

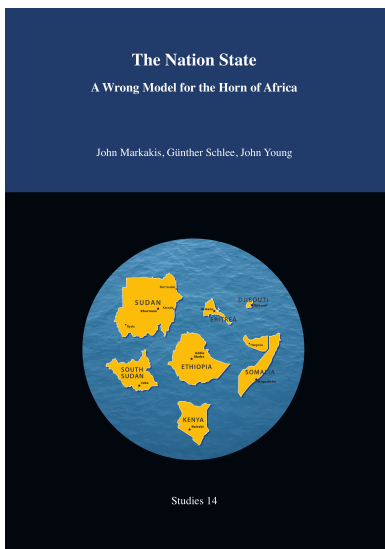
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John Markakis:

The Afar

DOI: 10.34663/9783945561577-06



In: John Markakis, Günther Schlee, and John Young: *The Nation State : A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa*

Online version at <https://www.mprl-series.mpg.de/studies/14/>

ISBN 978-3-945561-57-7, DOI 10.34663/9783945561577-00

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Printed and distributed by:

epubli/neopubli GmbH, Berlin

<https://www.epubli.de/shop/buch/111400>

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

Chapter 4

The Afar

John Markakis

They are taking our soil; we don't know why
They are digging our land; we don't know why
Motorcars overwhelm our animals
Foreign languages overwhelm our language.

Afar song (circa 1970s)

This chapter will present a detailed case study designed to illustrate the impact of factors highlighted in the chapter “The Crisis of the State in the Horn of Africa” on people in the periphery, including their identity, livelihood, security, welfare, and their response to ruling elite initiatives for nation-state building and socio-economic development. Specifically, the study will examine one ethno-regional group—the Afar—selected due to geography, history, ethnicity, mode of production, and distinct relationship with the center of state power. While these parameters distinguish it from other groups in the periphery, it shares the subordination, marginalization, and alienation that are their common experience. Because the Afar experience with state initiatives has a history unmatched by others in the lowland periphery, an analysis of this group’s history and current situation proves helpful in anticipating their future.

The lowlands zone in Ethiopia covers about 78 million hectares, making up about 61 percent of the country’s total area. The area has an elevation up to 1,500 meters above sea level, and the general climate is broadly categorized as arid (64%), semi-arid (21%) and sub-humid (15%). The average annual rainfall is less than 700 millimeters, and is unreliable and erratic. The temperature during most months of the year reaches about 30 degrees Celsius, rising to around 45 degrees Celsius during the months of June to August. Evapotranspiration is very high, reaching up to 250 millimeters per year. Low annual rainfall coupled with high evapotranspiration results in a critical moisture deficit and poor prospects for rain-fed cultivation. Throughout history, this terrain has been the domain of mobile pastoralism and remains largely so; however, this mode of production now faces extinction.

After the secession of southern Sudan, Ethiopia had the largest land mass in the Horn, the largest population (about 90 million in 2015), the largest lowland region, and the largest livestock herd in Africa. The bulk of the livestock is held by mobile pastoralists who belong to some 30 ethno-regional communities, representing approximately eight million people, according to official population statistics. Pastoralism is not included as a category in the national census; therefore, this estimate is considered low. The Afar homeland lies entirely within the arid zone. The Afar regional state population is given as 1.4 million, the majority of whom are pastoralists.

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Geography isolated the Afar to an unusual degree until recently, and has more profoundly impacted their identity than any other factor. Their homeland, on the eastern edge of the continent facing the Red Sea, is commonly described as the “most inhospitable” in the region. The Afar Depression in the north sinks below sea level in places. It holds the record for the highest mean annual temperature recorded on earth, and it is covered with sunbaked deserts, salt flats, active volcanoes, and bubbling lava lakes. Salt, exported to the Ethiopian plateau, provided the Afar with a rare link to the world outside. The southern part of the Afar homeland is crossed by the Awash River, the only river that drains the eastern side of the plateau, and irrigates a broad valley where irrigated cultivation is possible. The Awash River is the mainstay of the Afar pastoralist economy, and also supports cultivation in its inland delta where it forms lakes and swamps but never reaches the sea. The potential for commercial cultivation here created an opening for strangers to enter the Afar world and launch an ongoing process of forced transformation. In the second half of the twentieth century, once the Ethiopian state had claimed sovereignty over the region and controlled it effectively, outsiders began to farm the Afar land on a commercial level.

Afar was part of the vast territory incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire during the imperialist Scramble for Africa. During this period, the Christian kingdom on the northern plateau, otherwise known as Abyssinia, massively expanded, doubling its territory and population by conquering what is now the southern half of the country. Typical of pastoralist societies, the Afar had never created a state and had no history of political unity. They had established a more centralized and hierarchical form of government in five sultanates, but four of them were dismantled in the Scramble for Africa. At this point, the Afar Triangle was divided between Italy, France, and Ethiopia, whose share included the Awash River Valley. Only the Aussa Sultanate in Ethiopia retained its coherence and a degree of autonomy until the demise of the imperial regime in 1974.

Pastoralist societies do not lack governance, laws, institutions, or leaders. Maada, the Afar customary law is precise, comprehensive, and efficient because it is known and respected by members of the community. Generally, pastoralists take a limited view of traditional authority (*makabantu*), which is exercised only in conjunction with a council of elders, and this particularly true for the Afar. Every level of Afar social organization has its chief (*Aba*) whose authority is thus circumscribed. The heart of Afar social order is the clan, which is ruled by its elders.

The colonial carve-up did not inconvenience the pastoralists unduly. The Italians and French limited their presence to the coast, and Ethiopians claimed a distant lordship over the hinterland without setting foot in the lowlands. The Italians were first to spot the agricultural potential of the Awash River Valley when they occupied Ethiopia in the 1930s. The Opera Nazionale Combattenti, the agency charged with promoting the settling of Italian farmers in Africa, viewed the Awash as a promising site and began their agricultural endeavors in the Gewane area (Larebo [1994], 106). However, their stay was short and nothing came out of it apart from the present town. The Afar population at the time was estimated at about 60,000 in Ethiopia territory, 19,270 in Eritrea, and 12,341 in the French colony (Trimingham [1952], 172).

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After the Second World War, the imperial government made its first plans for economic development through import substitution and increased exports. The Awash River Valley (whose three sections are distinguished according elevation—Upper, Middle, and Lower) was chosen for obvious reasons, but mainly its potential for large scale, commercial irrigation. Its proximity to Addis Ababa and a string of emerging towns to the south was another advantage, as was the Addis Ababa railway line that crossed the valley. Also advantageous was the fact that, here, land and water were available at no cost because under Ethiopian law pastoralist land was considered unoccupied and classified as state domain; therefore, it could be disposed by state fiat and offered to investors for free along with the water of the river crossing it.

In the 1950s, the first invitation, namely to establish sugarcane plantations and processing factories in the Wonji plain in the Upper Valley, was extended to a Dutch firm with extensive experience in colonial Indonesia. Some 6,000 hectares were cleared for sugarcane, displacing the local Gilo herders as well as many Karrayu cultivators who were promised land as compensation. Emperor Haile Selassie was present at the inauguration of the Matahara Sugar Estate, and the Karrayu people complained to him about the loss of their land without compensation. The Emperor ordered that 8,000 hectares should be given to them. They were still waiting for it when he was toppled from the throne in 1974.

The Upper Valley lies outside the land of the Afar, and they were not directly affected. A few years later, the British firm Mitchell Cotts negotiated an agreement with the imperial government to cultivate cotton in the Middle and Lower Valleys for domestic use. The government thought it prudent to inform the Afar, whose acquiescence was considered essential, given their warlike reputation. Sultan Ali Mirah, whose traditional authority over the affected region was recognized in return for an annual tribute of 2,000 litres of ghee, was summoned to a meeting in the capital and asked to facilitate the project by approving the land grant for the cotton plantations. “I will not give Afar land to the foreigners. You’ll have to take it by force,” was his initial response (Soulé 2003, 74). Admonished by government officials, he changed his mind the following day. He became the prototype peripheral elite, and went on to enjoy a long tenure with status and wealth spanning three regime changes in Addis Ababa.

