

# **Is it a Silent Travel to Death? Case of the Subaltern Children of Lucy**

**Yasin Mohammed Yasin**  
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## ***Introduction to the Afars and Their Land***

The term subaltern was first employed in a non-military sense by Marxist Antonio Gramsci, an Italian philosopher, writer, politician and political theorist. Some believe that he used the term as a synonym for proletariat. Indeed, the term subaltern as a post-colonialism concept is used mainly in postcolonial theories even though its exact meaning in the current socio-scientific concept usage is yet disputable. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes while others like an Indian theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, used it in more specific sense and objects to the sloppy use of the term for all oppressed groups. According to Spivak, if speaking is a transaction between the speaker and listener, then the subaltern cannot speak. Though they may cry out in various ways, their voice could not be heard. The operational definition used in this paper choose to refer the term subaltern to persons who are socially, economically, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure and in fact they may not speak in the same level but struggle against hegemonic practices in their own way. As indicated by Jones and Robins (2009:12) 'In some cases, the victims of such subaltern violence may share an ethnic identification with actors who do hold a disproportionate amount of economic or political power [...]'. Similarly, this paper attempts to assess a major threat on the survival of a subaltern group, the Afars, who claim to be decedent of Kush, son of Ham and grandson of Noah and one of the nomadic people straddling across international boundaries between neighbouring states in the Horn of Africa, namely Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. The Afar land of Ethiopia is well known as cradle of early human origin as the skeleton of the earliest human ancestors including Lucy (*Australopithecus afarensis*) estimated to have lived 3.2 million years ago are discovered along the Awash Valley Basin in Afar Depression of Ethiopia. Historically, the Afarland stretched across the proper Horn region has long attracted the attention of external powers from the Pharaonic Egypt (25BC) to the Greco-Romans (1<sup>st</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> C.), south Arabian merchants, Persians, the Ottoman Turkish, Portuguese (16<sup>th</sup> c.), the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial powers, cold war masters, Israelis, the petrodollar Gulf states, up until today's super powers under the anti-terrorism alliance and the Chinese under their resource

diplomacy. The core focus of this paper, the Afars of Ethiopia, are the majority as well as the root of Afars straddling along Red Sea coasts. The land inhabiting by the Afars of Ethiopia is also well known for its geo-strategic and economic significance. Apart from availability of renowned archaeological sites<sup>1</sup> and significant geothermal power sources, the Afar region has potential mineral resource deposit. One of the earth's great active volcanoes, Erta'ale is found in the Afar Depression. It results in the existence of major mineral occurrence like Potash, Sulphate, Bentonite, Gypsum and Salt (Amole salt bars were used as a medium of exchange in many parts of the Horn region). In addition there are also promising geothermal energy sources and hot springs in different areas in the Afar Depression. There are many potential sites of oil and gas resources in the northern Afar lands of Ethiopia bordering with Eritrea. Two major national reserves of Ethiopia, Awash National Reserve and Yangudi Ras National Park are also found in the Afarland. Even though Ethiopia does not make use of its historical outlet to the Sea, Assab harbour in Eritrea, the Afar region in Ethiopia still remain as a throat through which transactions to and from the centre and port of Djibouti flows. Around 75% of vital road that link Addis Ababa to the harbours of Assab and Djibouti run via the Afarland. Likewise the most utilized river in Ethiopia, Awash [Afar. We'ayot] that regularly floods over 1200km runs through the Afar region of Ethiopia.

### ***Misconceptions about Land***

The 1.6 million nomadic Afar societies inhabits the dry and hot area of northeast part of Ethiopian Rift Valley, an area regarded by Ethiopian highlanders as malarious, 'economic liability and an asset only as an inhospitable natural defence protecting the Ethiopian heaven from unwanted intruders'<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the Afar land in Ethiopia is characterized by low erratic rainfall and high temperature. The average temperature ranges from 35<sup>0</sup>c to 45<sup>0</sup>c and the annual rainfall ranges from 561.4mm on the western edge of the escarpment to 225.3mm on the lava plains to the east. The Afar of north-eastern Ethiopia, however, have survived for centuries by adapting and perfecting a lifestyle of transhumance pastoralism that is taken as a

