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## Some Considerations on the Limits of Valuing Indigenous Knowledge in Development Interventions: The Case of the Garri Pastoralists of Southern Ethiopia

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*Some Considerations on the Limits of Valuing Indigenous Knowledge in Development Interventions: The Case of the Garri Pastoralists of Southern Ethiopia*

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Francesco Staro \*

To construct a technology is not merely to deploy materials and techniques; it is also to construct social and economic alliances, to invent new legal principles for social relations (PFAFFENBERGER 1988)

This paper focuses on institutional change related to water resources management among the Garri pastoralists inhabiting southern Ethiopia's lowlands along the Ethio-Kenyan border. I analyze contemporary practices of water management in the light of a participatory model and valorisation of local environmental knowledge, which nowadays constitute a major concern of international development organizations working in these regions.

Today a main feature of water usage among these groups is characterized by the spread of private hand-dug water points, a practice that started to grow in number in the early 2000s according to local informants. Ownership tenure does not involve strict and clearly demarcated individual rights, and water access is distributed through personal negotiation and daily bargaining. This kind of water point is quite simple in structure and combines different techniques, as it may either draw from shallow aquifers or collect water run-off. Nowadays private water points are regarded as more important than communal wells which constituted the main water sources in past times.

The diffusion of private water points among the Garri questions the relevance of the "community-based natural resource management" model. Privileged in the current development interventions, this model invites to examine the implications of the contemporary distribution and usage of these water points on "participatory development". However, this common approach tends to consider the "local community" as a static and holistic notion, while the usage of natural resources in general

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rather reflects the plural dynamics of social change. In Southern Ethiopia as in other parts of the world, the practices of water management are the changing combinations of plural—and often conflicting—social relationships, rooted into different historical layers.

The case of the Garri illustrates how local knowledge related to natural resource management cannot be viewed simply as the expression of “ecological wisdom”, providing an optimal usage of natural resources (AGRAWAL 1995, SILLITOE 2002). Indeed, the present Garri populations rather consider relation management as a much more relevant type of knowledge. The capacity of activating social relationships of different nature (based on kinship, commercial activities, political alliances) is then openly valued to get water access and cope with the different actors engaged in the local field of natural resource usage (traditional authorities, government officials, NGOs).

In my analysis, which draws upon the results of field work carried out in Moyale and Hudet in 2011 and 2012, new forms of water point ownership should be considered as a means for reconfiguring “local community”. Changing ideas of property, rights and entitlement to water access must be considered as part of a new form of social organization among Garri groups.

### **The quest for “indigenous knowledge”**

In southern Ethiopia, valorisation of local knowledge through participative approaches constitutes a backbone of development interventions related to natural resource management. This model started to be implemented in the early ‘90s, following the dismissal of a “top-down”, modernist development approach characterized by high technological transfer.

Anthropology questioned the possibility of isolating indigenous knowledge as a specific field that can be outlined and put at the disposal of development planners. Firstly, a participatory approach aiming to value indigenous knowledge often assumes that this knowledge is homogeneously distributed within a local “community” (MOSSE 1994). As we will see, the case of the Garri illustrates that current practices of water management results from political differences and economic cleavages within Garri society. This case shows that analysis of natural resource management and knowledge regulating their usage has to be framed in a wider context of social and economic change. From this perspective, a new form of water ownership regime is only one among different factors that must be considered. Other variables must be taken into account such as changes in decision-making process related to water usage due to external interference (colonial and government authorities, NGOs), dynamic of wealth differentiation, linkages with regional commercial markets, migrations and demographic pressure over natural resources (BROKENSHA and LITTLE 1990).

Secondly, the multiplicity of indigenous knowledge has been stressed. Development discourse takes for granted that local knowledge can assure an optimal usage of natural resources, and especially water, considered as “rare” resources, although conservation may not be the primary goal of natural resource management among local populations,

and different logics governing natural resource usage may be at stake. The discursive construction of scarcity as natural and universalized characteristic of water resources, reproduced at local level by relief and humanitarian agencies, contributed to a homogenization of diverse perspectives on water, and to reduce cultural complexity of this resource (MEHTA 2001). Adopting an anthropological approach to indigenous knowledge implies an acknowledgment of different “ideas” of water, thus recognizing many criteria regulating water management.