The Awash Valley Authority (AVA) was set up in 1962 to promote development in the Middle and Lower Awash Valleys. By 1975, the total irrigated area covered some 57,000 hectares, one-third of the estimated potential cultivable land in the valley, nearly every square meter of it covered in cotton. The investors were a mixed group of foreign firms and private persons, operating on their own or in partnership with the state. Among them was Sultan Ali Mirah, who turned into an entrepreneur overnight. Together with his family and clan elders, he set up 2,500 small plots of less than 10 hectares each and an Aussa Farmers’ Association. Free labor was provided by clansmen. When world cotton prices doubled in the early 1970s, the small group of Afar investors became wealthy overnight.

The impact on the pastoralist economy was far reaching. Loss of pastureland caused overstocking in the remaining grazing areas and overgrazing as a result. Plantations blocked access to the river that provided precious refuge for men and animals during the dry season. Hydroelectric dams in the Upper Valley reduced flooding, affecting pasture growth further down the river. With abundant stagnant water, malaria, a common scourge, now became the leading cause of death for the population. There was no compensation for the loss of land or water. Nor did the Afar benefit from the introduction of commercial agriculture. There was

no similarity between the traditional pastoralist economy and the modern plantation system. Very few Afar, other than the Ali Mirah coterie, took direct part in the cotton production, neither as investors for lack of capital nor as employees for lack of skills. Under the AVA program, only a few hundred Afar were settled.

There were 150,000 persons involved in 11 irrigated projects in the valley, of whom 100,000 were non-Afar. Some 10,000 were administrators and technicians, all of them highlanders (Kloos and Adugna [1989], 139). Poorly paid, unskilled seasonal labor was provided by destitute Oromo peasants who came down from the plateau, while Afar worked mostly as guards to prevent herds from invading plantation land. The decline of the traditional economy became obvious during the drought and famine of the early 1970s, when the Afar lost the bulk of their cattle and thousands of human lives without aid ever reaching them. "This destruction of both livestock and grazing areas is of such magnitude and persistence, that the ability of the Afar society to survive as significant pastoralists is endangered," warned a contemporary witness (Cossins [1981], 11).

Land in Afar was held communally and was shared equally by all members of the clan. Authority to distribute land and settle issues relating to it was the prerogative of clan elders. Now land was becoming a commodity to be traded in the market and people's perception of its value was changing. Claims to land became more exclusive, and conflicts over land within and between clans became more frequent. Afar elders exploited their authority to distribute land by renting plots to outsiders and sharing the money with the clansmen. On the one hand, this scheme was viewed favorably by many, particularly the young, who had no inclination to take up cultivation on their own, and Afar participation in the new economy was very limited. On the other hand, elder involvement in land transactions with investors opened possibilities for abuse and self-enrichment, illustrated by the Ali Mirah initiative, giving rise to complaints and resentment that damaged the abuser's status in the community.

Population displacement and shifting land caused by increasing pressure on land and water worsened Afar relations with their immediate neighbors. On the border of the Upper Valley they clashed with the Karrayu Oromo, themselves displaced by the sugar plantations in Wonji and Metahara. On the opposite side of the valley, the old conflict with the Issa Somali escalated, eventually becoming a major problem for the central government.

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The overthrow of Haile Selassie's regime in the mid-1970s was the result of a social revolution that eliminated the imperial ruling class together with the land tenure system that was its economic foundation. Abruptly converted to scientific socialism, the military junta, known as the Derg (committee), that seized power at the center of the state proceeded to nationalize the economy, including all land. They also confiscated all investment in commercial agriculture, quickly putting an end to the rise of an Afar land-owning upper class. The latter did not take this latest dictate from the center passively and resisted. Afar warriors chased state officials out of the region and blocked the road to Assab, where Ethiopia's sole refinery was located, causing fuel shortages in the capital. Ali Mirah fled across the border to Djibouti, and an Afar Liberation Front (ALF) led by his sons rose to confront the Derg. Government forces soon cleared the road to Assab, but security in the region was never entirely restored. Commercial cultivation in the Middle and Lower Valleys ceased. When the military regime

collapsed in 1991, the Afar looted the plantations, destroyed infrastructure and machinery, and left the rest to decay. Not long after, the successor regime intervened with their own policy for the exploitation of the region's resources.

The 1975 Land Reform marked the first time that pastoralist rights were given legal recognition in Ethiopia. Pastoralist "possessory" rights over their land were recognized, and their isolation and marginalization in the state and society was officially noted. It was promised that "special attention" would be given to raise their political, economic, and cultural life and "to equalize these nationalities with the rest of the nationalities in Ethiopia." With the establishment of a Settlement Authority in 1976, the regime laid down the principles that have governed the state's policy vis-à-vis pastoralism ever since: resettlement and agro-pastoralism. Replacing the derogatory term *zelan* (wandering herder) for *arبدو ader* (livestock producer) was a symbolic gesture.

The AVA and its projects in the Awash Valley came under critical scrutiny by the Derg, and in 1977 its scope was limited solely to development of water resources while other state agencies took the initiative for development in the valley. Sugar production on the Upper Valley was nationalized and its management was taken over by the newly-formed Ethiopian Sugar Development Agency. Famine on a biblical scale in the early 1980s highlighted the plight of a country with a 2.9 annual rate of population growth and a 6.9 annual rate of growth of per capita food demand. By this time, the Derg's program to boost agricultural production through collectivization had proven a failure, and a desperate search for an alternative was on. The Ethiopian Valleys Development Studies Authority (EVDSA) was formed in 1987 to prepare the ground for the utilization of the potential for large scale irrigated cultivation in the fourteen major river valleys of Ethiopia. The Awash Valley Authority was integrated into the new body.

In the meantime, the regime had proceeded with the transformation of the Afar economy according to its own terms. Former plantations became state farms, small dams were built to produce more cultivatable land, and improved mechanized production methods were introduced; all of these projects were to produce cotton, not food. This need for food was addressed by the people themselves who organized in settlement schemes. The land claimed by the Ali Mirah family and Afar elders was distributed to the clansmen in a program designed to convert them to sedentary agriculture. Villagization, a program pursued by the regime on a country-wide scale, was part of the scheme.

The settlement program was designed, managed, and heavily subsidized by the state and proved neither profitable nor sustainable. One report described it as a "welfare programme" (Kello 1989, 105). Three successive livestock development programs were designed for lowland regions, including the Afar Valley. They were designed to promote the integration of livestock production in the highlands through a variety of inputs intended to improve livestock quality and transport routes to link it with markets in the highlands. These programs had the same fate as many others of the kind carried out in the Horn. A report by the Ethiopian Red Cross at the end of this period remarked: "The Afar feel their way of life has failed in terms of the viability of their pastoral economy, and politically in the maintenance of their regional autonomy and in competition with their regional adversaries" (Ethiopian Red Cross (ERC) 1988, 4).

The list of proffered reasons for the abject failure of pastoralist development in the entire Horn region is long. The design of these programs did not assist pastoralism by adjusting to the demands of the times within the frame of its own mode of production but rather co-

ercively transformed it to fit into a model of development that, in fact, had no place for it. “Pastoral production systems are a highly efficient response to an environment which began to disappear in the early twentieth century and has been disappearing at an accelerating rate ever since” (Dyson-Hudson [1985], 173).

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The collapse of the military regime in 1991 signaled a second round of profound socio-economic and political transformation in Ethiopia within a quarter of a century. The successor regime of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is a coalition formed and led by an insurgent ethno-regional movement, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). It began as a self-declared radical Marxist group, but was compelled to lower its ideological sights in order to gain Western support, ostensibly converting to the free market and democracy. It also committed itself to a federal system of government that promised to shift the balance of state power towards the periphery. In the following years the regime took steps to realize these commitments, yet twenty-five years later it is still far from its goal.

The EPRDF’s economic policy retained a major role for what it called the “developmental state,” which in effect restricted the space allowed for private enterprise and the free market to function. Similarly, the concept of a “people’s democracy,” which the EPRDF claimed as its political guide, served to rationalize severe limitations imposed on rival political actors that rendered them impotent. Federalism in practice turned out to be the transfer of administrative functions from the center to the periphery without a meaningful shift in the balance of power between them. The task of administering the periphery was entrusted to a new class of local elite, allied and entirely dependent on the center and bereft of the economic and political resources needed to function autonomously.