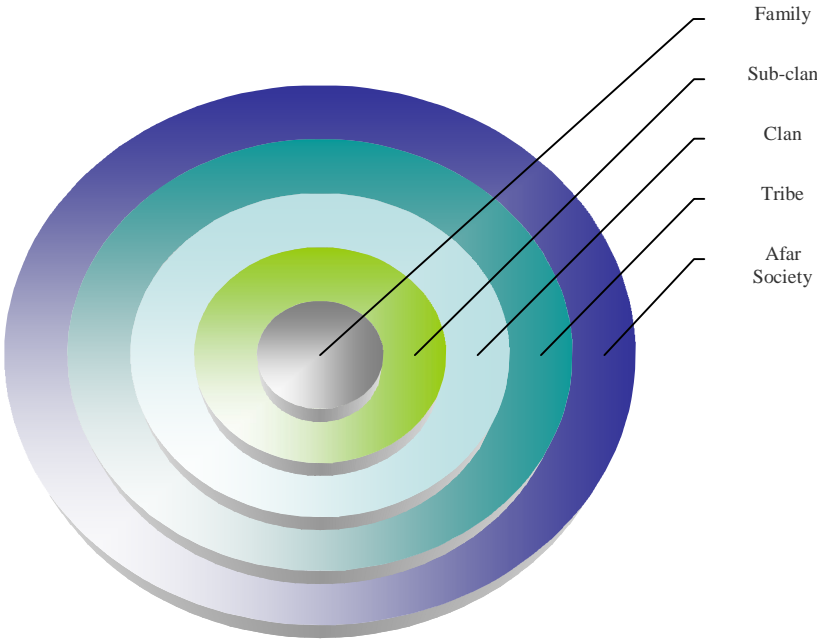
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<sup>1</sup> Remains of *Ardipithecus Ramidus Kadabba* (A.R.K.) and the earliest human ancestor *Ardipithecus Ramidus* (A.R.) that dated 5.2 -5.8 and 4.4 million years ago respectively were found in a place called Aramis in the Afar region of Ethiopia. In Afar language Arid means 'ground', Ramidus derived from Ramid, meaning 'root' and Kaddabba means 'grandfather'. Primitive hominids *Australopithecus Afarensis* that lived between 3-4 million years ago, and *Australopithecus Garhi* (Gari means surprise in Afar language), and transition between *Afarensis* and early human erectous that lived about 2.5 million years ago are found in the Afarland. Fossil of the 3 years old girl, 'little Selam' (peace) dated 3.3 million years ago was also discovered recently in a palace called Kikka in the Afar land of Ethiopia.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Mesfen weldemariam in his article entitled 'The Awash Valley: Trends and Prospects' refers the Afar desert areas as 'God's design to safeguard Ethiopia.'

means of coping up with the dry and fragile environment. As for the Afars, land is not just soil or rocks or minerals but a whole environment that sustains and is sustained by people and culture. They strongly believe and share the Anynomus Nigerian herder’s expression for land in such a way that “land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, few are living and countless members are still unborn”. Among the Afar, land is divided into number of tribal territories (*Dinto*) demarcated by boundaries (*Dikka*), which follows natural features such as rivers, hills and rocks. They use natural features and landscapes to identify their own land. Even children learn these ‘mental maps’ and relate places with clans and sub-clans traditional ownership.

**Fig 1. Hierarchy of Afar society**



Source: Modified the original made by IPS 1999

On the other hand, there seem to be a misconception with the highlanders that Pastoral areas are vast land tracts left idle. For the majority ‘outsiders’ from within, the need for an extensive area to enable pastoralists to move freely in accordance to the availability of resources in various seasons is yet a less understandable concept. However, pastoralists develop their traditional production system and transhumance way of life in order to cope with the inhospitable physical environment and to be friendly to the Socio-economic and ecology of the area they inhabit. Successive central governments of Ethiopia have a common perception that pastoral groups in the country occupied a ‘vast land area with no economic

use'. They still narrate that 'Pastoral areas cover 60% of Ethiopian land area' for over half a century even after Eritrea has seceded with significant portion of pastoral areas. For those 'outsiders' from within, a land where there is no evidence of agricultural and social structure like their own, would automatically categorized as *terra nullius*, land belonging to no one. As the land was never ploughed on which, Maize and Teff never grew or Orange and Coffee tree never planted, the agrarian hegemonic highlanders automatically branded it, as 'no man's land' and dash to sketch plans of development policy that entirely could be non-pastoral in nature. The focus seems only on the resources that indeed become the very enemy of the traditional owners. For instance, the dry and hot area of northeast part of Ethiopian Rift Valley, an area regarded by the centre as malarious, economically useless region and hence avoided for long period has become to be regarded as one of economic bases of the country due to the availability of a resource, mainly the Awash River.

***Fig 2. Awash River: An Oasis in the Afar desert***



Awash is the main perennial river that roughly dissects the Afar land of Ethiopia into two: Middle and Lower Awash Valley Basins. The Awash, as the home of the Afar pastoralists, and as the only oasis in this desert, has always been regarded by Afars as the last place of resort to which they could come in times of acute crises and drought. Until about 1950s, prior to an intervention of the centre, the Afar pastorals were able to feed themselves and secure their basic needs through their seasonal movement in response to harsh physical environment

and were able to sustain their livestock population which is the sole livelihood of Afar pastoral households.