This complexity can be observed from an historical point on view. In semi-arid areas of the Horn of Africa, despite current emphasis on “participation” and valorisation of “indigenous knowledge” in development discourse, local knowledge including knowledge of the environment has long been at the centre of social relationships between pastoralists, colonial and state authorities.<sup>1</sup> During colonial as well as postcolonial times, “indigenous knowledge” was discredited and considered as an obstacle to “modernity”. Different prejudices oriented the implementation of development activities in pastoral areas of the Horn of Africa: nomadic groups came to be represented as «either as unpredictable nuisance or even a threat, or (at best) as a resource to be tapped and exploited in the ‘national’ interest» (DOOMBOS 1993:118). In northern Kenya, these representations legitimated interventions such as demarcation of grazing and water boundaries and the implementation of irrigation schemes (HOGG 1987, BROKENSHA and LITTLE 1990). In southern Ethiopia as well, water constituted the main tool through which colonial and national authorities extended their control over local populations, with “water development” being the cornerstone of a political project to settle nomads (GADAMU 1994). Pastoralists were perceived by external planners as unable to conserve the rangelands, and their practices of resource usage considered as the main “cause” of deterioration of the vegetation and the decrease of stock carrying capacity,<sup>2</sup> due to overpopulation or land mismanagement. In modernization discourse, water development and irrigation schemes were intended as the “remedy” to incorrect ecological practices of pastoralists, who came to be considered in terms of a “problem”.<sup>3</sup>

External interference over water and land management prompted changes in the social organization of local groups. This has to do mainly with modification of local decision-making processes due to a decline in political power of local authorities in natural resource management, where elders were traditionally responsible for deciding

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<sup>1</sup> CORNWALL (2006) analyzes various “permutations” of discourses of participation during colonial and post-colonial times.

<sup>2</sup> This concept is good example of how sociocultural complexity of natural resource can be disregarded. The “value” of rangeland is defined only taking into account the size of herds that can be fed, without considering local agreements and social relations regulating grazing rights. As Hobart observes, scientific knowledge “requires the homogenization and quantifiability of what is potentially qualitatively different” (1993:6).

<sup>3</sup> A FAO report advocating for construction of irrigation scheme in northern Kenya refers that «(...) no solution of the Turkana problem is possible by which all the people can continue their traditional way of life» (FAO 1964:2).

the date of opening of dry-season fodder reserves and water points, impeding permanent settlements and persecuting herdsmen who did not comply with the rules.

From the late 80's, the top-down, modernist approach that governed interventions in pastoral areas started to be questioned due to the perceived failure of development projects. If official documents issued by international development organizations in the '60s were still reporting that "perpetuating nomadism would in the best of cases represent a waste of potential agricultural land" (cited in BOCCO 2000: 202), an emphasis on rehabilitating traditional indigenous knowledge emerged in development discourse as a new paradigm for intervention. Through concepts like «non-equilibrium environment», flexible management and abandonment of blueprint planning, a new development paradigm recognized the need to preserve the mobility of pastoralists, instead of relying them to remain at specific sites. Despite this change in approach, emphasis on valorisation of indigenous knowledge did not mean a step towards recognition of the social embeddedness of natural resource management. In planners' outlook, "the value of water resource" continued to be determined exclusively by ecological factors without paying attention to multiple social and political relationships.

In the Convention on Biological Diversity invoked in the 1992 Rio convention, the environmental dimension of development was given special attention, together with the affirmation of the principle of preserving indigenous environmental knowledge. The dimension of "autochthony" became a reference criterion for development projects related to natural resource management, being local population advocated as competent for conservation of nature and culture (DAHOU 2011). The World Bank's initiative of instituting a "Database of Best Practices on Indigenous Knowledge" exemplifies at best cultural assumptions that characterizes development's outlook over this issue. Indigenous knowledge is defined as the knowledge which "belongs to a specific ethnic group, which is locally bound, indigenous to a specific area, culture- and context-specific".<sup>4</sup> Such a perspective reproduces an idea of knowledge uniformly shared within a given community, which is seen as bounded to local dimension, and separated from economic and political networks.<sup>5</sup> This approach fails to recognize that indigenous environmental knowledge is not isolated within "tradition", but reflects recent and ongoing changes between local populations in their environmental relations (ELLEN 1999).

In southern Ethiopia, attention started to be paid not only to customary regulations for conflict resolution and cooptation of local leaders to mediate and settle disputes (PANKHURST and ASSEFA 2008), but also to local knowledge and traditional social institutions governing natural resource management (HELLAND 1998, OBA 1996). Development agencies started to look up for local interlocutors to implement projects,

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/most/bpindi.htm>, consulted in September 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Social scientists played a major role during colonial and post-colonial times in "mythicizing local community" as a homogeneity and unified unit of analysis. Ethnographic attention focused on locality often reinforced a reified and functional vision of agnatic social institutions and kinship relations, seen as a predominant criteria governing social life in rural societies, thus failing to acknowledge multiple networks and agency of social actors (DAHOU 2011).

without acknowledging that forms of local authority had evolved over time due to influences of colonial administrations and Ethiopian governments. Emphasis on indigenous knowledge in development discourse almost coincided with federal restructuring of Ethiopian state and demarcation of regional boundaries alongside ethnic borders. Ethnicity and primordialism influenced both national politics and development discourse (KEFALE 2010), and relief agencies started to implement participatory approach grounded on the assumption of cultural specificity, where each ethnic group is supposed to have its “own” culture.

