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# The alienation of land rights among the Afar in Ethiopia

*Ayele Gebre-Mariam*

*Ba ha numuk haba num yayese*

"The one who forgives is better than the one who causes distress" -Afar Proverb

## Introduction

The Afar country is the driest, and one of the hottest areas of East Africa, and one of the harshest, most fragile and inhospitable environments for human occupation in the world. The territory of the Afar consists of lava flows and stretches of volcanic ash traversed by great, solidified lava streams. The Afar of Ethiopia number about 670,000 souls, with cattle, camel and small stock population estimated at about 700,000, 300,000 and 3,000,000 respectively (Ayele 1991). The group constitutes 1.2 % of the total Ethiopian population. They depend on multi-species pastoralism, and, nowadays, because of natural occurrences such as drought and epidemics, they put greater emphasis on herding camels and goats.

The changes that have been inculcated in the Afar have been induced by internal dynamics and by external factors which are mainly political in nature. The Afar have not been involved in the creation of these processes which have resulted in destitution, displacement, environmental degradation, impoverishment, and the marginalization of their society. At the international level the prices for livestock and livestock products have been depressed and

kept low, and the Afar have been victimized.

This paper does not discuss the impact of the international market on the Afar. Instead I argue that major agricultural schemes have been launched in the Afar region to extract surplus for national benefit, without due consideration of the negative side effects of these programmes on the environment as well as on the human population. There are some well documented studies detailing where pastoral areas of Africa have been encroached upon by irrigation schemes, national parks, etc. (for details see Bondstam (1974)). The pastoralists have lost critically important dry and drought period grazing resources.

There are two essential things that an Afar should defend; these are "absuma" (father's sister's daughter - one's potential wife) and land. So far the Afar have defended the "absuma" and not the land.

According to Ethiopian law, all lands, including nomadic lands, are the property of the state, with individuals being given possessory rights. However, the Afar claim that the land they inhabit belongs to them and they are continually at odds with intruders, be they the state or agriculturalists.

## Factors leading to Afar marginalization

The Afar are being marginalized vis-a-vis national and regional centres of power and suffering from increasing internal conflict. In the following, I shall examine the internal and external causes of marginalization among the Afar.

Regarding internal pressures, in addition to their own livestock, some Afar herd the cattle of the neighbouring Oromo in exchange for grain. Some also herd for Oromo friends in exchange for clothing, the amount of which is not specified as these are friendly arrangements. However, the resultant overgrazing and overstocking in the Afar rangeland denies and destroys the Afar's own mode of existence. External pressures include the incursion of highland cattle-keepers and conflict with other lowland pastoralists.

### The Incursion of Oromo Cattle into Afar Rangelands

A dry season grazing reserve was established in areas adjacent to the Oromo lowlands by the livestock development project known as North East Rangelands Development Unit (NERDU). Before the demise of the Imperial Regime in 1974, Oromo were confined to their own area, with the exception of a few Oromo who established "Ketaissa" (friendship) relationships with Afar. In the past, the Oromo did not settle in the foothills of Afar land because they feared Afar raids, but now, one of the dry season grazing reserves set aside by Afar is used by Oromo as a grazing corridor, securing the latter's existence in the region.

Increasing encroachment on Afar grazing areas is observed in the highlands as well. Since the rural land na-

tionalization in 1975, the Oromo are allowed to move with their animals to the Afar during wet season, but they tend to continue grazing in the dry season grazing reserve. Thus the dry season grazing reserve established for the benefit of the Afar has not benefitted them, and is threatened by ever increasing pressures from the highland Oromo groups.

### Conflict with Issa, Kereyu, Itu, Argoba and Oromo Lowlanders

The Aledoghi plains are regarded as an open grazing area by the Afar, as long as they do not encounter Issa raids. The well-armed Issa restrict the Afar use of the Aledoghi plains. Due to frequent raids between the Afar and Issa, large grazing areas which could otherwise be used by the Afar are not. The government has proposed boundaries between the Afar and Issa, to no avail.

The Afar in Kesseme and Kebena in the Middle Valley have a similar problem with the Kereyu and Itu on the southern border, and Argoba on the western border. Armed encounters and casualties are common. The Oromo lowlanders occupying the areas adjacent to the Afar are sometimes at odds with Afar, and this results in the raiding of Afar/Oromo cattle, causing severe human casualties. The dispossessed communities respond by triggering new raids and counter raids, while the state looks passively on.

### Loss of Afar rights to land and access to critical resources

#### Depletion of Life-belt Areas in the Borkenna Valley

Though the Borkenna valley may have been used for 80 years or more by livestock groups, its intensive use by the Afar is relatively recent. Much of the

pasture in the Borkenna valley has been put under cultivation by Oromo lowlanders, who have been expanding in the last century, and have moved from being predominantly pastoralist to a farming mode. This has reduced the available grazing area.

In years of extreme stress, the Afar herds may need to graze the valley from December until the valley floods in late June. During July and August, when what little rainfall there is in Afar country occurs, the Afar would leave to rejoin their families and small stock. The main problem is that after the valley's resident farmers cultivate and plant in March and April, they want the immigrant herds out. The government, reminding people that since the revolution, the whole valley is de jure government land, in 1981 intervened with new laws which have favoured the Afar at the expense of the settlers.