The federation was organized along ethnic lines, with administrative boundaries drawn, as far as possible, to coincide with ethnic groups, whose identity and culture were recognized and reinforced through their use in administration, education, and political life. Federalism raised the profile of the lowland periphery and its pastoralist population in the national consciousness. The lowlanders were now administered by their own kinsmen, who constituted the new peripheral elite, free to use their own language, and to celebrate their own history and culture. The EPRDF also promised to close the development gap between the highland and the lowland regions, now called “emerging states,” with special programs administered by the center.

Afar became one of nine regional states in the federation comprising the Awash Valley and the Afar Depression, and the Afar in Ethiopia finally got their wish to be united in a single administrative jurisdiction. Simultaneously, however, the colonial dismemberment of this nation was once more replicated by the rival state-building projects in the Horn. Ethiopia’s annexation of Eritrea in the 1960s had reunited this northernmost segment of the Afar nation with its kinsmen in the south, albeit separated by provincial boundaries. Despite repeated petitions by Afar notables, the imperial regime refused to merge it administratively with the Afar province, and the military regime rejected similar pleas to consolidate the Afar into one province. Eritrea’s independence in 1993 restored the colonial map, and the northern segment was once again separated from the bulk of the Afar by an international border. With the rest of the Afar in Djibouti, this nation remained under three flags.

In the Awash Valley, the collapse of the military regime saw the abandonment of all projects for pastoralist settlement, the demolition and looting of infrastructure and machinery, and the return of much land to livestock pasturage. The capacity of the surviving state farms declined steadily due to lack of maintenance and failure to replace worn-out machinery, the silting of canals and clogging of locks after dredging ceased, and the lack of pesticides and insecticides. These problems were all due to loss of funding and direction from the center.

Land remained nationalized, but land earlier confiscated from private investors by the Derg was returned to the clans to use as they saw fit. Ali Mirah returned home and was able to reclaim some of the land confiscated by the military regime. Claiming credit for founding the Afar Liberation Front (ALF), his family became involved in the new political system, competing for local power under the banner of the ALF. It had initial success, and one of his son's became the first president of the Afar regional state. However, the ALF was not an EPRDF creation and refused to join the ruling coalition. It was eventually sidelined.

An Afar People's Democratic Organisation (APDO) was cobbled together, and the trusted former TPLF Afar veteran Ismail Ali Shiro was made the leader. Following a farcical election in 1995, he became region president and took charge of Afar affairs. He proved an able successor to Sultan Ali Mirah in the role of the peripheral elite, and went on to serve in that capacity for the next two decades, a national record for tenure in this office. Ali Mirah was compensated with the return of some 10,000 hectares of land in his homeland and a villa in Addis Ababa. Among his twelve sons and ten daughters several were appointed to ambassadorial and other official posts.

Initially, the new regime's policy for economic development focused on the transformation of the highland peasant economy to eliminate the country's perennial food shortage and dependence on food aid. Later dubbed the Agriculture Led Industrial Development plan, it was also expected to serve as the driver for agro-industrial development. It was a great effort to modernize a peasant mode of production that had changed little over the centuries. Ambitious programs, formulated by foreign experts and funded with foreign aid, were launched with great fanfare in the early 1990s to convince the peasantry to adopt new practices and imported inputs like fertilizer, improved seeds, and chemical pesticides. An army of trained agricultural agents was deployed to oversee implementation. The results were disappointing. The annual rate of growth in agriculture at 2.27 percent was an improvement on past performance, yet still below the rate of population growth of around 3 percent. The attempt to rely on peasant agriculture to spur development throughout the economy was abandoned.

It was a decade before the regime turned its attention to the perennial economic stagnation of the lowlands and pastoralism. Previously, it had concerned itself primarily with securing control over the state's perimeter by setting up political structures tailored to the ethnic federal format. Like the Westernized ruling elite throughout Africa, it ignored the traditional authority structures of pastoralist society and handed over administrative power to a new set of peripheral elite who organized overnight in wholly artificial political parties, clustered under the wings of the ruling coalition.

In the EPRDF's perception, traditional authority was considered a feudal remnant and was entirely ignored in the new federal structure. In Afar, as everywhere else, a centralized regional system of decision making and administration was imposed on a society whose affairs were managed by the elders until now. Traditional authority was not represented at the regional state level, and as a result it had no influence there. However, new state

structures took time to emerge, allowing chiefs and elders to continue administering local affairs, particularly in matters concerning land and justice.

Creating a modern administrative system in the Afar region proved difficult, especially due to the lack of educated and skilled manpower. Highlanders filled most of the posts, while Afar secondary school graduates were sent for training to the Civil Service College in Addis Ababa, an institution founded especially for this purpose. Upon their return, they were appointed to head administration departments, supported by experienced highlander deputies.

At the dawn of the twenty first century, the federal government launched a new development program that relied on two sectors to spur economic growth. The Growth and Transformation Plan (2010/11–2014/15) massively invested in infrastructural development and energy production, funded mainly with loans and aid from abroad. Dams to harness the country's hydroelectric potential and also support irrigated cultivation were the core of the program. Transport and communication were likewise targeted. Ethiopian bank loans, supplemented with funds from the Ethiopian diaspora, sparked a boom in urban construction for housing and tourist hotels that changed the face of Addis Ababa overnight and also began to transform regional state capitals. Urban employment reached unprecedented levels, trade thrived, and the economy scored rates of growth that gained Ethiopia fame as Africa's "economic miracle."

Belatedly, the Afar began to benefit from the economic upsurge. A new town, Samara, emerged on the road to Djibouti to serve as regional state capital, replacing Asaita, Ali Mirah's old seat. Several settlements on the road that served as truck stops expanded to service the increased volume of traffic. These roads later became a bone of contention between the Afar and their Somali neighbors and a perennial thorn in the central government's side. In line with the federal government's policy of upgrading services in all regional states, Samara acquired a university and hospital, while the regional administration strove to expand local education, health, and transport facilities.

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Having failed to turn peasant agriculture into the engine of economic development, the EPRDF turned its attention to the long-neglected lowlands at the end of the twentieth century. Three factors combined to transform the perception of the periphery from land of want to a future cornucopia. Technological advancements to restore fertility in such terrain was the first factor. Increased production was achieved through irrigation innovations, improved crops, fertilizers, pesticides, and modern methodology and machinery. The second factor was the steady increase in the price of foodstuff worldwide, the result of population growth in densely inhabited parts of the world, which attracted capital investment for commercial cultivation in sparsely populated areas in Africa and elsewhere. The dire need in the continent for more accessible and cheaper sources of energy was the third factor. The search for energy sources had been going on for some time. In Ethiopia, it was initiated by the imperial regime and concentrated in the southeastern Somali inhabited section of the periphery. It was continued by the military regime and succeeded in discovering significant gas deposits near the border with Somalia. The perpetual political instability and conflict in the area has not permitted the exploitation of this resource to this day. Exploration on a much wider scale began in the 1990s, with the participation of foreign capital from many countries—led

by China—in parts of the lowland periphery, none of which have come to fruition to date. The role of the lowlands in this context is highlighted by the fact that crop produce can be converted into a source of biofuel energy.

The EPRDF's initial statement of economic policy referred to nomadic regions as areas with special problems, and promised to “issue policies based on studies in order to alleviate the particular problems of these regions” (Transitional Government of Ethiopia [1991]). No studies or policies were produced, save for a statement a dozen years later, which referred to “phased voluntary sedenterization along the banks of the major rivers as the main direction of transforming pastoral societies into agro-pastoral systems, from mobility to sedentary life.” The statement claimed that twenty districts of Afar were already settled (Ministry of Federal Affairs [2002]).