Despite change from modernist to sustainable development approach, and the shift from imposition of “scientific rationality” in natural resource management to the valorisation of indigenous environmental practices, “indigenous knowledge” continues to be conceived “as neutral information that can be provided like any other commodity if it is properly organized, archived, and transmitted” (MOLLE 2008:148). This perspective fails to acknowledge that what is important in “indigenous knowledge” is how it is used in different contexts from social actors in order to pursue specific needs. In other words, what is still missing is a recognition of the «political nature of natural resources management» (MOLLE 2008: 133).

### **Private water point among the Garri**

The Garri are the most important of the pre-Hawiya Somali clans (LEWIS 1955: 26-7; KASSA 1983). Studies analyzing the formation and development of various ethnic groups in this area postulate that southern Ethiopia’s lowlands continuing into northern Kenya were inhabited by population sharing a common culture of camel pastoralism antecedent to Oromo and Somali expansion (TURTON 1975, SCHLEE 1989).

Historically, the Garri became the main commercial partner of Oromo Borana groups thanks to their prominent role in controlling caravan traders. Alongside with commercial cooperation, relationships between local groups were constructed through local agreements to fetch water at deep wells known as *Tula* in Oromo, perennial water sources whose importance is strategic to run pastoralist activities during dry-season. Among the Borana, every *Tula* belongs to a specific clan, and clan identity is an important reference to accord water access.

Garri are engaged in different economic activities (pastoralism, commerce, farming and occasional agriculture), which implies that they are not restricted to local kinship relationships as are subsistence-oriented herders (SATO 1996: 292). This is relevant also for contemporary practices of water management, where kinship relations based on clan or lineage membership is only one among many criteria that can be “used” in order to distribute water rights. From the early 2000s, Garri pastoralists inhabiting the areas around Moyale and Hudet started to construct private hand-dug water points. Usually constructed in clusters, these water points are used for watering cattle as well as for domestic consumption. They are closed during rainy season and do not exceed 4 meters deep, collecting rainwater or exploiting a shallow aquifer located not far from small seasonal streams. During excavation, the presence of a type of grass or a tree species can help selecting the location; as the excavation begins, the identification of a limestone

(locally known as *katchawa*) confirms the presence of water in the basement. The particular type of ownership and management of private water points has also been stressed (GOMES 2005, STARO 2013). One or more herdsman may finance construction works, and this gives them entitlement to priority rights and decisional autonomy in defining the watering order.

### **Which / whose “indigenous knowledge”?**

Private hand-dug wells are shallower compared to traditional ones, and water can be fetched more easily, without the need of involving a large number of people. In a situation of high drop-out rate from pastoralism and settlement in urban areas, this kind of water point turns out to be a suitable strategy to comply with scarcity in labour force to look after herds and manage water distribution. Nowadays pastoral activities are carried out recurring to hire workers, while members of the same clan or lineage carried out these activities previously. The choice of herders to take care of livestock, as a Garri herdsman explains, “is largely a matter of trust”. The practice of private water points cannot be considered simply as a response to water scarcity, or just referring to a “Garri tradition” in natural resource usage.

A higher degree of independence from traditional social institutions regulating access to natural resources (especially the role of the *abba herega* (“father of the watering order” in Oromo) which used to regulate water access at communal wells before the spread of private water points) comes along with a reconfiguration of clan and lineage belonging, which nowadays is not considered a preference criterion to select the collaborators to run pastoralist activities as it was in the past.

Two major features characterize management of this type of water point:

#### *A system of turns to water animals*

A three days system regulates water distribution at privatized water points, being the first two days reserved to the owner(s) and the third available for users who have reserved their turn. During the first two days, there are no particular constraints the owner is expected to follow. Therefore he may give priority to those who have financially contributed to the realization of the well, or decide the watering order using different relationships (kinship, commercial alliances, political contracts between lineage groups).

Allocation of water rights is based on reciprocal relationships of trust and daily negotiations. Water bargaining between Garri herdsman results in a higher degree of decisional autonomy from *kebele*<sup>6</sup> interference in natural resource management. This practice allows the Garri to extend their control over the rangeland, and implies a higher degree of decisional independence in planning nomadic movements across administrative boundaries.

