement that has grown up in the forest beside a stream and around the "mother" church for the surrounding population. The village is beautifully kept, with clear, clean paths and blooming flowers. Their grass-roofed church building seats over 300 but has now grown too small, so poles are being collected to expand the building.

The Sheko Christians in this village welcomed us – the first white people who had ever visited them – with great joy. They brought out a bowl of wild honey in the comb, and a few stray larvae, for us to share. (Sheko honey is famous all over Ethiopia.) We dipped into the common honey bowl with our fingers. It was like a communion service commemorating our oneness in the company of Jesus. In the church building the Sheko Christians formed a group around us and, to the joyful beat of the drum, sang one of their favorite songs with a chorus that celebrates, "The bridge of Satan has been broken, and now we cross on the Bread of Life."

They apologized that the church elders were not present, for the elders had gone to assist the development of churches in more remote Sheko villages a five-day walk away. So the circle of blessing widens further! Before leaving, Bench and American Christians prayed with Sheko sisters and brothers about how we might give the growing Sheko Church the right kind of assistance in response to God's great harvest among their people. 🌍

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