### ***The Feudo-Imperial Economy: Rape of the Afars' Pastoral land***

The central government of Ethiopia started the first rape of pastoral lands in early 1950s since the Imperial regime shifted its perception towards the Awash valley, which previously considered as a hot, inhospitable and economically useless region of the country. As clearly stipulated by Teferah-Work and Harbeson (1978:252-3), 'the highlanders, for the first time, considered economical benefit of the Awash Valley. Apart from 'the nature of the land and the availability of water [...] they considered the flat Awash Valley traversed by the great river [as an] ideal site (for irrigation agriculture). Furthermore, the availability of rail transport and its proximity to the future area of industrial concentration that extended along the railway line below Addis Ababa whetted the appetite of an imperial Ethiopian government [...]' In the early 1950s, the Dutch's firm, Handelsverenigins Amsterdam (HVA), started rice plantation at Barga (3 km from Ayssaita) on land claimed by the Crown Prince Asfa Wossen. This intervention created a disagreement between Sultan Alimirah and the Royal family in Addis Ababa. The Sultan took a punitive measure against some Afars including Dunna Sadkis and Mohammed Abadier (Abadirta) who were accused of leaking information to the emperor and later the Sultan exiled himself to Boha (a village bordering Djibouti). Soon after consensus has been reached through the arbitration of Fitawrari Yayyo Hamedu (Vice of the Sultan) in which Emperor Haile Selassie paid a visit to Ayssiata, afterwards the Sultan, himself commenced commercial farms in the Middle as well as Lower Awash Valleys. Furthermore, the Imperial government began to produce Laws and Proclamations that could solidify legal legitimacy for the government's territorial claims along the pastoral lands. Accordingly, Proclamation Number 70 of November 1, 1944 Article 3 defined a 'land owner' as 'a person whose title to ownership of the land recognized by law'. As analyzed by Ayalew (2001) 'traditionally in Ethiopia rights over land were established through the land tax paid by the cultivators. However, pastoralists paid only an animal tax, [In 1950, the government imposed a tax on Zellan (nomads) at the rate of 0.50 birr per camel, 0.25 per cattle, horse, mule, donkey, 0.05 per goat and sheep] therefore, they had no legal rights to land.' As for the implementation of Proclamation Number 1 of July 1944 that granted a 'gasha' (~ 40 ha) of land to each patriot who fought during the war against Italy, to nationals who spent the period of Italian occupation in exile, and to survivors of persons who fell in battle', the 'no-man's'

land of pastoralists was allotted accordingly. Another significant legal context that confined pastoral rights for land is article 130, sub-article (d) of the revised constitution of 1955 that stated: 'All property not held and possessed in the name of any person, natural or legal, including all land in escheat, and all abandoned properties, whether real or personal, as well as all products of the subsoil, all forests and all grazing lands, water resources, lakes and territorial waters, are State Domain.' The Ethiopian Civil Code of 1960, Article 1168 further stated as: 'The possessor who has paid for fifteen consecutive years the taxes relating to the ownership of an immovable (property) shall become an owner of such property.' It doesn't stop there. Article 1194 read as: 'Immovable assets in Ethiopia which are vacant and without a master shall be the property of the state.' Accordingly, all land proclamations issued under the Imperial regime conceived a notation that pastoralists' land is 'no man's land', and hence considered as state land. In 1962, the Awash Valley Authority (AVA) was established in order to administer big irrigation schemes in upper Awash valley<sup>3</sup>, which later stretched along the Valley in the Middle and Lower Awash. The Tendaho Plantation Share Company (TPSC) was formed in 1962 as a partnership of the Mitchell Cotts Company with the Ethiopian government to produce cotton in the Lower Valley. As written in (Teferah-Work and Harbeson 1978:253) 'while it was realized that the envisaged plantation economy would displaced many pastoralist inhabitants of the Valley, it was confidently assumed that most of them would take up paid employment in the plantations, or else move with their animals to other parts of the region.' However neither the settlement nor shifting the pastoral livelihood to out-grower farmers became successful. Helmut Kloos (1982:32) wrote his critic as follows: 'The idea was to provide irrigated land, training and services on the margins of commercial plantations for would-be Afar settlers who were known as 'outreach growers.' The first settlement was founded in 1966 with 19 settlers on 95ha in Dubti. The second was in Amibara and began with 56 settlers in 1967, later expanding to include 214 settlers on 535ha. However, says Kloos 'by 1973 only about 300 Afar families had been settled by AVA on 2.5 hectare cotton plots on the Amibara and Dubti settlement farms as compensation for loss of their land to the schemes.' In effect, therefore, the AVA represented the presence of the Ethiopian government within the Afar sphere of influence rather than the vehicle for Afar political and social change within the empire. (ibid: 497)

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<sup>3</sup> In 1951 Gile Oromo pastoralists were evicted from the Wonji Plain in the Upper Awash Valley as their land leased by a Dutch company, Handelsverenigings Amsterdam (HVA) to set up a sugarcane plantation and processing factory. The Karrayu Oromo pastoralists were also alienated from their land for the establishment of Metahara sugar plantation. Similarly Wonji-Shoa sugar estates and the construction of the Koka Dam displaced thousands of Ittu Oromo pastoralists from their ancestral land without offering them any option for survival.

Rather these development schemes led to mushrooming of ethnic conflicts between neighbourhood pastoral groups as a result of aggressive competition among themselves for controlling grazing land and water points in the remaining land. On the other hand, small group of individuals took advantages.<sup>4</sup> The Imperial family had also shared the ownership of lands along the Awash valley as if its their personal fiefdom.<sup>5</sup> The Afar pastoralists expressed their sorrow whilst their homesteads were burned and houses were pulled down with bulldozers to clean off the area for plantation farms, by their widely known popular song:

*They are taking soil; we don't know why  
They are digging land; we don't know why  
Motorcars overwhelmed our animals  
Foreign languages overwhelm our language  
(Abdullah 1993)*

On top of all these pastoral land grabbing for irrigation farms, the Imperial government evicted pastoralists for the sake of establishing national parks, game reserves and protected areas in order to benefit from the tourism business. Accordingly, the Awash (75,000ha) and Yangudi Rassa (4730 square kilometers) National Parks, Allegedhi Wildlife Reserve (18,320ha) which established since late 1960s have incorporated around hundred thousands of wet season pastureland. Overall, the pastoralists along the Awash valley became victims of 'development' schemes which alienated them from their ancestral land, limited their mobility, decreasing of grazing land areas, spreading of livestock diseases as the result of agro-chemicals used in irrigation schemes, cutting of long aged plant species that have prevailing value for pastoral livelihood and degradation of lands led to a man-made famine that according to Bondestam (1974:423) 'the Afar-the predominant tribe in the Awash Valley have been reduced by 25-30 percent.' These development interventions have caused tragedy