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<sup>6</sup> The lowest administrative unit of Ethiopian state.

*Different forms of payment*

Water access can be paid in money, which is coherent with Garri's economic diversification and multiple interconnections with regional markets. For the watering fees, there is a difference between cattle and camels. For camels, the pastoralist is supposed to ask each time access to water for the day by providing in exchange a few litres of milk. For cattle, he will apply to the well's owner by providing an amount of money (usually 100 to 200 birr), which will entitle him to use the water point for the entire dry season.

If the new form of ownership regime may reflect economic stratification among Garri herdsman, arrangements regulating water rights are not limited to monetary transactions, and payment-based water access cannot be considered just as a mere source of vulnerability for poorer households. Through water agreements, which are highly flexible and contextual, kinship as well as other type of relationships are continuously re-defined and re-negotiated. Kinship relationships are still relevant for natural resource usage among the Garri, even if agnatic relationship is only one among many criteria that can be used to grant water rights. This in turn corresponds to recognizing flexibility of lineage model among Somali pastoralists, which overlaps with other informal networks of decision-making and is constantly adapted to real situations (LEWIS 1961).

During interviews, distribution of watering right based on clan or lineage membership has been defined as a "bad habit" that Garri people should erase and forget, even through training activities organized by development organizations. A marginalization of traditional social institutions like the role of the *abba herega* in the decision-making process for water access distribution can thus be observed.

"We need our community to be trained on the issue of lineage relations and the disadvantage that may arise out of it. My community needs lineage memory to be eroded" (Author's interview with Garri pastoralist in Chamuk kebele, Moyale Wereda, 14/11/11).

These considerations are relevant in order to understand local representations of development, expectations regarding humanitarian interventions, and the impact of "participatory approach" in the framework of development projects. The demand for external intervention in order to reduce kinship importance as a reference criterion for assigning watering rights is contradictory with development organizations' attempt to value indigenous knowledge regulating natural resource usage. The focus of traditional social institutions in the framework of development programs may be faced with a situation where these institutions do not respond any more to needs and priorities related to natural resource usage among local population.

**Conclusion**

The current quest for indigenous knowledge and community-based natural resource management has to be placed within a wider social and historical process, and observed taking into account a long history of external interference on local environmental practices among southern Ethiopia's pastoralists, which in turn deeply influences how



natural resources are used and shared nowadays. The spread of private water points among Garri pastoralists cannot be considered simply as a practice to cope with water scarcity. This case demonstrates that local knowledge and practices of water management does not deal as much with the need of preserving water, but rather with “managing” social relationships among resource users. Management of private water point is deeply concerned with the need of re-organizing pastoral activities beyond clan or lineage boundaries. This purpose is accomplished through change in ownership tenure, where social relationships of different nature (based on kinship, political contracts between lineages, economic cooperation between herdsmen) are the basis for distribution of water rights.

Besides, the practice of private water point results a consistent strategy to counteract the high degree of interference from state authorities as far as nomadic movements and access to land are concerned. That is why analysis of impact on pastoralists’ livelihoods should not be limited to assessing economic stratification, weakening of poorest pastoralists and “intrusive penetration” of market economy in Garri society. In this way we wouldn’t take in account cultural complexity of water contracts, and how different relationships are negotiated through the watering order. Adaptation of indigenous knowledge related to water usage serves as a mean of reconstructing local community in a changing social and ecological environment. We should not consider the diffusion of private water points among pastoralist groups as a mere result of the weakening of traditional social institutions regulating water access distribution. Such an analysis risks to reflect an «hegemonic temporal view of environmental change in development discourse» (MOSSE 1999). In this perspective, a mythical time of “equilibrium” – where indigenous knowledge was collectively shared and reproduced – is countered with a time of “decay”, where a break up of indigenous knowledge undermines moral integrity and social cohesion within a given community. This interpretation, which recalls the contraposition between tradition and modernity, prevents from considering different social, economic and political relationships that give rise to change in environmental knowledge.

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## *Agribusiness, Cultural and Social Changes in the Ethiopian Lowlands*

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Alain Gascon\*

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a growing population and a rising industry demand have generated a continuous rise in the prices of agricultural products all over the world. Large firms, mainly from Asia, have rushed to the southern hemisphere, especially to Africa, in order to secure huge land concessions. Africans have suffered from the undeserved reputation of practising backward subsistence farming. Ironically Africa does have a huge reserve of vacant land available for intensive “modern” production in spite of recurrent food shortages.

