

Shifting Regimes of Violence within Ethiopia's  
Awash Valley Investment Frontier

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# 14

## Shifting Regimes of Violence within Ethiopia's Awash Valley Investment Frontier

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Over the past fifteen years the Ethiopian state has greatly increased its investments in the sparsely populated arid and semi-arid pastoral lowlands where land is deemed as 'unused' (Lavers 2012). Guided by export-oriented agro-industrial development strategies and a modernist development ideology, the state has embarked on large-scale mechanised schemes to expand commercialised irrigation agriculture. Land investments focus on the large river basins such as the Wabi-Shebelle, Nile, Omo and Awash, all of which are considered to have high irrigation potential. With the construction of large dams and the conversion of prime grazing areas along large rivers into farmland, conflicts with dispossessed and resettled local pastoralists and agro-pastoralists are on the rise (Fratkin 2014). While the Ethiopian government has trumpeted double-digit national economic growth rates, critical perspectives are that pastoral livelihoods have experienced a 'negative' structural transformation characterised by widespread impoverishment, increasing social inequality and rising levels of destitution (Rettberg et al. 2017). Most pastoralists are currently excluded from the benefits of large-scale land investments pursued in the name of 'growth and transformation'.

Land investments and large-scale enclosures in marginal dryland areas are not a new phenomenon in the Ethiopian lowlands. They map onto the historic Ethiopian centre-periphery dynamics between Muslim mobile pastoralists inhabiting the lowland areas and the ruling Christian Orthodox regimes familiar with farming in highland areas. Previous regimes under Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–74) and the socialist military junta of the Derg (1974–91) also pursued investments in large-scale cotton and sugar estates in the lowlands, leaving a legacy of displacement and dispossession in the pastoral frontier (Makki 2012). The state conceives arable land in the lowlands as 'underutilised', 'untapped' and relatively abundant compared to the densely populated highland areas where land is scarce, as we saw in Fana Gebresenbet's chapter on South Omo in this book. At the same time, large-scale agricultural investments in Ethiopia

have always served as a tool for state-building and the consolidation of power in its periphery, countering the widespread assumption that land grabs undermine state sovereignty (Lavers 2016). An authoritarian high-modernist state mainly concerned with control and appropriation often uses the establishment of large-scale schemes as a way to increase the legibility of frontiers (Scott 1998). Pastoralists uniquely challenge state sovereignty as their mobility undermines the state's capacity to tax, conscript and otherwise regulate the population. This explains the continuity of governmental policies for an expansion of the plantation economy in the pastoral frontier in spite of its lack of profitability compared to pastoralism (Behnke and Kerven 2013).

In the face of increasing resource appropriation by the state, this chapter examines the impact of past and contemporary state-driven land investments on regimes of violence and forms of local conflict and contestation in the pastoral frontier of the Awash Valley. As Hagmann and Alemmaya Mulugeta (2008) argue, the drivers of conflict and violence in Ethiopia's lowlands have changed through the process of increasing political and economic incorporation of pastoral areas into the state. In 2014 the Awash Valley accounted for 50 per cent of the national irrigated area (Fratkin 2014). Having unfolded over a period of nearly sixty years, the impacts and influences of large-scale investments in the Awash Valley are readily apparent. Once known as an area of exceptional pastoral wealth due to preferential grazing areas along the river, pauperisation and food insecurity have substantially risen during the last decades, with new forms of local conflict emerging. Therefore, the case of the Awash Valley can also be read as a cautionary story of how lives and livelihoods in other drylands in the Horn of Africa that are experiencing new, more recent large-scale investments may develop, including in South Omo (Chapter 10), Lamu (Chapter 2), Turkana (Chapter 4), and Kilombero (Chapter 6).

Conceptually, frontiers are understood as symbolic and material spaces at the margins of the state where 'authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies of the recent past have been or are currently being challenged by new enclosures, territorialisation, and property regimes' (Peluso and Lund 2011: 668). They are zones of contact between two previously distinct social orders, where governmental and autochthonous forms of political organisation compete and multiple regimes of violence, power and territoriality overlap (Korf et al. 2015; Hagmann and Korf 2012).