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<sup>4</sup> The Tendaho Plantations Share Company [one of the biggest farms In the Lower Valley] is an increasingly lucrative business, administered and managed by the British firm Michell Cotts which has 51 percent of the share capital: the Ethiopian Government has 38 per cent, Sultan Ali Mira 7 per cent, while various local and foreign private interests share the remaining 4 per cent. [...] cotton in the Awash Valley is now called "the white gold". [...] An ultra-modern administration has been built up in the middle of the desert, with excellent facilities for the Europeans and the best-paid Ethiopians, including a bar and even a bingo-hall. The average daily salary for a foreigner is about Eth. \$80, whereas a store-keeper, educated up to the 12th grade get Eth. \$3, and a cotton-picker only Eth. \$1. The top class is composed of large-scale farmers, headed by Sultan Ali Mira, [possessing almost 20,000 hectares] with his relatives and close friends, including small elite of educated Afar. However, their counter-offensive implies not only the exploitation of labourers, but also the increasing eviction of pastoralists from the best grazing lands. (Teferah-Work et la. 1978:435-8).

<sup>5</sup> The emperor's daughter, Princess Tegegne-worq, asserted claims to a vast tract of prime pastoral land. (Teferah-Work et la. 1978:253) TPSC also managed a plantation at Barga owned by the Crown Prince Asfa Wossen. (ibid:260)

not only in terms economy and ecology but also have a negative impact on socio-cultural and political inter-relation among neighbourhood pastoral societies.

### ***The Command Economy of Derg: Shift from Commercial Farms to State Farms***

Following the 1974 régime change, the Derg government has announced the régime's recognition of pastoral land system and declared protection for pastoralists land rights. Article 24 of chapter 5 of the Rural Land reform proclamation of March 4, 1975 stated: 'As of the effective date of this proclamation, nomadic people shall have possessory rights over the lands they customarily use for grazing or other purpose related to agriculture.' However, in effect the Derg continued the path of its predecessor by expanding state farms with offering only unrealizable promises to pastoralists. In the Ten-year perspective plan 1984/5-1993/4 the Derg announced its priority in such a way that 'the expansions of irrigated farming which would permit the realization of dependable and adequate domestic food supplies and enhance the country's export capabilities.' (1983:20) Accordingly, Most of the commercial plantations in the Awash Valley soon transferred as state farms. In the process, the name 'commercial farms' has shifted to 'state farms' and also the owners 'feudal lords' has replaced by the new lord, the state. Furthermore, the task of AVA was delegated to Ministry of National Resources Development that in turn handed the responsibility of administrating state farms to Ministry of State Farms Development that was created in 1979. Middle Awash Agricultural Development Enterprise was also established in order to administer new cotton plantation expansions.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of pastoralists have displaced with no compensation or tangible projects that could transform pastoral livelihood. In fact settlement programmes designed during the Derg régime were yet again considered as a way of transforming Afar pastoralists to agriculturalists. The Derg has established a Public Settlement Authority (1977-80) a responsible body for settlement schemes. Later on PSA was replaced by a Settlement Department in the Ministry of Agriculture that again reformed as the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) in 1980. Settlement programmes were considered as a way of transforming Afar pastoralists to settled farmers. With the supervision of these successive facilitating institutions, settlement farms were established in both Middle and Lower Awash Valley. The major settlement areas were Amibara, Gewane, Mille, Logia, Dubti and Assaita. The central government was responsible in funding finances on a yearly budget for running

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<sup>6</sup> New plantations are established particularly in Middle Awash Valley like the Dofan Boloha state farm and huge expansion project was implemented in Amibara that displaced thousands of Afar pastoralists. In addition, horticultural enterprises gradually converted to state owned cotton plantations.

the settlement farms. However, as Abdulhamid (1989) investigated the implementation of these settlement schemes, 'the farms were loss making farms run with government subsidies as well as they faced difficulty in setting pastoralist people on crop farms.' From the highlander's perspectives the major reason for these failures in both régimes was reluctance of the Afar nomads for change. However, Afars believe that they are forced to severe loss of life and deteriorating livelihood since the introduction of state intervention through huge dam constructions and large-scale irrigation developments that resulted in loss of grazing and water resources and environmental degradation rather failure of the rains. Thousands hectares of irrigated land had been abounded due to salinity problems on the different schemes in the Awash Valley. As pointed out by Ali 'excessive use of biocides, herbicides and insecticides have led to increased incidence of diseases such as malaria, encephalitis, yellow fever, cholera, typhoid and various gastro intestinal disorders:' (Ali 1997). In addition, plant species those are useful to livestock under normal range conditions were also severely destructed. Moreover, the Derg has taken vast areas of wet season grazing lands around Awash Arba for establishment and expansion of military camps. As a result, pastoralists along the Awash basin have been deprived access to water and pasture by the state's refusal to pragmatically recognize their land rights and hence the non-pastoral development schemes along the Awash Valley displaced thousands of Afar pastoralists, resulting in crowding, overgrazing and destruction of the remaining pastures. The whole process has produced depressing socio-political and economical impacts on the pastoralist's livelihood. Pastoralists along the Awash Basin became victims of 'progresses'. The so-called 'development' from above brought nothing but clear the path for mushrooming inter and intra ethnic resource use conflicts apart from daily skirmish between the pastoralists and the army. Migrated farm laborers and settlers outnumbered the natives that may turn to be a future threat for Afar's self-rule.