Since 2009 the Ethiopian government made a selection of between 3 and 4 million ha (1/7 to 1/5 of cultivated land) from “empty” land in the western regions to start huge commercial farms (ENGELS 2012). They will concentrate on mechanized monoculture for export when 7 % to 11 % of the 87.1 million Ethiopians have to rely on food aid. Would it not be more sensible to invest in subsistence agriculture? Thousands of displaced agro-pastoralists in the lowlands could hardly be employed in these farms where a few technicians can take care of 1,000 ha. Will these enclaves of machinery facilitate the integration of the western *marches* into the core of Ethiopia? Officials are running the risk of destabilizing the often-troubled Gambëlla region as well as neighbouring (and fragile) South-Sudan.

This contribution<sup>1</sup> deals with the Gambëlla *kəlləl* where huge concessions have been leased to multinational groups. The Ethiopian government has channelled these agribusiness investments to sparsely populated peripheral regions because they remembered that the previous expansion of commercial farms had been the cause of agitation among the peasantry on the eve of the 1974 Revolution (GASCON 1994). All this when the Gambëlla region was only firmly united to Ethiopia as late as 1956 with the independence of Sudan. During the Sudanese civil war thousands of refugees had found shelter in this *marche* of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian army has had to intervene a number of times since 1991 because of clashes between the native inhabitants and the recent migrants from the highlands; in neighbouring South-Sudan political unrest still prevails.

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is a revised version of my article published in *BAGF* 2012-3.



Map designed by A. Gascon

## A race to the western lowlands

### *Ethiopia as a victim of land-grabbing: a continuing debate*

The 2008 food crisis in Ethiopia was overcome without any serious unrest. In November 2009 the *Agricultural Investment Agency* announced through in *The Daily Monitor* that 3.2 million ha of “unused” (*sic.*) arable land were available for agro-industry investors. The Internet sites of Ethiopian (*Addis Fortune*, *Abugida Info*) and international newspapers (*IRIN*, *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *UPI*, *Le Monde*) as well as sites of the opposition (*nazret.com*, *Anywa Survival Organization*, *Anyuak Media*) and of humanitarian and ecology militants (*Oakland Institute*, *MNCH*, *agricultures Network OCHA*) relayed the arguments against the government’s initiative.

It was easy to collect data about land-grab in Ethiopia: the concession holders were listed in *The Macroeconomic Handbook 2010* and the Ministry of Agriculture gave details on leases and annual rents (MOA 2011). Officials are not reluctant to justify the programme: Wändirad Wändäfräw, Minister of Farms declared, “*They [the agro-pastoralists] have to abandon their previous way of life*” (VIDAL 2011). As to the late Prime Minister, he said: “*Where there is land unutilised that could be used by farmers business, then it makes sense for us to encourage private-sector economic development of this business to farming land*” (FITZGERALD 2010). The Ethiopian newspapers published the President’s answer to the letter of the Godarē wäräda officials who had drawn his attention to what

they considered to be a land-grab in their district in the Gambëlla *kəlləl*. Conversely the Sudanese government has concealed the fact that its members had grabbed for themselves irrigated land in the new Merowe Dam Scheme (TALEB 2009). In South-Sudan<sup>2</sup> and in Somalia warlords have expelled farmers and pastoralists in order to steal their ancestral land (SCHLEE, 2007).

However this apparent profusion of sources could be explained because the various sites have been copying each other. Entries differ only on figures — the size of the concessions, the rates of the leases, the workers' salaries —, on the locations and on the transcriptions of place names. Therefore I decided to use *Google Earth* to visualise the progression of clearings in the outskirts of the town of Gambëlla. It was difficult to judge on location as until 2010 it took several days in a 4x4 vehicle to reach this very remote region. There are three domestic flights a week to Gambëlla but no transport once you get there and land concessions are heavily guarded.

A few years ago however I had the opportunity to visit Baqqoo (Wällägga, Oromiyaa) before land was allocated to *Karuturi* in the Gibë valley. In the light of this experience and of the recent study by Dessalegn Rahmato I can reasonably hope to have a critical approach of the reports recently published in the media (DESSALEGN RAHMATO 2011).