The initial intervention in Afar, taken in the early 1990s, was to return the land confiscated by the Derg from private investors, outsiders, and Afar notables to the local people, to be distributed to the clansmen by the elders. The state-owned plantations remained under central government control. It was not long before the combination of cheap land, water and labor began to attract outsiders looking for land to invest in. Since it could not be bought outright, a land renting system was used, whereby the investor negotiated with clan elders to rent plots of land that fell within their jurisdiction to manage. Turning elders into agents in outsourcing land put them in a position to profit personally and to prefer renting clan land instead of encouraging their people, especially young men, to take up cultivation. Pastoralists themselves preferred to collect their share of the rent paid by the investor and to continue raising livestock. Neither the central government nor the region produced a land use policy, and the investors were allowed to use the land and the water as they chose. Environmental damage due to mismanagement of irrigation was one notable result.

The EPRDF also invited the NGO sector to assist the pastoralist sector to adapt to change, provided it “worked in line with government policies.” In absence of such policies, NGOs were left free to improvise. Innumerable NGO programs designed to modernize the lowland economy and integrate pastoralism into the national economy followed. The programs covered the gamut of foreign assistance targets, including famine relief, health, education, support of vulnerable groups, and conflict resolution. Theoretically these programs were devoted to preserving pastoralism by adjusting to social change and participating in the modern market. Success was predicated on changing the wandering lifestyle of traditional pastoralism by anchoring men and animals to a settled location, i.e. agro-pastoralism. In effect, pastoralists were required to change their way of life to meet the requirements of the nation-state, not to preserve it. The NGOs were, in fact, preparing the ground for what was soon to become official policy. The blanket failure of these programs testifies to the inability or unwillingness of pastoralists to accept the change demanded of them.

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It was at the turn of the century that the EPRDF began to draft ambitious plans for the Awash Valley that would have a fateful impact on its inhabitants. In 2008, the Ministry of Water and Energy announced the launching of two projects for sugar and ethanol production: one at Tendaho in the Awash River Valley, another in the far southwest corner of Afar on the Kessem River, a tributary of the Awash River. The first phase of building dams and irrigation channels, as well as levelling land had already started. The Ethiopian Sugar Corporation

(ESC) was established in 2010 to take over the projects, as part of the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) (2010/11–2014/15). An Accelerated and Equitable Development for the Emerging Regions program developed in line with the GTP that had a particular focus on the lowland's periphery.

This plan was designed on a scale that dwarfed previous development ventures. It intended to commit over 320,000 hectares across the country to sugar production. A large part of this expanse was represented by the Awash River Valley where cotton was to be replaced by sugarcane. The Tendaho Dam and Sugar Project was designed to occupy nearly all the irrigable land of the Middle and Lower Valleys for sugar production. It is envisaged to cover a total of 85,000 hectares, 65,000 hectares for sugarcane cultivation, and the rest for infrastructure. It will include not only the existing state-owned cotton plantations and vast areas of grazing land but also—inconsistently, given the EPRDF's penchant for agro-pastoralism—the land traditionally cultivated by Afar in the river's inland delta.

India's Export-Import Agency invested substantially on condition that 75 percent of the project's inputs would be imported from India. The Indian consultancy firm that carried out the first feasibility study described the area to be inundated by the dam, some 17,000 hectares, as “desert” of no importance to the Afar people. The loss of pastureland, it claimed, would be more than compensated by range improvement and the services provided for the people. To compensate the herders for this massive dispossession, it recommended that a mere 1,800 hectares should be reserved for “pastoralist development” (Interim Report: Environmental Impact Assessment (Interim Report [2003](#), 105). Follow-up studies warned of potentially devastating consequences, such as the loss of 15,000 hectares of forested land and 19,000 hectares of bush and shrub land, the consequent extinction of bird life, a malaria epidemic, and the drying of the lakes in the Awash River inland delta.

Initially, the EPRDF vowed not to continue with the population resettlement and villagization policies of previous regimes. These were radical measures taken to deal with overpopulation and consequent land hunger, mainly in the northern plateau, and the spatial dispersal and isolation typical of rural settlement patterns throughout the country confounded development efforts. Initiated by the Haile Selassie regime, resettlement and villagization turned into a major campaign under the Derg, when a large number of people were moved, willingly or not, from north to south, causing much suffering and loss of life. The campaign would not have a lasting effect; most of the survivors abandoned the villages and returned home after the fall of the Derg.

Resettlement and villagization were revived by the EPRDF, with plans to resettle 1.5 million people. Under federalism the central government has no power to move people across regional state lines, and resettlement must take place only within regional state boundaries. The target this time is the sparsely inhabited lowland zone, where people will be congregated in villages to free land intended for commercial cultivation by private investors.

Conversion of herders to agro-pastoralism is official state policy implemented jointly by the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation and the regional state administration. The documents outlining the implementation are prepared in politically correct and pastoralist friendly format, envisaging monetary compensation for expropriated land, provision of pastureland for those who remain pastoralists, cultivable land and water for those who convert to cultivation, resettlement in villages provided with housing, health and education facilities, as well as training for the young who will be employed in the sugar industry. Private investors are expected to share this burden. The Afar administration asked investors to provide at least

20 percent of leased land for this purpose. The Ethiopian Sugar Corporation was expected to do the same, but on a much smaller scale.

State as well as private enterprise is expected to offer local people the opportunity to engage in the production of commercial crops as sharecroppers and outgrowers. The oldest and most successful program of this type is the Wonji project, which includes 12,000 households and 7,000 hectares in a sharecropping partnership that supplies more than one-half of sugarcane production for the factory. The input and operational costs are provided on credit by the state and are deducted from the final income, and irrigation is provided for free. Observers suggest that success in this case is due to the fact that most of the sharecroppers are peasants, not former pastoralists.

The ESC support program for agro-pastoralism has earmarked some 10,000 hectares of land in Tendaho for pastoralist resettlement, of which 2,000 hectares had been distributed by 2016 to 2,000 families in one-hectare plots while 1,000 hectares had been distributed to 1,000 families in Kessem. Eighteen so-called villagization centers have been established, 14 in Tendaho and 4 in Kessem, totaling 18,000 households settled in individual housing. The newly established villages will have schools, health centers, grinding mill facilities, bakeries, mosques, and shops.

The Tendaho and Kessem projects provided compensation for the land taken based on prior land use. The price of land used for crop production was worth double that of land used for pasturage. The money distribution was carried out by elders and project coordinators without supervision, and they received no guidance as to who should receive it or how the money should be used. According to one report, “there are still beneficiaries who complain that they have not been paid and who further note that the money disappeared between the projects’ coordinators and the community leaders. Many of the officials interviewed believe that even those who managed to get the payments used the money for their daily consumption rather than investing it to augment productivity and that there was no proper guidance from the regional government as to how to spend the money in useful ways other than consumption. It was after recognizing these problems that the regional administration disbanded the project coordination secretariat and decided that all future compensation disbursements would be done through the region’s Bureau of Finance and Economic Cooperation” (Gebrehiwot and Sintayehu 2014a, 107).

Compensation was also offered in the form of plots of land for those willing to take up cultivation. Financial assistance was also additionally offered on an annual basis in order to bridge the time until their first harvest. Plots were limited to one hectare, intended for cereal production and irrigated accordingly. Infrastructure was provided free of charge, and the hope was that they would switch to sugar cane when more irrigation is provided. According to ESC records in 2016, six associations with total of 1,347 Afar households had been formed.

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ESC’s ambitious, detailed programs and targets for agro-pastoralism in Afar were seriously affected by the inordinate delay in the completion of the infrastructure and plant. In 2016, several years past the planned date of completion, neither of the two projects was operational and not a single kilogram of sugar had been produced. Built by Chinese contractors, the Kessem project was five years in the making. Planned to cultivate 25,000 hectares, it had

3,000 hectares under cultivation by end of 2016, whose produce was sent to Matahara for milling, or burned. Construction of the Tendaho project had begun earlier and was scheduled to be completed by 2013. About 50,000 hectares were planned for cultivation; with infrastructure the total area would be 85,000 hectares. At the time, the area under irrigated cultivation, both state and private farms, was 26,000 hectares.