The transformation of regimes of resource control goes hand-in-hand with the conflictive establishment of new property rights and regulations of access. Territorialisation, the embedding of social relations in bounded space, is the defining strategy to gain resource control, to consolidate state power in frontiers (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995) and to increase the legibility of the society (Scott 1998). It refers to the 'creation of systems of resource control – rights, authorities, jurisdictions, and their spatial representations' (Rasmussen and Lund 2018: 388). Therefore, territorial reordering for the allocation of rights, authority and control presents

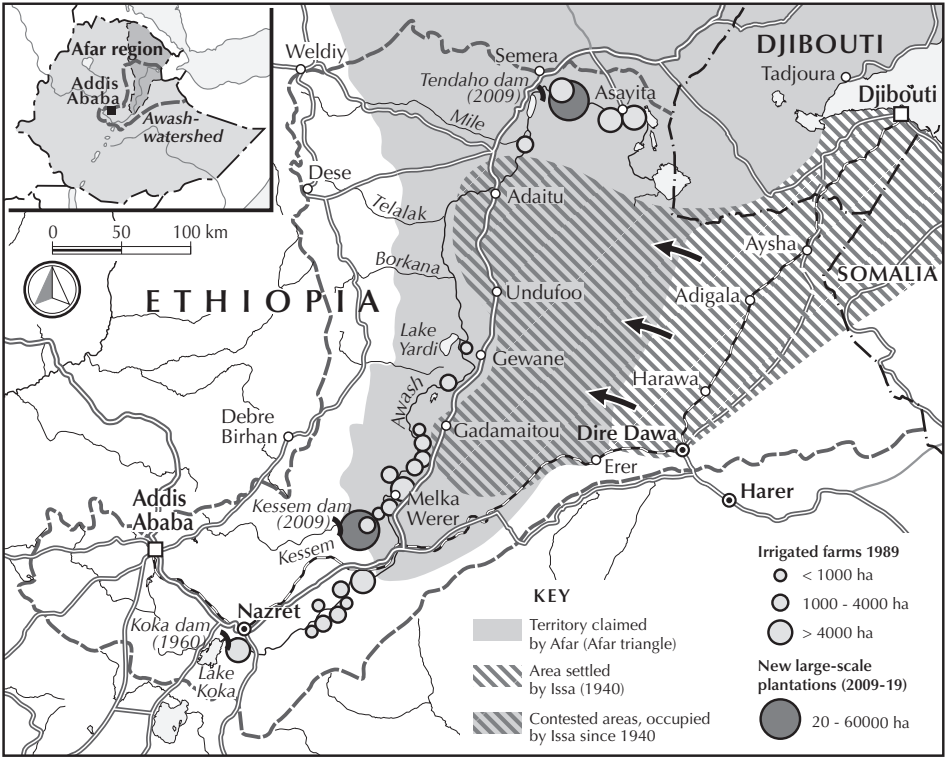
one of the main features of national governance in pastoral areas where national sovereignty is contested. Recent studies increasingly include indigenous discourses and practices so that territorialisation appears as a co-constitutive process of governmental and non-governmental actors within the frontier (Korf et al. 2015). The centre represents frontiers as zones of backwardness, disorder and insecurity. However, from the perspective of local inhabitants, the frontier is not a backward, marginal territory needing to be controlled but a threatened homeland at risk of being invaded by external powers.

The hegemonial discursive construction of the frontier as ‘no man’s land’ is constitutive for the legitimate use of state violence and authoritarian interventions in the name of ‘civilisation’ and modern development, for example, through sedentarisation (Asebe Regassa et al. 2018). While violence is often the outcome of conflicts over resource control and sovereignty within the frontier, it can also serve as a tool to establish the frontier. A ‘state of emergency’ characterised by violence, disorder and insecurity is often a constitutive means of governance for the anchoring of state presence in areas where the state lacks the monopoly of power (Hagmann and Korf 2012; see also Chapter 10 on South Omo).