*Who will win the race?*

The international agribusiness groups who have started farms west and south of Gambëlla have seen smaller businesses settled around them but we lack information about them. The first rose producer in the world, *Karuturi Global* from Bangalore, had already developed its flower production in Holäta and in Wäliso in the vicinity of Addis Abäba (GASCON 2013). The Gambëlla regional government granted a 50-year lease to this Indian group for a 100,000 ha concession (possibly 300,000 ha in the future) on the left bank of the Baro river for *Berr* 20/year/ha (\$ 1.1). They are planning to grow 3,000,000 metric tons of cereals (wheat, sorghum, maize and irrigated rice: 10,000 ha for each crop). Sixty-five thousand hectares will be cleared by huge tractors to make room for 15,000 ha of sugar cane and a nursery of 100,000 palm oil seedlings necessary to plant 20,000 ha of palm-trees. *Karuturi* promised to create 20,000 jobs (expected to rise to 60,000) to be paid *B* 10 a day (in other farms *B* 8). But up to now, only 11 contracts (*B* 2,500–4,500: \$ 200–400 a month) have been signed with local executives under the supervision of seven Indian experts.<sup>3</sup>

Generally speaking mechanized farms generate few full time jobs (4 per 1,000 ha) and extra seasonal labour (often women) is required for weeding and harvesting. Because the drainage of the Duma Marshes and the Baro dyke were built too fast to be properly completed, 20,000 ha of maize were flooded by the river in October 2011 and \$ 13 million were lost. In Baaqoo, halfway between Addis Abäba and Gambëlla, *Karuturi* signed for 10,900 ha at a rate *B* 135/year/ha (\$ 8) with a free initial period of six years. Palm trees are

<sup>2</sup> *Nile Trading and Development* (Texas) leased 400,000 ha for 49 years and \$ 25,000 and *AIG* 400,000 ha (1 million?) with the help of General Paulino Matip (*Oakland Institute* 2011).

<sup>3</sup> An Indian expert said in a Uganda newspaper that his salary had doubled when he came to Ethiopia (VAN KOTE 2012).

going to be planted, and rice and maize (4,000 ha), will be grown in place of subsistence crops: *nug* and *t'eff*. Oromo peasants were evicted from their grazing land on the pretext that they had no written evidence of their rights.

Journalists also reported discontent among farmers because promised daily wages dropped to B 20-25 to B 8 a day while the value of their livestock fell because of shrinking pastures: “*The company came to hurt us, not to help us*” (TAMRAT G. GIYORGIS 2009). *Saudi Star*, the other major group was set up less than 10 years ago by Saudi investors and Sheikh Al-Amoudi, an Ethiopian-Saudi millionaire<sup>4</sup>, to produce flowers for export. He is the managing director of MIDROC, the first private group in Ethiopia (transportation, industry, tourism, finance, agribusiness, computing) and he was by all accounts one of the late Prime Minister’s friends. *Saudi Star Agricultural Development Plc* was granted 10,000 ha free for the initial 6 years and with an option on 300,000 ha south of Gambëlla and 30 km downstream from the Abobo Dam on the Aloworo River (FITZGERALD 2010). The farm has the free use of 22 m<sup>3</sup>/sec of water from the reservoir built in the *Därg* [the junta] times. It will produce 1 million tons of rice of which two-thirds will be sold in the Middle East. *Saudi Star* is expected to create 3,000-4,000 jobs in the proposed Gambëlla Rice Processing Factory. The group purchased machinery and tractors for \$ 110 million and plans to invest a total of \$ 1.8 billion in projects located in Däbrä Zäyt, in Bēnə Šangul and in Harärgē (VAN KOTE 2012).

In 2010 the Indian *Ruchi Agri Plc* was granted 25,000 ha by the Gambëlla Investment Agency for 25 years in the Fuñido *wäräda* to grow soya bean. It now plans to expand its farm to 250,000 ha along the banks of the Gilo River. In 2010 *ARS Agrofood Plc* started a 6,000 ha farm in Abobo and Itang with cotton (50%), sesame (30%), soyabean (10%) and groundnut (9%) and created 50 permanent jobs (plus seasonal workers) with Ethiopian and Indian supervisors. This project required a \$ 4.9 million investment and it will yield B 15.6 million (\$ 900,000) the first year and a total of B 172.5 million (\$ 9.95 million) for the next 10 years. *BHO Bio Products Plc* (India) signed an agreement with MOA at the rate of B 111/ha a year (\$ 6) for 27,000 ha of palm, cereals, and pulses in the Itang special district. *Huanan Daf* (China), *Sannati Agro* and *Vedanta* (both from India) will grow sugar cane, rice, pulses, cereals, tea, bio-fuels, and spices.

In an attempt to fend off criticism *Karuturi* and *Saudi* are planning to finance the official programme of “voluntary” villagization-resettlement concerning 15 000 farmers. *Karuturi* plans to allocate a 1 ha plot to each worker for their own family use. These companies are engaged in road building, construction work, water distribution and keep solar power in mind. Whether these demonstrations of good will manage to convince the Anuak hunters to stop their raids from their shelters in the Gambëlla National Park and to appease the fear of the possible settlement of Indian migrants remains to be seen? (PEARCE 2011)

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<sup>4</sup> *Forbes*: sixty-third fortune in the world.