The reasons given for the delay are many. “Though the task of covering such a large area of land with sugarcane in three years is challenging, it can be made possible by efficient management and perfect planning,” was the blithe conclusion of the original study by the Indian consultancy (Draft Final Report 2005, 36). Unfortunately, neither prerequisite materialized. The grandiose size of the Growth and Transformation Plan and the unrealistic targets it set, are now said to be far beyond the country’s economic, technological, and administrative capacity to deliver. The government’s choice to entrust a major role in planning, construction, and administration to federal and regional state agencies had negative consequences, given the lack of capacity for the task at both levels. State agencies, ministry divisions and departments, and ministries themselves bid for contracts directly or set up parastatal structures for this purpose. The Ministry of Defence became the biggest local contractor to use state assets. Soon after coming to power, the original parties that formed the EPRDF set up their own business ventures, which flourished on state contracts, and gradually expanded into production, transportation, and construction. The practice was imitated by political parties that appeared afterwards at the regional level as affiliates of the EPRDF. Obviously well placed to win state contracts, the parties were able to get unsecured bank loans. The ESC was staffed with inexperienced young graduates, and senior posts were filled with persons with political connections who were frequently recycled. The Kesseem Project had four managers in five years.

The result was a feeding frenzy involving Ethiopian state and private capital, as well as foreign state and private counterparts. Eleven Indian contractors were involved in Tendaho. Chinese contractors were brought in to finish Kesseem, after a company owned by the Ethiopian Ministry of Defence walked out of the project, without returning the funds received or incurring any liability, legal or financial. Within a few years the Ethiopian “miracle” had produced a new hierarchy of power and privilege spawned by the “developmental state.” It also produced corruption on a monumental scale, which did more than anything else to dim the luster of the “miracle” and peoples’ confidence in the EPRDF regime. As an editorial in a local paper noted, “the construction of around ten sugar factories [...] is saddled by a plethora of shortcomings that have dented the government’s credibility in the eyes of the public” (*Reporter*, 16 July 2017).

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The weight of the argument for agro-pastoralism rests on the expected conversion of wandering herders to sedentary farmers. This scheme has yet to be tested in Afar and Ethiopia, but there is considerable experience in other areas of the Horn, particularly Sudan and Kenya, showing strong pastoralist reluctance to comply. Instead, wherever possible, they far preferred to sell or rent land allocated to them for cultivation to others, quite often to outsiders. Needless to say, this was the experience in Afar under the imperial and military regimes.

“Sedentarization though impoverization” is a trend noted elsewhere in the Horn. As the mobility of the herds is increasingly constrained, their habitat is progressively degraded,

the climate turns drier, and the traditional strategies of coping with successive crisis are exhausted, herdless pastoralists are compelled to take up cultivation wherever possible. Others are forced out of the system and into the peri-urban periphery to take menial jobs, loosening ties to their clan kinsmen.

The staple argument in favor of large-scale land cultivation in Ethiopia is the creation of employment for local people. At full capacity, the projects in Afar plan to employ more than 100,000 people in plantations and factories. The bulk of these jobs are seasonal and the lowest paid, as well as bereft of any form of security. Historically, these jobs have been taken by impoverished peasants who migrate seasonally from the highland to the valley. Afar participation has been minimal and mainly as plantation guards; in 2016 guards worked eight-hour shifts for 32 birr (USD 1.50). It is expected that this will change as young Afar acquire education and relevant skills.

Agro-pastoralism claims to be a replacement for pastoralism, but the economic rationale of this policy is far from proven. Recent studies contradictory to this claim cite, among other reasons, the disappearance of pastureland designated for agro-pastoralism as nearly all the land has been earmarked for cultivation. Furthermore, agro-pastoralism puts a high labor requirement on households as they then have to divide labor between cultivation at home and care of livestock away from home. What is obvious already is the rapid decline and ultimate disappearance of mobile pastoralism, for the very simple reason that mobility is no longer possible. "From our interviews with regional officials, the overriding consensus was that pastoralism has reached a dead end when it comes to sustaining the economic livelihood of the communities," is a recent appraisal (Gebrehiwot and Sintayehu 2014b, 105).

Several studies of the ongoing process in the Awash Valley conclude that "sedentary agro-pastoralism has not been able to provide food security for humans and animals, and thus continued the reduction of livestock through compromising mobility" (Botterli 2015, 21). Others maintain that "pastoral livestock husbandry is more profitable than cotton farming." The same can be said for sugar; livestock remains the best, if not the only, option under these ecological conditions (Behnke and Kerven 2013, 33). As in the 1970s and 1980s, drought induced famine threatened 600,000 people in Afar in 2013. Whatever the final outcome of the latest massive intervention in the Awash River Valley will be, it has initiated a process of economic and social transformation that leaves the future of the Afar people uncertain.

Pastoralism is more than an economic production system. It is a way of life that encompasses a system of social and political organization and a culture woven together since time immemorial. It is an accomplishment that guarantees the integrity, coherence and cohesiveness of pastoralist society and defines its identity, all of which are threatened when mobile pastoralism, the foundation of this way of life, is no longer viable, and a process of adaptation to a sedentary existence is the only option. These consequences are even more potent when the option is dictated by external actors and the pace of adaptation is forced to meet their goals.

The loss of autonomy is the context in which this forced process unfolds, impacting every aspect of society, starting with the clan, the living cell of pastoralist society. It immediately affected the clan structure by undermining the decision-making process and the status of traditional authority. Less obvious is the impact of localized interventions on the clan-based social fabric of Afar society. One report describes the model of plot distribution devised by the regional government, which appears designed to dilute clan claims to land by assigning neighboring plots to members of different clans. Accordingly, each plot

is worked individually by its owner, instead of one person assigned by the clan to work on several adjoining plots belonging to members of the clan. Plots belonging to members of the same clans are often located far apart from each other, making it hard for clan members to help each other.

Demographic change is a noted trend with potential consequences on Afar ethnic identity. The total population of the region is currently estimated at 1.5 million of which some 10 percent is not indigenous. The non-Afar are concentrated in the small towns that have sprung up in the region. The plan envisages a workforce of 100,000 at full capacity, signaling a sizeable increase in non-Afar employment in the sugar industry. The regional administration is another sector with a significant number of non-Afar employees, estimated at over 45 percent. If only because they do not speak Afar, the regional government opted to use Amharic as the working language. Rising concern for the survival of the Afar language prompted the government to prepare to make Afar the language of administration. As part of it, non-Afar civil servants are required to attend Afar language lessons for one hour daily.

4.1 Afar Response

Because of its enormity and hurried pace, the Afar experience provides a particularly striking illustration of state-imposed transformation and the absence of local autonomy and agency. While it is true that change is a negotiated political process involving various agents with varied access to power, including local agents, it is also true that their situation is highly asymmetrical given the loss of local autonomy. It is equally true that the situation itself is subject to change, as shown in the case of the three regime changes in Ethiopia, and that change affects local response and agency. The consequences of regime change are particularly significant in the center-periphery context because regime change has a direct effect on the composition of the local elite and, therefore, the representation of the periphery at the center. A variable factor that lays outside the center-periphery binary relationship yet still impacts it is the interaction among groups within the periphery, a particularly heavy factor in this case. The following pages will describe the Afar position in the negotiation process and their response to the transformation of their way of life.

Afar history is a tale of repelling incursions into their homeland by outsiders to preserve an untrammled autonomy. The familiar description “inhospitable” in their case applies both to the landscape and to the fearsome reputation of the people. The reputation was sealed in 1875 when Werner Munzinger, a Swiss adventurer and the first white man to venture into the region was killed along with his entire escort. Ethiopia’s royal chronicles going back to the fourteenth century record the unsuccessful attempts of Abyssinian rulers to subjugate these people. Although they came under Ethiopian suzerainty at the turn of the nineteenth century, no state official entered their homeland until 1945. At this time, an Ethiopian force was sent to Aussa to dethrone an obstreperous sultan and replace him with his nephew Ali Mirah, who enjoyed official favor. The nephew was left to exercise traditional authority of the post with minimum interference from Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian governor of the Afar district resided on the heights above in Wollo province, and few highlanders ventured into the lowland below. It was not until the appearance of the sugar cane plantations on the Upper Valley in mid-twentieth century that the Afar directly confronted the world outside.