### ***Political Economy of the 'Revolutionary Democrats': Dead End for Pastoral Survival***

After overthrowing the Derg régime, the EPRDF-led government reaffirmed the pastoralist's right to own land freely for grazing. In 1991, the transitional government of Ethiopia designed an economic policy, which stated: a) All land remains the property of the people of Ethiopia through the agency of the state. However, there is a vacuum between statutory (de-jure) and existing infact (de-facto) tenure system. Even though the law recognized land, grazing reserve, forest, river water, wild life and wet land as state domain, the Afar assume it as their communal property and open access for the river water and wildlife. Indeed, the second part of the economic policy state as: b) Areas with special problems require special attention and

treatment. Henceforth, Article 40 sub-articles 5 of FDRE's constitution affirmed that 'Ethiopian Pastoralists have a right to free land for grazing and cultivation as well as a right not to be displaced from their own lands.' Soon after, in spite of undertaking any pre-arrangements, the federal government has returned about 17,000 hectare of well-developed irrigated state-owned farms in both Lower and Middle Awash Valley to the Afar pastoralists in line with their clan and sub-clan affiliations. As a result, Afars could not maintain the large-scale farms so each clan started to lease their portion of land to private investors either as sharecropping or with fixed-rental price. Shortage of human and financial resources, lack of efforts towards integrating livestock herding with farming as well as inexperienced bureaucratic system of the regional administration were some factors which contributed for the failure to well-manage the returned state farms. Currently, in most returned farms, shelters, clinics, schools and drinking water points are literally, destroyed and non functional. The benefits that the Afars have got from the income generation and employment opportunities of the private cultivators are very insignificant. Indeed, the arrangement is similar with free exploitation of the land by the so-called investors due to incapacity of clan leaders to deal with modern financial statements presented by the investors as well as incapability of the regional government to follow up the matter thoroughly. Similarly, the revenue generated by the regional government from these private farms for the last two decades is infinitesimal. Rather the region is incurring severe socio-economic and environmental loss due to high toxic chemicals used by private cultivators as well as their refusal to practice fallowing and crop rotation to conserve the productivity of the land for some future years. Apart from the income lost due to façade benefits, land degradation, intra-Afar conflicts and developing dependency attitude upon the youths are the major drawbacks of private agricultural investment undertaking in the Afar region since 1991. The Afar National Regional State seems to be too reluctant to hasten the design and implementation of a land use policy in the region. It is also vague for many observers to figure out the reason why the federal government refrain itself from pressurising the regional administration to draft an appropriate land use policy as well as revise the existed gap between the de-facto and de-jure land tenure policy. Despite working on a long term plan of enabling the Afar pastoral society to better-off their livelihood and minimize their survival dependency from the riverine areas, the federal government seems rushing to compete the river basins by offering promises to the pastoral Afars either to transform them to agrarian farmers within number of years or to supply their cattle 'modern' by product of sugar cane, molasses, instead of 'primitive' natural pasture. Generally, ill-conceived development policies in the past two regimes since 1950's

remain the Afar pastoralists still relegating in the waiting room of development. The incumbent government keeps on the production function of state farms along the Awash Valley and further alienated the Afar from the remaining wet season grazing land due to the expansion project of the Awash Arba military camp. Moreover, the out spread of the plant species *Prosopis Juliflora* commonly known as Woyanne that made the grazing land a 'green desert', further invaded the grazing areas and chased away valuable species for the pastoral livelihood.

*Fig 3. Cattle crossing the Addis-Assab/Djibouti road to access Pasture*



Source: photo taken on January 2004.

As stated by Ayalew (2001) 'for the pastoralists the end is not yet in sight'. Bondestam (1974:494) also argued as 'legally pastoralists have 'rights of occupation until the legal owner, the Ethiopian government, asserts its rights.' In a way that seem to Prove Bondestam's argument, the Afar pastoralists and agro-pastoralists who faced immeasurable socio-cultural, politico-economical and environmental loss due to preceding development interventions, are now expected to hand-over huge grazing and farmlands to the legal owner, the EPRDF-led federal government that reinitiated the Derg regime's plan<sup>7</sup> of Kessem-Tendaho Dam and Irrigation Development Project for huge sugarcane plantations.

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<sup>7</sup> The feasibility study was done by US based Sir M. McDonald and Partners under the Derg regime in the late 1980s, and the detailed design was completed by the state-owned Water Works Design and Controlling