## Regional integration and/or land deprivation?

### *A 'new frontier' for Ethiopia*

We must bear in mind that 1.1 million ha (VIDAL 2011) or 875,000 ha (VAN KOTE 2012) that is to say one third of the available land for agribusiness were distributed to 896 firms in 2011. The indigenous regional peoples have suffered a major and brutal change as a result this land reallocation process. Nearly 11,000 km<sup>2</sup> were divided into large 100,000 ha farms for international groups and into 200 ha plots for small Ethiopian entrepreneurs who were granted 42.6 % of the total area (25,802 km<sup>2</sup>). In 2010 Ethiopia offered three million hectares to Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) while 700,000 tons of food were imported: is this a contradiction? (VIDAL 2011)

It is not easy to make an assessment of the consequences of the brutal irruption of mechanized monoculture in Ethiopia. Will the Ethiopian balance of payments improve and what of its "balance of food"? We cannot answer this question because the oldest farms have only been operational for four years and because we have little information about smaller local entrepreneurs. In fact, only large groups have published results but we know nothing about their selection process, about the origin of their funds or about the part played by personal ties with officials. About three-quarters among them seem to have connections with Təgray (the late Prime Minister's *kəlləl*) or with the government coalition (LEFORT 2011).

Officially the allocation of "virgin" land to private companies is not in contradiction to the Constitution which has established the State as the eminent landowner and attributed the management of natural resources to the regional states. The present regime defeated "barracks socialism" in 1991 and promoted free enterprise but introduced the 1975 Land Reform as well as the *qäbälē*, the local committee that control cities and countryside, in the Constitution. State farms however — former commercial farms nationalized by the *Därg* — were either privatized or distributed to small farmers. Since 1991 the adherents of a *status quo* and the supporters of an open market of land have been engaged in a tough debate, which was reported in the media: will private initiative inevitably boost agricultural production or not? (CREWET and KORF 2008)

Up to now the increase of food production has partially followed the population increase despite the security of tenure. In absolute terms more Ethiopians do rely on food aid but since 1970 their proportion has remained between 7 and 11% of the total population which rose from 20,000,000 in 1970 to 42,000,000 in 1984 and 87,100,000 in 2011<sup>5</sup>. The opposition site nazret.com reported a brutal turning point in 2009: "*After the collapse of its land-led industrialization policy, the TPLF-led EPRDF government has turned to eradicating poverty, without building capacity of individual farmers to produce for themselves [and for] the market and build assets for themselves*" (GANNAT MERSHA 2011).

The Ethiopian government seems to fear the doubling of the population by 2050: 174 million! The average population density on the highlands (80 % of the population) has already reached 200 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>! In order to avoid falling into "Malthus's trap"

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<sup>5</sup> Eritrea is included in the 1970 and 1984 censuses.



the Ethiopians will have to open the “New Frontier” of the lowlands. Unlike the previous regimes that had concentrated the FDIs in the vicinity of the capital the present government is turning them towards the sparsely populated peripheral regions (Gambēlla, Bēnə Šangul and Gumuz, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples and Oromiyaa). For centuries these *kəlləl* have been the homeland of the Shanqəlla, a derogatory name given by highlanders to the Nilo-Saharan and Omotic speaking people who had provided a large contingent of slaves.

*Political unrest in the Gambēlla kəlləl*

The Gambēlla *kəlləl*, situated at the *qolla* altitude level (526 m ASL in the capital), extends on the eastern edge of the Sudanese Basin (DESSALEGN RAHMATO 2011). Highlanders are uncomfortable in these malaria and trypanosomiasis prone lowlands even if trypanotolerant cattle can survive in this environment. The average population density is only 11.6 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> but the hilly Mājānger Zone, to the east, has a higher density of 20. The Baro valley also has a higher density (15 inh/km<sup>2</sup>) as it gave shelter to 40,000 South-Sudanese refugees who are still crossing the border. The 2008 Census recorded 306,916 inhabitants in the *kəlləl* (253,000 in 2006) among them 75,640 urban dwellers<sup>6</sup> (24.6 %) including the 38,994 in the capital.

Besides its high urbanization rate (17 %) —above the national average —, this region has attracted a continuous influx of migrants from the highlands. The 144,703 migrants (47 % of the total) now outnumber the natives i.e. the Nuer (40%), Anuak [Añwaa] (20%) and Majañgir (6%). Even if persistent unrest has slowed down this trend, the implementation of federalism in 1991 boosted this movement. Since then the regional administration has been using Amharic as its working language but there were very few native civil servants in the local administration. We can be sure that among these newcomers, the *Tāwabədo* [Monophysite] Ethiopian Christians (18 %) came from the highlands, but they were outnumbered by Protestants (70 %) who had been previously converted by missions on both sides of the border.