This new development did not directly inconvenience the Afar for they held no land in the Upper Valley. The displacement of the Karrayu and Gilo peoples saw them forced to the

edge of the escarpment in the vicinity of the Awash National Park, where they clashed with the Afar who consider the park their own grazing ground.

Historically, the Afar who live on and near the escarpment have had a complex relationship with their highland neighbors. The relationship was closer in the north where Afar districts were incorporated in the provincial administration of Tigray. The salt trade in which both Afar and Tigray were involved strengthened their relationship. In their frequent clashes with the imperial government, Tigray rebels frequently sought refuge in the Afar lowlands, a tradition continued by the TPLF in the 1970s and 1980s. Afar relations with Amhara and Oromo peasants further south were permanently troubled with frequent clashes over land. Land shortage forced highlanders to cultivate land lower on the escarpment flanks, where they confronted Afar herders moving higher in search of pasture. Drought frequently added further strain on the relationship and provoked violence.

Regional state borders drawn under the federal system sought to prevent conflict of this sort, yet often provoked it, with both sides claiming the borderlands. There have been many clashes on the escarpment border since 1991. The most dramatic occurred in November 2002 when thirty Afar women on their way to market were killed. A study conducted jointly by Amhara and Afar regional governments and based on official police figures reported that 174 people were killed and 75 wounded between 1995 and 2003.

As the cotton plantations began to transform the landscape in the Middle Valley, pushing herders away from the Awash River banks, the peoples' response was bewilderment; they "couldn't understand why" as one song put it. No information or explanation was provided by the AVA, and the traditional leaders were equally perplexed. The example of acquiescence given by Sultan Ali Mirah and elders of his clan was instructive, and no major incidents of violence are recorded for that period, other than clashes between herders whose livestock overrun plantation grounds and guards hired to prevent just that.

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Afar militancy was focused on containing the Issa Somali expansionist pressure westwards in the Afar River Valley. This conflict is the most serious ongoing dispute in the region, with cross-border linkages in Djibouti, Somaliland, and Somalia that concern national security and, consequently, the federal government (Markakis 2011, 301 ff.). "An everlasting animosity," as a painstaking study of it describes it (Yasin 2010, 2), it has a history of gradual escalation and has proved intractable despite persistent efforts at various levels to resolve it. The two have fought for control of a vast rangeland area stretching from the northern foothills of the southern plateau to the Awash River Valley a long time. "War with Afar is fourteen generations old," the Issa say.

Its recorded history goes back over a century, when the battlefield was the Erer River Valley north of Dire Dawa in Ethiopia and west of Tadjura Bay in Djibouti. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Afar and Issa fought a series of bloody battles for control of this area. A battle at Mefayidela in the Alighedi Plain on July 16, 1963, ended with 481 Afar killed and 25,000 of their cattle looted. Seriously weakened, the Afar gradually ceded territory. Weima (Afar) clans were forced to evacuate Erer, Afdem, Mulu, Hurso, and Mieso and move into the Middle Awash Valley, where other Afar jokingly referred to them as refugees. A large clan, the Issa Somali inhabit the Shinile Zone in the Somali regional state adjacent to Zone 3 of the Afar regional state in the Middle Valley. The Issa share the territory

of Djibouti with Afar clans, where they have monopolized state power since independence, largely excluding the Afar. This conflict has scarred the collective Afar psyche. They have not forgotten or forgiven, nor have they lost hope of recovering the lost land.

Until recently, the conflict was over pasture, water, and access routes, a purely pastoralist confrontation. Unlike the introverted nature of the Afar, the Somali are highly mobile nomadic herders, who range widely over the Horn, constantly shifting territory in search of green pasture. Also unlike the Afar, they are active in local trade, exchanging livestock products for grain with peasant neighbors. In the past, they were engaged in the long-distance trade of luxury goods, such as ivory, animal skins, myrrh and frankincense, civet oil, and ostrich feathers. They were actively involved in the caravan trade that linked the hinterland of the Horn with the towns on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, as transporters, guides, and guards. More recently, they have become major exporters of livestock through Djibouti and Somaliland to the Arab Gulf.

The imperial state kept a low profile in the pastoralist zone, leaving the people to manage their own affairs, and to settle disputes among themselves in the traditional manner. The usual form of intervention was to threaten, or indeed to use force to disarm the belligerents. The furthest the imperial regime went to manage the Afar-Issa dispute was to redraw district boundaries in order to separate them and temporarily station soldiers there to enforce them. It was only when state security was threatened—when violence spilled across international borders, or blocked transport links—that the state intervened. For example, when Issa warriors attacked a train and killed a Frenchman in August 1963, units of the Imperial Bodyguard carried out a massacre of people in Ayisha, the district capital.

External factors intervened to tilt the balance against the Afar. The construction of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway line that was completed in 1917 crosses the Erer River Valley. Begun in Djibouti by the French, it employed Issa clansmen as transporters, workers, and guards, who later settled in the lowland region crossed by the railway that is now Shinille zone, the Issa homeland. Two decades later, the Italians came and recruited large numbers of Somali askaris from Italian Somalia for the 1936 invasion of Ethiopia. The Issa fought for the Italians and received arms and training in return, as well as a lucrative market for their animals. They used the arms to evict the Afar from the Erer River Valley and gain access into the Alighedi plain for their expanding herds. The Italians considered the Somali as allies, while the Afar, who fought on the Ethiopian side, suffered retaliation.

With the expulsion of the Italians in 1941, the entire southeast region of Ethiopia came under British control. It ended in 1944, but a belt of land alongside the railway line to Djibouti, called the Reserved Area, remained under the British until 1948. Taking advantage of British protection, the Ishaq clans from Somaliland moved en masse into the Jijiga Plain inside the Somali inhabited region of Ethiopia, creating overstocking and overgrazing that put pressure on clans to the north, including the Issa, to move westwards.

The focus of Afar militancy shifted as an emerging generation of educated youth was drawn into the radical current created by the student movement in Ethiopia to oppose the imperial regime. Afar students in Addis Ababa, Djibouti, Cairo and Europe debated the future of their nation and began to organize. An Afar Rassemblement Movement was founded in 1972 by students from Djibouti. A joint meeting held in Berlin in 1974 resulted in the strategic formation of separate organizations to represent the Afar in Djibouti and Ethiopia, and an Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM) was founded a year later in Addis Ababa. The division along state lines became a political imperative for the Afar, who realized that

any expression of pan-Afar nationalism, implying a quest for independence, would face opposition by every state in the Horn and would likely be drowned in blood. Afar politicians in Djibouti and Ethiopia knew better than to arouse suspicion on that score.

The nationalization of land in 1975 by the Derg, the show of resistance by Sultan Ali Mirah, and the founding of the Afar Liberation Front marked a turning point in Afar political posture. Initially, the ANLM and the ALF collaborated in preparations for an armed struggle and sought assistance from the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Siad Barre regime in Mogadishu. It was not long before the ANLM radicals fell out with the ALF, led by Ali Mirah's sons, and both organizations became inactive. In 1976, the Derg issued its Programme of the National Democratic Revolution, promising equal treatment for all nationalities and cultures in socialist Ethiopia. Having dismissed traditional authorities throughout the periphery as "feudal remnants," the regime proceeded to raise its own corps of peripheral elite by recruiting lowlanders into a corps of cadres that comprised its political and administrative support. A limited number of lowlanders were trained and then assigned to political and administrative posts in the lowlands.

Leading ANLM members were tempted by the promise of the program and travelled to Ethiopia to meet Derg representatives. Several meetings were held in Afar to negotiate terms, to which elders were invited. Once more, the Afar asked for all their kinsmen, including those in Eritrea, to be united in one province within Ethiopia and to be administered by their own people. The first request was rejected, and the Afar remained divided in three provinces: Eritrea, Tigray, and Wollo. The second was accepted, and several ANLM members were appointed to administrative and political posts in the Afar region. Upon meeting Yusuf Mohammed Gas, the newly appointed head political commissar in Asab, the Derg leader Mengistu Haile Mariam reportedly said: "I found the man who'll work for us." A couple of hundred Afar joined the Working People's Party of Ethiopia (WPPE) when it appeared in 1984. In his speech to the founding congress of WPPE, the regime's leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, declared: "Regional autonomy is the practical solution to the problem, in view of the objective conditions of our country."