### ***People: Not as Sweet as Sugar !?***

Apart from half-a-century old land-grabbing schemes undertaken by successive governments of Ethiopia for expanding agricultural farms, Game parks and Military camps, the incumbent federal government of Ethiopia came up with a scheme of '*Kessem-Tendaho Dam and Irrigation Development Project*' (KTDIP) for sugarcane plantations that will alienate Afar pastoralists from around 109,000 hectares of dry and wet season grazing lands. Indeed, the sugar and the benefit from exporting sugar definitely taste sweet. But displacing fellow pastoral citizens from their ancestral land (on which their livelihood entirely depend) just for the sake of ambitious expectations of dominating the sugar market in the Horn of Africa seems illogical in any aspect. A country that claim to have approximately 12-15 million pastoral population, covering 61% of the country's landmass failed to have a federal ministerial portfolio for the pastoralist but created a new ministry of Sugar. The PM appointed Abay Tsehaye, TPLF veteran and founder, as Director General of Sugar Corporation with the Rank of Minister. The irrigation scheme will occupy much of the most productive grazing lands in Afambo, Ayssaita, Dubti, Mille, Awash Fentale and Dulecha Weredas. Apart from grazing land, agricultural developments of farms like tomato, onion, pepper, corn, maize as well as cotton existed along the riverine areas. These farms and grazing patterns have been severely affected due to the construction of the dam that significantly changed the course of the river. While accepting this sort of mega projects that really put the survival of Afar pastoralists under question, there was no formal discussion held either at the regional council or cabinet level. Except for number of visits by the federal officials, there was no discussion held between the regional administration and the local people or their traditional representatives. Elders in lower Awash Valley claimed that the federal government officials who came and talked with them about the project initially identified the plain land at Gerjile as the project site. Gerjile has a plain land stretched 40kms up to Serdo, 25km to Dubti and around 53 km up to Ayssaita. However, when the project touched the ground, the project owner, federal government, compete for the control of Awash basin areas that would alienate Afar pastoralists from around 109,000 ha of dry and wet season grazing lands. From the alienated land, 60,000ha<sup>8</sup> of land along the Awash basin is allocated for Sugarcane

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Enterprise. The enterprise also hired consultants with the Tendaho project feasibility study being worked on by a Russian company.

<sup>8</sup> According to the project plan, half of the 20,000 hectare irrigation land of Kesem will be controlled by Metahara Sugar Factory for input production of sugar and the balance will be distributed for local pastoralists to cultivate sugarcane.

cultivation, 24,000 ha will be left for grazing, and the remaining 25,000ha is allotted to be distributed for investors and out-growers. An additional fourteen hectare of land is also allocated for the construction of residential houses for emigrant workers. According to the news posted on Fortune newsletter (v.7,no.336,oct 8/2006), the total expense of the project will be 8.68 billion br (~\$528 million), the Ethiopian Government budgeted 4.7 billion birr (~\$286 million) from its own treasury and the remaining funds will come from EXIM's<sup>9</sup> hard currency. EXIM, an Indian government owned Bank has offered to loan 351 million US dollars to co-finance the Tendaho Sugar Development Project. The feasibility study of the project was also conducted by Indian firm, J. P. Mukherjee. It may happen by default, but extensive involvement of Indian firms in the current Kessem-Tendaho Dam and Irrigation Development project has historical connotation in which Emperor Ba'eda Maryam (1468-1478), according to Pankhrust, R. (1974: 247) 'had also made contacts with India for commencing sugarcane cultivation in Abyssinia.' In fact it would have been preferable if Ethiopian government has followed the Indian way in executing the project rather than the Sudan paths which seems they are following. The India sugarcane production sectors have involved more than 45,000 out growers while in Sudan, out of five sugarcane plantations four are owned and administered by the state. Beside its unparticipatory nature, the environmental impact assessment of this project explains predictable risks and dangers on the pastoral livelihood. It stated that 'two giant dams which have capacity of holding 520,000,000 and 2.8 billion cubic meters of water with the capacity of cultivating up to 90,000 ha of land will be constructed in the Awash valley basin.' In fact, these dams and Reservoir are already constructed in the most seismic area of the country and as anticipated in the feasibility study, the dams sharply reduced the seasonal floods downstream where pastoralists come from long distances during dry season to look for communal grazing land. The project continues its ambiguity by stating that 'flood mitigation is seen as a positive impact that comes out of the implementation of this project' (2005:85). However, it contradicts itself by stating, 'the Afars say the floods used to maintain the grazing in good condition and ascribed the present degraded condition of the pasture largely to the flood control measures'. Nonetheless, recently heavy floods that cause the Tendaho canal collapse have affected a large portion of the Awash Basin areas that displaced thousands of Afar pastoralists. The assessment report further asserts that 'a canal of 70km length will be a favourite breeding site for mosquitoes' (2005:13). The project suggests a remedy for mitigating the spread of malaria, which is to 'clear all

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<sup>9</sup> The Export-Import Bank of India is an Indian government-owned financial institution for the public sector created by and Act of the Parliament of India: the Export-Import Bank of India Act 1981.