## Historicising conflicts over land control in the Awash Valley

The Awash is the longest river in Ethiopia (1,200 km), originating in the highlands where mean annual rainfall reaches 1,200–1,400 mm. It descends the escarpments of the Awash Valley as it makes its way to Afar, a hot lowland region bordering Djibouti and Eritrea. The land-use potential for irrigation and grazing along the river has made it a bone of contention between the state and Afar pastoralists inhabiting the riverine areas. The fertile seasonally inundated floodplains along the Awash River became the earliest focus for agricultural investments under the imperial regime of Haile Selassie in the second half of the twentieth century. These floodplains constitute a small area but are highly significant resources for Afar pastoralists as dry season grazing and drought refuge. Customarily, access to and use of resources in the floodplains was governed by a communal clan-based system of granting land rights. The only area where Afar practised agriculture along the river was the powerful Sultanate of Aussa located in the lower Awash Valley (around Asayita), where agro-pastoralists engaged in small-scale irrigation in the inland river delta.

Another group who claims resources along the Awash are Issa-Somali pastoralists. With the flare up of Somali irredentism in the second half of the twentieth century, Issa violently displaced the Afar far towards the west, so that Afar clans of the middle Awash Basin lost access to a major part of their rainy season grazing areas (Rettberg 2010). Issa even managed to establish several settlements along the main road to Djibouti (Undufoo,



**Map 14.1** Ethiopia, showing the Awash Valley as a conflict hotspot

Adaitou and Gadamaitou). The area where Afar and Issa currently come into contact and violent contestation overlaps with the development corridor along the Awash River where small towns, administrative centres, major transport routes and large-scale farms are concentrated (see Map 14.1). Recurrent clashes along the main road threaten Ethiopia's foreign trade, which relies disproportionately on access to the Djibouti port that is reached by road through Afar.

## Imperial and military rule: geopolitical threats and securitisation

State land investments in the Awash Valley were initiated by the Abyssinian imperial government as part of its nation-building efforts and as a way of asserting its economic and political power in the pastoral frontier (Markakis 2011). The establishment of commercial farms on the banks of the Awash in the 1950s and the completion of the Koka Dam in 1960 marked the start of an agro-capitalist exploitation of the floodplains (Kloos 1982; Bondestam 1974). The main body responsible for the planning and implementation of development programmes in the Awash Valley was the Awash Valley Authority (AVA), a parastatal agency founded in 1962. The government transferred the land rights along the Awash to AVA in order to modernise the agricultural economy through the cultivation of cash crops and to generate foreign currency. In the following years, the Awash Valley became Ethiopia's most intensely used river basin. This was also owing to its relative proximity to ports along the Red Sea and the strategic location of the valley between the Ethiopian highlands and the Red Sea, which made it an important transit region for overseas trade. Under Haile Selassie large concessions were granted to foreign investors, primarily British and Dutch. By 1971 the irrigated farm area had expanded to 48,900 ha, of which 60 per cent was used for cotton and 22 per cent for sugar cane (Maknun Gamaledin 1987). In 1989 the Awash Valley accounted for approximately 70 per cent of the country's total irrigated area (68,800 ha).

The Awash Basin also served as a security buffer for the Ethiopian state. The securitisation of the Awash Valley was of major importance in defending Ethiopian territory against the irredentist ambitions of Somalia, which claimed the Awash River as the western border of a 'Greater Somalia'. Even though the overall size of irrigated farmland increased (especially under Haile Selassie), the state's prime interest was not resource accumulation, but rather to protect national security in a politically fragile, war-ridden region. Against this background, the Ethiopian state employed divide and rule tactics to isolate the Issa-Somalis. Ethiopia selectively supported the Afar in their conflict with the Issa, while the Somalia government lent military assistance to the Issa. Consequently, the conflict between Afar and Issa-Somali pastoralists

deepened and morphed into a proxy conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia. On several occasions over the years, buffer zones were established to separate the Afar and Issa, but this was above all motivated by the Ethiopian state's interest in halting westward Issa expansions.