The deterioration in the relationship between the regimes in Addis Ababa and Mogadishu, which both avowed Marxist Leninist regimes, led to the Somali invasion of Ethiopia and had a serious impact on the Afar-Issa struggle. In the early 1970s, Mogadishu trained a guerrilla force to prepare the ground for the invasion of Ethiopia. The Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF) had several divisions, one of which was intended to occupy and annex Djibouti and was composed mainly of Issa clansmen. The Djibouti part of the plan was abandoned, but when the invasion of Ethiopia came in 1977, the Issa, well-armed and well-trained, once again pressed their advantage to push the Afar farther to the west.

The Ethiopian counterattack and expulsion of the Somali forces the following year was enthusiastically supported by the Afar but proved only a temporary setback for the Issa, who were later to return to the vicinity of the road to Djibouti. In the 1970s, when the nationalist revolution in Eritrea cast a shadow on the future of the Assab port, Ethiopia's only outlet to the sea, the military regime constructed a road to Djibouti as an alternative. Several of the construction camps along the road soon evolved into hamlets living off the traffic, and Issa clansmen initially employed by the German construction company settled in two of these, Gadamaitu and Adaitu. Here they became involved in the truck-stop service trade, also in smuggling goods across the border from Djibouti and Somalia, as well as raising livestock.

Few Afar settled in these hamlets, and they departed when hostilities between the two groups broke out.

The EPRDF came to power well prepared with plans to transform both state and society in highland Ethiopia, and wasted no time in implementing them. By contrast, it had no knowledge or experience of the lowlands, and had made no provision in its plans for their unique character. The regime's leader, Meles Zenawi, later admitted: "These are clan-based societies, unlike our own peasantry, and we didn't know if our political experience suited them."¹ Nevertheless, later on, the regime went on to impose the same plans on lowland society with little concession for its distinctiveness.

Afar was not a blind spot for the TPLF leadership. Northern Afar had been administered by Tigray and, while still fighting the Derg, the TPLF had recognized the Afar who lived in Tigray as one of the five nationalities in the province and even tried to recruit them in its guerrilla army. The Afar chiefs opposed this, as well as TPLF attempts to set up bases in northern Afar. In 1978, a clash with TPLF units in the region resulted in heavy Afar casualties and further strained the relationship. Eventually, Afar resistance to highlander intrusion into their homeland brought together a band of warriors that included former ANLM members, who called themselves Ugogomo, meaning "revolution." They led a shadowy existence in the depths of the Afar Depression, and menaced any and all intruders. Ugogomo gained notoriety in later years by kidnapping foreigners for ransom and embarrassing the EPRDF regime in Addis Ababa. Despite many efforts, the regime has been unable to eliminate them to this day.

The ANLM leaders and Derg collaborators were rounded up in 1991 and spent the decade in prison. After release, several were appointed to posts in the Afar regional state administration. Mohamood Gas escaped abroad to organize a rebel faction named the Afar Revolutionary Democratic United Front (ARDUF), which claimed to represent Ugogomo. The appearance of TPLF units in Afar was initially opposed by the ALF, and in September 1991 the two clashed in Gewane in a battle that lasted four days and left hundreds of Afar dead and wounded. This signaled the beginning of the political decline of the Ali Mirah family, which made things worse when it demanded the return of nationalized land that had been distributed by the Derg to local people. Hanfare Ali Mirah's term in office lasted only a few months; the ALF split and disintegrated amidst family quarrels. A miffed Ali Mirah took himself to Saudi Arabia once more. He returned after the Ethiopia-Eritrea war broke out in 1998 to attack Eritrea on television and was rewarded with a grant of land in Aussa and the aforementioned villa in Addis Ababa.

In the early 1990s, EPRDF watched Afar political factions compete for local power, a forbearance it maintained elsewhere in the lowland zone while it secured political control of the highlands. In the meantime, the loss of northernmost Afar to Eritrea went almost unnoticed. No Afar voice spoke out against the issue when it was discussed and settled in the July 1991 conference in Addis Ababa or when Eritrea became formally independent in 1994. The Afar People's Democratic Organisation (APDO) was cobbled together in 1995 and won elections that year. The election was a farce that even the government press could not take seriously. In Asaita, the regional capital, one newspaper reported, "voters had virtually no idea how to cast ballots, election officials in the area were either just as ignorant or not willing to explain the process, ten to twelve year old teenagers were voting, and officials harassed

¹ Author interview with Bitew Belay, TPLF Central Committee member, Addis Ababa, April 2, 2007.

press people when asked for an explanation” (*Ethiopian Herald*, June 19, 1995). The APDO was renamed the Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP) and won every electoral contest held subsequently. It rules the Afar regional state to this day.

The Afar-Issa confrontation escalated steadily in the years that followed, with a number of factors adding to its complexity in the 1990s. The restructuring of the Ethiopian state under federalism unwittingly introduced two contentious points. Firstly, the federal structure of the state requires fixed, recognized boundaries that separate its constituent units. Since the territorial boundaries between states, once drawn, will be definitive and final, it is crucial for the parties involved to secure as generous a settlement as possible. This strategy inhibits compromise and makes negotiations difficult. Secondly, decentralization of the state administration has aggravated local conflict because it provides resources associated with local administrative status. Because of materials and social resources allocated to a *woreda* (district) and the right to control its own budget, local governments aggressively competed to achieve the *woreda* status.

The third factor is the loss of Assab as a result of the Ethiopian-Eritrean War and the consequent rise in importance of the road connecting to Djibouti that crosses the Awash Valley. After 1998, traffic on the road multiplied, the truck-stop hamlets became hives of activity that attracted highlanders, and the road emerged as a new and valuable source of wealth in the midst of a deprived region. Given the collapse of state control on the borders between Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somaliland, and Somalia, contraband trade acquired new dimensions, and a veritable “common market” emerged throughout this part of the Ethiopian periphery. Not surprisingly, Somali, and especially Issa, pursued this trade, moving freely among their own kin throughout the region. More Somali hamlets appeared on the road to function as staging posts for the contraband trade. The Afar remained aloof and gained no benefit from these activities.

The civil war in Djibouti in the early 1990s was another contributing factor. On one level, the war was an extension of the struggle in Ethiopia—the steady retreat of the Afar westwards in the face of Issa pressure. On another level, it was a struggle between Afar and Issa urban elites in Djibouti for access to state power. The conflict in Djibouti raised tensions across the border and made the mini-state a reference point for conspiracy theories in the Afar-Issa dispute within Ethiopia, each side claiming the other received weapons and manpower from their kinsmen in Djibouti. The end of this forceful assertion of Afar political militancy in Djibouti was an object lesson for them. It was strongly opposed by Ethiopia, Eritrea, and warlords in Somalia, as well as France, which committed soldiers to save the Issa regime from collapse. In the end, the Afar insurgent movement, FRUD, split, and another faction abandoned the struggle when its leaders negotiated with the Issa regime for appointment to government posts.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean War (1998–2001) was fought partly in northern Afar and caused havoc among the population who had to abandon their land and move south with their animals, increasing the burden on already congested and desiccated pasturelands. Thousands of Afar from Eritrea sought refuge among their kinsmen in Ethiopia, and two groups emerged to represent the grievances of the Afar in Eritrea—the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation and the Afar Liberation Democratic Movement in Eritrea. The relationship of the Afar with the Eritrean nationalists was spoiled long before they came to power as a result of the EPLF’s attempts to create bases in the northernmost Afar lowland and to recruit local youth for its guerrilla army. After coming to power, the EPLF forcefully disarmed the Afar and

forced them to join the National Service scheme that made conscription indefinite. The fact that women were subject to conscription further alienated this community. Above all, the Afar in Eritrea resented the nationalist regime's policy of national integration, which aimed to eliminate ethnic distinctions in order to produce a homogeneous Eritrean national identity. This policy is the opposite of the one implemented in Ethiopia that has gained Afar cultural recognition and a degree of local autonomy.