Although the number of Afar cattle coming in to the valley was only 1/3 that of the Oromo in 1981 and 1/9 in 1982, when the Afar need the valley they need it very badly. The livestock utilizing the valley in drought periods has increased, and the Afar will have to make what will be for them great changes, if they are to survive without the Borkenna Valley (Ayele 1982).

#### Dams, Plantations and Pollution: Depletion of the Dry Season Grazing Reserve in the Awash Valley

The Awash Valley occupies 10% of the entire land area of Ethiopia. About 58% of the valley's 120,000 km<sup>2</sup> is drained by the Awash River. The 1,200 km river flows from the highlands in the west to the semi-arid and arid areas in the east. The valley is divided into upper, middle and lower plains. In the Upper Valley, schemes such as the Wonji and Shewa sugar plantations, and Tibila

and Nura Era, where cotton and tobacco are grown, are in progress. In the Middle Valley, at Meta Hara the Abadir sugar cane plantations are found, and at Awara Melka, Kesseme Kebena, Gewani, Angelele and Amibara, the Melka Sedi banana plantations, where cotton and banana are planted on leased land. The Lower Valley includes the Tendaho plantations, which are share companies, and farms at Mille, Dubti, Det Bahri and Awssa. Cotton and maize are the primary crops of the valley. Foreign concessionaires were given privileges of tax-free agricultural equipment and duty-free fuel, which led to vast areas being mechanized. Some 83% of the irrigated area is controlled by the State Farms, and the remaining 17% by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and cooperatives farms.

The justification for the schemes is that they can help reduce population pressure on land elsewhere, that they can promote import substitution policies for commodities such as cotton, sugar, fruit, and that they are part of a general programme aimed at the settlement of the Afar.

Before 1975, the Upper and Middle Valley schemes were the responsibility of the Awash Valley Authority. The Awash Valley Authority was set up in 1962 to plan, control and coordinate the development of the Awash valley. The land in the lower plains was under the control of the Sultan of Awssa. After the nationalization of rural land in 1975, all commercial farms were turned into state farms, except for the Tendaho plantations, which are run as a joint venture of the British firm Mitchell Cotts and the Ethiopian government.

Most of the land which was taken for early development was close to the Awash River, in areas which flooded easily and took a long time to drain. Consequently, the pastoralists have lost

land which is of greatest importance to them; land which gave good grazing during the driest part of the year from February to June. These riverine lands were strategically left unutilized for most of the year, and were regarded as a kind of dry season grazing reserve. Since 1962 the pastoralists have been losing this land to the farmers. Much of the land taken had been good grassland, and cattle in particular have suffered.

Koka Dam, built on the Awash river to the south of Addis Ababa, has reduced the peak flow of water from 700 m<sup>3</sup>/second to 300 m<sup>3</sup>/second, and increased the minimum flow from 200 m<sup>3</sup>/second to 30 m<sup>3</sup>/second. The Awash has been tamed and regularized for the farmers, but the effects of this reduction in the river's potential to flood are obvious throughout the valley. The irrigation process takes much water from the river and allows it to drain away or evaporate in the fields where it is lost to the herdsman. Less water reaches the inland delta of the Awash nowadays, so that vegetation balances have been disturbed and the desert is encroaching. About 3,000 ha of land previously used for cotton cultivation in the Middle Valley has had to be abandoned because of the problem of salinity. The yield of cotton has also declined from 30 tons/ha to 20 tons/ha, due to salinity and sodicity arising from poor irrigation practices, lack of conservation practices, management inefficiencies, etc. (MacDonald 1991).

The major grazing species which comprise the fodder for livestock are being reduced. Riverine vegetation such as *Acacia nilotica*, *Sehima nervosum*, *Salvadora Persica*, *Grewia enthraea*, *Cordia sinensis*, *Dobera glabra*, *Tamarix aphylla*, *Cadaba rotundifolia* (Ali 1992), which save animals' lives in the dry season and drought periods, was cleared. Degradation of the envi-

ronment and declines in carrying capacity are currently found in the Valley.

In the Middle Awash, the grazing area available to Afar livestock has decreased in quality and quantity over the last thirty years. Because of the Koka Dam, a significantly reduced area is flooded during the rainy season, and several hectares of good grazing land along the river have been occupied by cotton farms. This has left the Afar with less area for cattle and sheep. The loss of flood grazing means more intensive use and relative overpopulation of the remaining land.

The change of environment has created over-grazing conditions near the Awash river, resulting in the suppression of perennial grasses. Fodder shrubs and bushes are still to be found near the river, but most of the large trees are dying due to the falling water increasing soil erosion. This cycle impairs the milk yields of cows and has an adverse effect on the growth rate of animals. The overall effect is the reduced productivity of livestock. Sheep and goats, which are usually grazed near the villages, are herded by children. Sheep are the losers because they rarely find good grazing; camels and goats become more valuable to those Afar who have not settled because they can better utilize the remaining cover of shrubs and bushes near the river. Traditional Afar pastoralism is thus threatened, but little has been done to give them another economic foothold.