Ongoing violence between Afar and Issa and repeated attacks on trucks and trains provided cover for autocratic governmental interventions, including the occasional proclamation of martial law and the deployment of violence as a means of political rule. For local communities, the state's presence was manifest above all in the military (Markakis 2011). Large-scale state violence was directed against Issa who were perceived as state enemies because of their Somali background. Notable episodes include the killing of hundreds of Issa civilians by troops of Haile Selassie in Aysha town in 1962 and the 'Getu war' (named after Colonel Getu, Police Chief of Chercher, Adal and Garaguracha Awraja) in 1972, when the army, led by Colonel Getu, in alliance with Afar and Oromo launched an attack on Issa who had settled close to the Awash River. In comparison, Afar suffered relatively more from structural forms of state violence, namely the dispossession from their key dry season pastures in the Awash floodplains to make way for large plantations. It can be concluded that the Ethiopian state under Haile Selassie and the Derg instrumentalised and used pastoral violence and disorder within the Awash frontier for its own ends: to defend its external borders against Somalia and to gain a hold over land resources for the sake of national economic development and modernisation.

## The developmental state: geo-economic opportunities and infrastructural violence

The territorialisation of social relations and processes of land commodification in the Awash Valley intensified in the early 1990s following ruptures in state power. After the removal of the Siad Barre regime, Somalia descended rapidly into civil war, which meant a dampening of the irredentist threat inside Ethiopia. Around the same time, the Derg regime collapsed and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an alliance of ethnically based opposition movements, assumed power in 1991. The government under the leadership of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (1995–2012) adhered to a strategy of 'Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation' (ADLI) with land remaining the property of the state. The policy encouraged land investments by foreign or domestic investors, which were centrally managed by the state (Lavers 2012). Adopting a developmental state model in the first decade of the twentieth century, the EPRDF embarked on a mission to consolidate its political power in the peripheral lowlands and to integrate Ethiopia in a global neoliberal market economy (Rettberg et al. 2017). The overarching interest of the Ethiopian developmental state focuses on export-oriented



catch-up development in 'unused' areas of the lowlands. While security remains a major strategic objective, the expanded commercial exploitation of water and land resources, as well as extending the reach of state institutions, has become a further priority.

Against this background, practices for territorial reordering have received increasing attention in the Awash Basin frontier. The first phase of territorialisation aimed to create the base for an enhanced regulation of resources and pastoralists. It was marked by the institutional formalisation of a new administrative structure in 1994 based on ethno-territorial units (so-called ethnic federalism) and the decentralisation of political power so that state presence expanded significantly. This undermined customary institutions and created a class of Afar politicians highly loyal to the state. The second phase of territorialisation (since 2000) has focused on investments in commercial agriculture, water provision and transport infrastructure. Bearing the hallmarks of earlier large-scale resettlement programmes pursued by the Derg regime, since 2010 the EPRDF has pursued a villagisation programme in which pastoralists are encouraged to settle voluntarily in new settlements. Here, the provision of water and schools, as well as access to other basic services including health and social assistance, serve as a main incentive to encourage pastoralists to settle. This is linked to a formalisation of land rights and property regimes through land titling, the distribution of one-hectare riverine plots to newly settled pastoralists, and the commodification of water provided by new water supply schemes.

Decentralisation, an increasing literacy of the pastoral population and improved accessibility due to the expansion of transport infrastructure have increased the capacity of the state to penetrate civil society and to implement political decisions. A proliferating number of infrastructural state investments in the region indicate the state's intent to deepen its presence also in areas outside of the development corridor along the Awash River. This thickening of state presence is also apparent in other pastoral areas of Ethiopia, notably in the South Omo valley (see Fana Gebresenbet, Chapter 10 this book). Recent investments include the expansion of the rural roads, the completed rehabilitation of the Addis-Djibouti railway, and schemes to develop the region's groundwater supplies as well as tributaries of the Awash for irrigated agriculture.

In 2010 the EPRDF regime began construction of two large dams (Tendaho and Kessem) in the middle and lower Awash Valley with the capacity to irrigate up to 80,000 hectares of land. The Tendaho Dam and Irrigation Project aims to develop 50,000 ha for sugar-cane production along with 10,000 ha for fodder for displaced (agro-)pastoralists. Riverine forests were flooded or cut and existing cotton farms and key patches of communal dry season grazing areas were transformed into a fully state-owned and federally managed sugar-cane plantation. This dispossession from key rangelands has disturbed seasonal migration patterns, as pastoralists have been forced to move to other, less productive grazing areas for extended periods, leading to localised overgrazing in some places

and declining herd sizes. This, in turn, has contributed to widespread impoverishment, chronic food insecurity and a high dependence on food and cash transfers (Rettberg et al. 2017; Müller-Mahn et al. 2010).