vegetation from the periphery of the lakes.’ Accordingly, the proposal states that ‘a forested area of 15,000 ha plus 19,000 bush and shrub land will be cleared and hence, the expropriation of land for irrigation development and clearance of vegetation will, seriously affect wild life habitats.’ The proposal also pointed out that it is ‘not simple to suggest a solution to this problem’ (2005:73). Let alone the solution for the life of the wild life habitants, the project couldn’t suggest a solution for the threat on the survival of the Afar pastoralist due to the execution of this mega project. Rather, the project proposal declared that ‘the area where dam is to be build is desert area and has no significant cultural, economic and agricultural importance to the Afar community’ (2005:10). Nevertheless, the same proposal warned that ‘unless adequate amount of water is released to the lakes, they will dry out’ (2005:70). Beside the economical and environmental predictable risks and threats on the Afar pastoral livelihood, the execution of this project further led to demographic reengineering over the Afar land in which around 80,000 household labourers would be expected to migrate from the highlands and resettle in the surroundings of the project areas. As one elder analyzed the process of demographic reengineering ‘the Imperial government raped our land, the Derg penetrated further deep by using extensive force and the incumbents are going to finish off the three regimes-old project of conquering strategic areas over the Afarlands through a silent weapon.’ In spite of all these controversies and threats, the federal government seems to expand development schemes further in the remaining lands along the Awash valley. Apart from the huge sugar cane plantation project being implemented in Kessem-Tendaho, the former deputy Prime Minister Adissu Legesse has announced (during his sojourn in the region in 2009) another round of ‘development’ schemes in Teru Depression (gravity) Northwest of the Afar region and Alidegihe (underground water) in Southeast of the region. The Prime Minister himself confirmed the plan during his meeting with ‘youth’s representative of all regions’ on 7 Feb 2009 in which said ‘the focus is not only Awash River but also we plan to develop the underground water potential in Shinelle and Alidegihe and our target is to avoid water and grass scarcity of being a source of conflict.’ Indeed, as history repeats itself, the Kessem-Tendaho project is packed of promises that are not new for the pastoralists. The project promised to undertake voluntary settlements and transforming the Afar livelihood to sedentary life by converting them as out growers.

### ***Same Old Promises?***

The mere difference between the old promises and the current one might be the new project assures to transform Afar nomads not as ‘cotton cultivators’ like the previous ones but as

'export-oriented sugar producers'. During his visit on 22 March 2008, the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi visited 'development projects' ongoing in the Afar regional state and guaranteed that the 'Afar people will definitely be direct beneficiaries of the project.' And hence he requested their whole-hearted cooperation with the project executers in order to realize the end result as sooner as possible. He even has analogized the delay of the project with Afar's traditional folk lore about a pregnant woman who suffers regardless of her pain during labor; with the realization of her husband's strong wish for a baby boy rather than a girl. He suggests that not the sex of the baby should worry the couples but the safe delivery of a healthy baby, analogizing to Afars' 'unnecessary worry' to be expelled out from their land, which would fade away right after a successful completion of the project according to the Prime Minister. However Afars who had similar promises from the previous regimes had the experience that the then long expected baby, the cotton, was far more privileged by the centre than the people. Thus they do have deeply rooted distrust towards the government whether the Afar people would get more attention than the expected new delivery, these days, the sugar. Among discussants with the Prime Minister, an Afar elder criticized the assurance of offering Molasses, a residue from sugar cane, as grazing pasture, told to the PM a traditional story about the meeting of starved animals reached in a consensus to slaughter the Hyena and to give the biggest portion of the meat to the hyena. Then the Hyena run to his mom and told her the decision of the meeting. His mom felt sorry for him and remind him that once slaughtered it does not matter which portion he would get.

Afars are being too pessimist on the realizable of these promises not only because of their past experiences but based on the on-going progress of the KTDIP that derive them to be cynical towards this project. In July 2010, a herder with the name Mohammed Igahle went out on a course to Lifage (13 km from Ayssaita) looking for camels that travelled across their area in search of water as the natural course of the river has been changed due to the construction of dam. But Mohammed never returned from his course only to have died and his body been eaten by hyenas. Though the project commenced since 2004, an office that is expected to be a bridge between the people and the project implementers, Namalefen-Tendaho Comprehensive Development Project Coordination Office, has established in 2005 and until 2007 head of the office was not assigned, no professionals recruitment was undertaken, no training offered, there was no rules, duties and regulations of the office drafted and even there was no institutional structure, office and vehicles assigned to the office. It was on the year 2006 that the resettlement and rehabilitation study of the project is studied. However, government was quick enough to establish the Ethiopian Sugar Development Agency on 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2006. It

was after the 1<sup>st</sup> March 2007 visit of Kassu Elala (the then Minister of Infrastructure) that the sugar cane out-grower's association has been established on 31 Oct 2007. According to the head of the coordinating office, efforts done for preparing pastoralists to be an out grower is too insignificant. Afars have also criticized on the accuracy of the population census undertaken by the programme executers. For instance, the project proposal argues that number of households around Mille Wereda (district) that would be affected by the implementation of the project is only 40 households while the Wereda administration claim to have over 1000 households displaced since the project commenced its implementation. Furthermore, Afars regret for losing very crucial species of plants like Adayto, Gersa, Angeli, Doma and the like in areas where bulldozers cleared the forest and bush lands. Another benefit promised to the local Afars was employment opportunities in the project sites. Data shows that until October 2009 only 15 Afars were hired (as drivers) in the Tendaho sugar industry project. Indeed, the data shows that about 2000 Afars were employed as a temporary basis as guards, coordinators, day labourers and construction store keepers. Total payment due to the 2000 temporary Afar employees in the year 2009 was 512,920.50 br (~31,148.389 USD) but 1500 non-Afar project employees<sup>10</sup> earned 1,102,142.87br (~66,930.4022 USD) / month. As the head of coordinating office has claimed<sup>11</sup> they facilitated training for driving and there are around 300 Afars who hold the licence but surprisingly enough, employment vacancies appeared in an English newsletter, Ethiopian Herald and they demand a high school graduate which is unattainable with the pastoral Afar societal context.