The pressure on arable land started before the land rush in the last three years due to a persistent influx of migrants and refugees. The present raids on land featuring foreigners mounting big machines will fuel discontent among indigenous peoples. By choosing the lowlands for the allocation of concessions the government thought to avoid confrontation with farmers and pastoralists but it hasn't clearly been the case in that region. The opposition has accused Umod Ubang, the President of the Gambēlla *kəlləl*, of misusing his regional position and connections and of alienating natural resources to large foreign groups.

In any case since 2009 the central government and/or the regional governments have dispossessed indigenous peoples of their ancestral land on a large scale. They have dramatically changed the agrarian structure and consequently destabilized the political situation in western Ethiopia (MELAKOU TEGEGN, 2012). However in neighbouring South-Sudan the Anuak have been engaged in a long-aged feud with the Nuer: for

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<sup>6</sup> According to the criteria of the *Central Statistical Agency*.

centuries, both have been living on the right bank of the White Nile and in the Baro salient (a part of Ethiopia since the 1902 British-Ethiopian treaty). The Nuer have built sedentary villages in the centre and south of the *kəlləl* while the Anuak have been herding cattle in the north and west part of the region. Until the independence of Sudan in 1956 the British had a 1-km<sup>2</sup> enclave on the right bank of the Baro River in Gambēlla. They had set up a regular transport service on the Baro to the White Nile and Khartoum in order to export coffee, hides and skins that were brought to the river port by caravans and lorries from the Gorē market on the western highlands.

For a long time the Ethiopian administration cautiously stayed in Gorē *kätäma* (at the *däga* altitude level) where the British opened a consulate. During the civil war the Sudanese consulate in Gambēlla kept a watch on southern refugees who had fled to Ethiopia. In 1991 in return for the help given by the Sudan, the late Prime Minister ordered the eviction of South-Sudan refugees and closed the camps. Some of them returned to Gambēlla and took part in the struggles for regional power: since the 2003 riots a coalition of members elected by the Nuer and internal migrants with the support of Ethiopian-Eritrean war veterans has dominated the regional Parliament. This majority has the power, be-it partial, to give plots of land to Nuer and Anuak refugees from South-Sudan, which is an excellent opportunity to cultivate its regional clientèle. Political rivalries for natural resources will worsen because it has recently been discovered that the South-Sudan oil fields extended as far as the Gambēlla *kəlləl*.

## Conclusion

Can land dispossession for the benefit of foreign groups with the approval of the local officialdom be considered as the only means to integrate Gambēlla into Ethiopia? Is speculation on land the only way to build roads, houses, schools, a Parliament and a Museum in a remote border region?

According to some papers, the central government has a deliberate plan to turn the indigenous peoples into a minority in their own territories at the risk of reviving serious conflicts.<sup>7</sup> One may wonder whether national and regional officials realize how difficult this region is to govern. In the face, this persistent discontent the government has merely tried to satisfy public opinion. They allowed Ethiopian journalists to accuse the president of Gambēlla and to reveal that 57 % of the land leaseholders are Ethiopians, who have been given 400 to 5,000 ha plots. Besides, the free periods in the leases have been dropped and the rents have been increased.<sup>8</sup> Farmers will have to pay from B 100 to 160/ha a year (\$ 5.5 to 9) for growing tea, soya, sugar cane and cotton, but *Karaturi* and *Saudi Star* are still paying from B 20 and 30/ha a year (\$ 1.1 to 1.6). No one knows whether these measures will be sufficient to defuse violent reactions in the region.

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<sup>7</sup> Dereje Feyissa 2006; Chan Gatkuoth and Sommer 2007; Meckelburg 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Youness Bousema (IEP Bordeaux) for this information (MOA, 2011).

## Epilogue

In the South *kəlləl*, the opponents to the Ethiopian grand dams (*International Rivers*) have become the advocates of dispossessed indigenous peoples (GASCON 2012b). The Gəlgəḷ Gibē III Dam, with the largest power station in Africa, is due for completion in July 2013. A total of 445,000 ha irrigated schemes (with Indian participation) of cotton and sugarcane are officially planned to improve the livelihood of the downstream population (*Oakland Institute*).

More than 200,000 agro-pastoralists have been living for centuries in the lower Omo Valley, north of Lake Turkana. Most of them will either be expelled from their grazing land, or deprived of an access to the Omo River (*Survival International, Human Rights Watch*). Are Ethiopian lowlanders willing to sacrifice their present way of life, in order make sure Ethiopia becomes the emergent power in the Horn of Africa?

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