A large majority of the pastoralists have not reaped any economic benefits of agro-capitalist irrigation developments so far. Without formal land titles over their communal grazing areas they received no compensation when the land was expropriated and they were displaced (Dessalegn Rahmato 2008). They also have not benefited from employment opportunities on the plantations, as it is mostly incoming labour migrants from highland areas who are recruited. Afar only get low-paid jobs as guards, as they lack the agricultural skills and qualifications required by recruiting agencies; exclusion from higher paid work in this case mirrors the experience of residents living near to large projects in other contexts covered in this book, including oil installations in Turkana (see Chapter 4), the wind farm in Marsabit (see Chapter 5), and the Mngeta commercial rice scheme in Kilombero (Chapter 6). As in these others, lack of access to good paying and longer-lasting jobs for local residents has nurtured the perception that the state excludes them from economic development. Seen from the margins in Afar, the promise of large-scale plantations has turned into infrastructural violence (Li 2018; Zoomers 2018), as benefits are only captured by a narrow, predatory elite.

## Resistance within the frontier

State interventions to firm up its economic and political control in the frontier are conceived by pastoral groups as massive threats. Most pastoralists experience the state as an external, colonising invader whose interventions have undermined local institutions and livelihoods. While pastoralists are often portrayed as victims of land grabs, local agency in resisting and adapting to the state's expanding presence has been evident in the Awash Valley over time. During the imperial and military regimes, local resistance within the Awash Valley was mainly directed against political control and state sovereignty. High on the political agenda of Afar and Issa was the quest for self-rule in autonomous regions. Various ethnically based insurgent movements offered armed resistance to state power.

At the same time, endogenous forms of territorialisation emerged to counter the ongoing and anticipated land losses through large-scale enclosures by external actors. Land investments had a notable impact on the wealthy Aussa sultanate where the granting of a concession to the British Mitchell Cotts Tendaho Plantations Share Company in 1961 led to dispossession and dislocation of the Afar (Cossins 1973). Against this background, the Sultan of Aussa, Ali Mirah Hanfere, who controlled most of the land in the lower Awash Valley, became one of the largest investors in order to prevent a further expansion of multinational investments onto

'his' land (Maknun Gamaledin 1993). This agrarian development led to a stratification of society in Aussa consisting of marginalised labourers, relatively affluent agro-pastoralists who cultivated small areas (<10 ha), and a wealthy upper class. The latter consisted of customary authorities and relatives of the sultan who controlled most of the irrigated land and were comparable to feudal lords (Bondestam 1974).

Processes of counter-territorialisation intensified after the EPRDF came to power in 1991. The new political context of ethnic federalism increased exclusive ethno-territorial claims to land. It induced processes of voluntary sedentarisation, which has also been encouraged by state development policies for pastoral areas. In a context of insecure land rights in the Awash frontier and an outstanding border demarcation between Afar and Somali regional states, Afar and Issa rushed to establish settlements along the main road to Djibouti as a way of staking territorial claims based on physical presence (Markakis 2003; Rettberg 2010; see Chapters 3 and 8 this book for parallel developments in Isiolo and Baringo, respectively). For the Issa these settlements also perform an economic function by providing an outlet for contraband items coming from Djibouti and Somaliland. In this context, the conflict between Afar and Issa pastoralists turned more and more into a political conflict involving also the Afar and Somali Regional States. It was the contested administrative status of the road settlements inhabited by Issa that led to severe fighting in 2018–19 between pastoralists as well as regional security forces.