Despite very lagging effort to engage the Afars within the envisaged huge projects, the strategy seems to incline towards alienating the locals from their ancestral lands 'first by army then by money' as an Afar elder puts it. The federal government has been paying around 9000 br (~ \$ 550) per square meter in different phases for clans claiming ownership.<sup>12</sup> The total area of land ready for sugar cane plantation until October 2010 is 12,000 ha, out of the 8000 ha is the state domain under Tendaho cotton farms and the remaining 4000 is land taken from the Afars after paying them compensations<sup>13</sup>. The money given to the Afars as a

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<sup>10</sup> The four projects are Tendaho Residential Houses Development, Tendaho Sugar Industry Project, Water Works Construction Enterprise, Water Works Design and Supervision Enterprise.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Awol Uttica, Head of Namalefen-Tendaho Comprehensive Development Project Coordination Office, on 22 August 2010 in Addis Ababa.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the money is paid to Afar pastorals as a compensation for the opportunity lost in the first years of the sugar plantations project implementation as the water flow is cut off due to the construction of dam and canals.

<sup>13</sup> Until October 2010, around 1000 hectares of land are taken for reserved grazing areas and construction of 288 houses in Sabure (Middle Awash). In Lower Awash, similarly 500, 420 and 470 hectares of lands are taken by

compensation for production lost as a result of water flow cut is merely a façade benefit in which individuals or clan leaders collect the money and distribute small amount to members of the clan. Since 2007 up to 2009 fiscal year, 65 million br (~ 4 million USD) is paid as compensation and for the second half of the year 2010 additional 21 million br (~ 1.3 million USD) is earmarked as compensation. All in all, even though critics argue that the full-fledged implementation of this project would be a finishing point for over half-a-century old marginalization process that could be considered as the end for the survival of the Afar pastoral nation in Ethiopia, the Prime Minister, however, strongly opposes and declare that, “Ours is different!” Once when he was asked in the federal Parliament by ex- Afar MP, Awol Utticca, about the Derg era plan to develop plain land (Gerjele) all the way from Logia to Afdera, the Prime Minister replied as ‘we are not Derg, we want to develop not the land but the people.’ However, Shiferaw Jarso, the then Minister of Water Resource Development and the incumbent Basin Affairs advisor to the PM, has announced that according to the air survey his team conducted, there are over 100,000ha of free lands along the Awash Basin. According to him, the sugar processing factory is decided to be installed in Dubti wereda by assuming that (using air survey) there would be around 25,000ha of ‘free land’ and thus he urged the regional government to hand over the next phase of 12,500ha of land for plantation of sugar cane. Then, what makes the PM’s promise different from his predecessors? Time will tell.

### *Alternative Futures*

As a matter of fact Awash River is large enough to entertain the need of the pastoralists as well as the state. The Awash basin has vast plain lands (110,000 km<sup>2</sup>) that stretched from the western outskirts of Addis Ababa until it ends at the salty Lake Abbe on the border with Djibouti. However, participatory and people-oriented development schemes are prerequisites for transforming the livelihood of the pastoral society and to make Awash Basin developments sustainable. Distorted economic policy of the centre that argues as ‘no more pastoralism’ should be critically revised. Settlement could not be the answer for all. Is agrarian farming the sole alternative to better off the pastoral society? It seems really tough task to pursue one pastoralist to follow the track of Ethiopian highlander agrarian societies who plough for the last thousands of years but yet suffer under severe poverty. Government

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the project from Tendaho (Dubti), Geweya and Detbahri respectively. Extra 500 ha are taken in Faro for the construction of the factory.

regional welfare data itself shows the facts on the ground. According to MOFED's Development and Poverty Profile of Ethiopia for the year 2002, the predominantly pastoral Somali Region scored as wealthiest of all Ethiopia's rural regions; on the other hand, the Afar pastoral region that entertains over half-a-century old land grabbing, is the next to the poorest in Ethiopia, followed by the agrarian societies of Tigray. Most of the 'successful' farmers who are awarded by the PM were telling us in ETV interviews that they have scored a speedy transformation from farmer to investor as they today own hotels and Isuzu trucks. Even though their success is encouraging, revolutionary democracy economic policy aim at 'agricultural development lead industrialization' rather than mushrooming 'rent seeking' car rental businesses like the 'successful' farmers who became owners of Isuzu trucks are currently engaging. And to reach this goal, a pastoralist does not necessarily need to own paired-ox plough for other millennia. Therefore, government shall take a pause to the rush for competing over land ownership as well as concession to foreign governments and focus on long term but sustainable development schemes. Economical and social profitability of sugar, cotton and livestock should be carefully studied. Major impacts such as environmental degradation, socio-demographic alteration, cultural and attitudinal changes, political dimension of co-existence among the Afar as well as with their neighbours, identifying the beneficiaries of rural-urban linkages shall be investigated cautiously prior for dumping projects on the ground. Previously, these sort of unhealthy development interventions into the Afar land have resulted mushrooming of conflicts between the state and the Afars in various ways ranges from individual, clan and well organized armed resistances. Nevertheless, the Afars' reaction against the new scheme (KTDIP) which is predicted by many Afars as 'the beginning of the end' is silence. Is silence the last resort for the Afar? While the subalterns by definition are groups who have had their voices silenced, they can speak through their actions as a way to protest against mainstream development and create their own visions for development. These [Subaltern] groups use local knowledge and struggle to create new spaces of opposition and alternative futures. Indeed, the subaltern may start to speak after a long 'silence'.

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