In 2000, Saudi Arabia imposed a ban on animal imports from the Horn, the second one in recent years, due to the outbreak of Rift Valley fever. The ban hit the Issa particularly hard, because they are major exporters of sheep and goats to the Saudi Arabian market. It caused overstocking and overgrazing in Shinile zone, and pushed Issa herders to range deeper into Afar territory towards the Awash River where they met an increasingly hostile reception from the Afar.

Violence spilled onto the Addis Ababa Djibouti road, making travel on it dangerous. Afar stayed away from Issa hamlets; even driving through was risky. Provoked by the murder of a popular Afar politician and member of the federal legislature in May 2000, the Afar carried out a massacre in Somali hamlets and the road was closed. In the following four months, some fifty Issa deaths were recorded by the Shinile zone administration. Two years later, an Afar ambush killed a dozen Issa. The road was closed on several occasions, and at least one lorry driver was killed, prompting his colleagues to stage a strike that caused a shortage of fuel in Addis Ababa.

The loss of Assab Port had made the railway and road to Djibouti virtual lifelines for Ethiopia, therefore the federal government became involved in the effort to resolve the Afar-Issa conflict. A newly formed Ministry of Federal Affairs was made responsible, but the Prime Minister's Office took the initiative. The EPRDF's approach to conflict management in ethnic disputes generally relied on consultation, negotiation, and persuasion. Having sidelined the traditional leadership, the federal government depended on the new political leadership in the regional states to take the initiative. The Somali and Afar regional administrations came under increasing pressure from the federal government to reach an agreement on the issues that divided them and to put an end to violence.

This approach made little progress; both sides became even more unwavering in their respective positions. A key issue was the boundary between the two regions that had not yet been adequately demarcated. Basing their case on history and the right of prior possession, the Afar claimed the return of territory up to Erer Valley and jurisdiction over all settlements on the road to Djibouti. The Somali countered with the right of actual possession of the land they now occupy and a demand for a referendum in the roadside settlements, in the obvious expectation that they would become part of their region. They had already moved to preempt the issue by claiming administrative jurisdiction of these towns by integrating them into the Shinile Zone, although the towns lay within the Afar-controlled Zone 3.

The regime's next move was to order the formation of "integrated peace committees" with administrators and elders from both sides, as well as military and security officials to mediate local conflicts and adjudicate disputes in order to avoid clashes. It was agreed that both Afar and Issa would have access to the Alighedi Plain until a definitive border demarcation was made. Innumerable meetings followed without result. The Afar demanded the return of lost territory and a delineated border. "When two people fight, they have to be separated before they reconcile," they said. They wanted the federal government to draw the boundary so that it would have the responsibility of enforcing it. Basing their claim

on current political practice, the Somali wanted a referendum to decide the status of the contested territory, a method that was widely used to determine the border between Somali and Oromo regional states.

The federal government faced a political dilemma. A return to the territorial status quo ante would alienate the Somali, while a referendum would further upset the Afar. And there the matter rested. As clashes continued, the federal government resorted to familiar tactics by bringing in the army to keep the road clear and to stamp out the contraband trade by raiding the settlements, arresting smugglers, and confiscating goods and vehicles. The army also burned a couple of settlements and generally disrupted the local economy founded on smuggling. Though the Issa suffered more, the Afar were not spared; eighteen of them were killed by soldiers in August 2008. Finally, the federal government sought to solve the problem with a dictate. It put the towns on the road under Afar jurisdiction and administration while stipulating that the Somali residents are recognized as an ethnic group and accorded certain rights as provided in the Constitution. Whether this plan succeeds remains yet to be seen.

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The huge expansion of sugar production in the Middle and Lower Valleys began in the first half of the 2000s with the commissioning of feasibility studies that were completed in 2005. In 2008, the Ministry of Water and Energy announced that they were breaking ground on projects in Tendaho and Kesseme that was then taken over by the newly-founded Ethiopian Sugar Corporation in 2010. While it is not clear whether the Afar administration was consulted at the outset, there is no doubt that the people in the Valley were unaware of the plans until the second half of the decade. As the construction process proceeded, the federal and regional governments undertook a public relations campaign to convince the Afar of the benefits they stood to gain directly from the sugar industry and from conversion to agro-pastoralism.

Little was said publicly about popular opinion, but the large number of meetings that were held and the multiple visits to the region by the regime leader, Meles Zenawi, to address the meetings indicates a less than enthusiastic attitude among the people. The plan was promoted by the Afar ruling party whose leadership and cadre had a great deal to gain from it since it involved a huge investment in the region from which the peripheral elite were certain to appropriate a share as well as administrative posts. Pressure for posts in the ESC was almost immediately exerted, and the Afar were appointed to several senior posts, including deputy CEO of the ESC. Others made it to similar positions in the federal state administration. The former leader of ARDUF, Mohamood Gas, made peace with the EPRDF and returned to Ethiopia to become vice minister of youth and sports.

The support of the elders was critical for it would determine the reaction of the rest of the population. Naturally the elders were dubious about the news from Addis Ababa, having heard similar promises from previous regimes. They complained of having been ignored by the EPRF and sidelined in the regional administration by the politicians. Redress was promised, and a council of elders was attached in an advisory capacity to every level of the regional administrative hierarchy, a model applied gradually to every lowland regional state. The Afar elders demanded compensation for land taken by the sugarcane plantations, and the state allocated 241 million birr for this purpose. Entrusted to the Tendaho-Kesseme

Coordination Secretariat for distribution, “the money disappeared between project’s coordinators and the community elders” (Gebrehiwot and Sintayehu 2014a, 107). The Secretariat was disbanded and the task was assigned to a regional bureau.

4.2 Conclusion

For over a century since it was incorporated into the state, the lowland periphery of Ethiopia was regarded as a buffer zone between the highland kingdom with its Christian core and its Muslim neighbors. This role did not require its integration into the highland economy and society, and the state did not intrude into the lives of the people there beyond the claim of a vague suzerainty. As a result, lowland society remained distant and aloof from the profound transformations—economic, social and political—that prepared the ground for the dramatic initiatives pursued by the state in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The Afar experience is a partial exception in that it was the subject of early state initiatives before the era of globalization.

In the global economy in which Ethiopia has recently placed itself, there is literally no space for the traditional pastoralist mode of existence. It has survived to this day because the country itself is underdeveloped and stands near to bottom of the world development scale. Left to itself, the state would not have been able to take significant initiatives in nation-state building or development, especially in the lowland zone. A globalized economy has made it possible by providing the required resources in a formidable combination of external and internal forces—funds and technology for the economy as well as political and military support for the state.

The integrity of Afar society, culture, and identity are facing an existential challenge. Although the typical Afar reaction in the past was forceful and largely effective, the Afar reaction to the latest challenge is divided and weakened as a result. The conflicting opinions stem from the appearance of Western-educated Afar, who have no role in traditional society, and the rise of this group to power under federalism, yet another combination of external and internal factors.

Federalism guarantees autonomy that allows space for the exercise of local agency. In this case, local agency is practiced by a small elite section of the population to neutralize the majority of the Afar people who, at the very least, would have preferred a less cataclysmic approach to development, one that did not involve the loss of their land and dislocation of their society. It can be rightfully argued that the resources of Afar land belong to the Ethiopian nation and the state has the right to make use of them. It is also argued that the Afar way of life would be swept away by globalization anyway, regardless of state action. Whatever the merits of these arguments, it remains true that the fate of the Afar will be decided not by negotiation but through force majeure. “We were unwilling to move because we were comfortable where we lived,” one Afar remarked. “The government forced us to move” (cited in Botterli 2015, 22).

The same process of indigenous dispossession in the production and trade of salt is taking place in northern Afar. Once an Afar monopoly exported to the plateau, the exploitation of this essential commodity is now dominated by highlanders associated with the EPRDF. According to a recent study, while Afar are still involved their share is steadily decreasing, and the option of livelihood diversification this sector might have offered is closed. The study concludes that “instead of economic empowerment, what can be observed in the

largely pastoralist peripheral areas is rather a growing economic insecurity and a threatened livelihood. Powerful farming neighbors and a state with an agrarian bias have encroached onto the rangeland, putting the viability of pastoralism into question. This continuity of center-periphery relations of dominance threatens to undermine the moral and political legitimacy of the federation” (Feyissa [2011](#), 20).