Pastoralists also increasingly engage in small-scale subsistence farming (mostly maize and vegetables) on their clan land along the Awash River. Individual and communal enclosures for livestock and farming have become a new phenomenon in recent years, a further indication of local grabbing to stake exclusive land claims, minimise the risk of land losses to competing groups and diversify their livelihood. The main actor in this was the new local Afar elite that emerged after 1991. They included individuals who benefited from political positions in the regional administration and from their involvement in land deals with investors mainly from highland regions (Rettberg 2010). Many profited from their own agricultural investments as well. From being a collective resource, a 'gift of Allah' to be shared, land has turned into a valuable commodity and political resource, just as it has elsewhere in dryland eastern Africa (see Elliott, Chapter 3 and Greiner, Chapter 8 this book). The accompanying monetisation and spread of predatory dynamics have eroded the social capital and the overall well-being of the Afar. In a speech to mark his coronation as the new Aussa sultan in 2011, Hanfare Ali Mirah spoke of the worsening inequalities and social divisions:

Formerly virility, bravery and a fighting spirit were the most laudable qualities among the Afar ... Today we have entered into an age where merit and reputation are based only on the wealth one has amassed and the power one has obtained by intrigue. Today the descendants

of the Afar live in poverty, their livestock decimated, and everyone knows that their agricultural lands on both sides of the river, despite an increase in the area cultivated, have shrunk in size through land grabbing ... People have no mutual trust because of their fear, poverty, lack of faith and ignorance combined. This is due to a lack of spirit of resistance and solidarity leading to the total debility of individuals. A condition in which anything can happen without anyone making the least attempt to protest.<sup>1</sup>

With their integration in and growing economic dependency on state structures, the Afar leadership is increasingly co-opted and tamed. This has resulted in a crisis of both representation and political legitimacy. The interests of Afar elites who have amassed significant wealth from agricultural investments as well as political budgets are in opposition to the majority of Afar livestock-keepers who are dispossessed from key rangelands and are the losers within Ethiopia's developmental state model. The lines of conflict have shifted, with the state now embedded and allied with Afar leadership and pastoral frontier capitalists. The new wealthy Afar elite, which has benefited from its association with political administration and land deals, has emerged as a type of enemy from within as perceived by the majority of disempowered and dispossessed pastoralists. The insecurity and loss of solidarity this has generated has weakened customary institutions, undermining the potential for a unified resistance and easing the way for further investment in the future.

## Conclusion

A long-term perspective highlights that land investments and the appropriation of communal land have been going on since the Ethiopian state first sought to expand into the pastoral lowlands in the mid-twentieth century. Shifting geopolitical and geo-economic conditions have seen the Awash Valley evolve from a security buffer zone against Somalia's irredentist ambitions into a frontier for grabbing resource wealth to the advantage of state development aims. While frontier interventions by the imperial and the Derg regimes were mainly guided by concerns of national security and territorial integrity, the state's objective since the early 1990s has shifted to expand and deepen its resource control and political domination as part of a broader vision of economic growth and structural transformation. The periodic coercive use of state violence and the instrumentalisation of pastoral conflicts have remained central strategies to consolidate its power and enforce processes of commodification and territorialisation in the frontier.

<sup>1</sup> Official speech of the new Sultan of Aussa, Hanfare Ali Mirah, on his coronation in Assayita, 10 November 2011. From 1995–96 Hanfare had also served as president of the Afar Regional State.

A new dynamic is the emergence of capitalist social formations in the context of land dispossession through enclosures. Under these conditions, new types of pastoral conflicts in the Awash investment frontier have evolved as territorial claims multiply. Ongoing processes of social differentiation that are marked by new inclusions and exclusions challenge the assumption that pastoral society is egalitarian. These dynamics underline the need for a critical agrarian political economy perspective in the context of understanding the impacts and influences of investments in pastoral settings. Land investments, rather than being seen only in terms of external state grabs of frontier resource wealth, must also be understood as an investment strategy by new pastoral and post-pastoral capitalist elites in the frontier.

Currently, local forms of resistance do not challenge power structures, as the state has effectively created a class of domesticated capitalists among the Afar who are closely allied with the exercise of state-building – a dynamic similar to what is unfolding in South Omo (see Fana Gebresenbet, Chapter 10 this book). Rather, increasingly individualistic adaptations to a changing institutional context of conjoined state–local elite power are a reflection of a fragmented pastoral society, and one of the few options for most people to build secure lives and livelihoods. With no end in sight to the state’s investment push at the frontier, further inequality, social division, violence and conflict in the Awash Valley are likely.

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