When the Koka Dam was constructed on the Awash river, the flow and the level of the river changed, and some grazing lands no longer flood at the seasons they used to. As a result, the vegetation has changed, particularly in the Upper Valley, and is no longer ideal for grazing. The frequency of flooding has also been reduced by the flood protection works of the State Farms.

It is clear that a tiny proportion of the Afar land has been allocated for cultivation, but the effect of this loss has proved disastrous and will soon result in the complete destruction of the pastoral culture; the accompanying loss of life will be considerable. The great plains, which support no human habitation during the dry season, are capable of providing grazing for several million animals during the wet season. When a small area close to the river is made unavailable for dry season grazing, a much larger area away from the river is rendered useless.

The flood control measures have resulted in the diminishing conditions of grazing land. Small towns occupied by non-Afar highlanders are expanding in the irrigation scheme. Afar are frequenting towns and are getting used to town life. Prostitution and thievery, common in the towns, adversely affect the Afar; their socio-cultural mechanisms are breaking down and the community survival strategies are threatened.

It is important to recognize that in a pastoral economy such as that of the Afar, simple measurement by hectares is no way of judging the impact of taking away land for other uses. It is the Afar who know the potential and actual resources of those lands. The famine of 1973, which in part stimulated the Revolution, was caused in great part by development, allowed and encouraged by a Government elite working in corrupt liaison with international capitalists (Bondstam 1974). The excision of key areas from Afar territory was a major factor in the disastrous famine that accompanied the 1973 drought. The loss of land had the effect of increasing the vulnerability of the Afar to subsequent droughts and other challenges.

The Afar are nowadays more vulnerable to drought than before. Inter-ethnic conflicts, especially during drought pe-

riods, have intensified due to the loss of grazing land. Drought has more severe consequences since dry season grazing land been taken away from the Afar. Famine is the result of this neglect by the State, which is also accountable for the lack of resources available in drought situations. If the State can't control drought through early warning planning, cereal banks, seed banks, etc, it is the Afar who suffer. Should the state resign or be replaced by a Peoples' Government? The answer is yes to both questions.

The concentration of Afar herds and flocks in fragile rangelands results in increasing grazing pressure. If the present development continues unchecked, the full utilization of the 200,000 ha irrigable in the Awash Valley will leave thousands of Afar destitute and marginalized. But profits come more quickly with cotton, sugar and fruit than with livestock.

What has happened in the Awash Valley is perhaps typical of riverine schemes in Ethiopia. In the beginning, appropriate noises were made and appropriate statements put on paper about settling the people of the Valley and improving their living conditions. This is laudable if questionable. But no studies were made to help achieve this end, and the existing settlement schemes and re-education schemes have the appearance of being mere appendages to a massive development of capitalist agriculture. Unless we count settlement by burial, many more Europeans and Ethiopian highlanders have been settled in the Valley than Afar, whose land it is by traditional usage. In terms of national interest a net loss is being incurred, quite apart from the moral questions involved. A huge Afar area, once exploited by about 150,000 people during the wet season, will no longer be available for the Afar. On the 200,000 ha

which will be developed, employment will be found for perhaps 50,000 permanent and 250,000 seasonal workers.

About 30,000 ha of land is cultivated in the Middle and Lower Awash, resulting in 20,000 Afars being displaced from their best grazing areas. If the present situation continues, most of the capital amassed in these enterprises will leave Ethiopia, and the ordinary workers on the farms will maintain a "standard of living" slightly higher than most Ethiopians, at the expense of becoming dependent seasonal labourers who migrate from the highlands at harvest time. The original "pastoralists" will have been replaced by modern "wage-labourer pastoralists".

With the introduction of cash crop production, some of the Afar were forced to leave their river-watered pastures—where they had lived more or less since the 16th and 17th Centuries—to become increasingly dependent on the availability of rain. This has led to a relative overpopulation of the less fertile areas to which they had to move, with consequent overgrazing followed by diminishing herds and malnutrition. It is the rainfall in the highlands which determines the level of the Awash. The Afar will be lost if they are denied access to this life-line when there is drought in the rangelands.

The changes which are taking place in the Valley seem to be working in every respect against the people. The Afar suspect that during recent years the river they still use to water their animals, as well as for their own consumption, has been "poisoned" by industrial wastes. Effluents from sugar industries are discharged into the Awash, and, moreover, its affluents pass through a new industrial region south-east of Addis Ababa. It is alleged that both people and animals have fallen ill from drinking the water and that cat-

tle have died. Human ill-health should also be considered part of the causal chain. Increased incidence of yellow fever, malaria, water-borne diseases and cholera are observed. The situation which is emerging is extremely serious. Many of these industries are linked to the cash crops being produced in the Awash Valley, and they are naturally expected to develop still further. But it is unlikely that legal restrictions on the pollution of water will be imposed, and in any case their implementation would mean an increase in both capital and recurrent expenditures, which would thereby hamper the rate of investment and would be incompatible with targets set for the nation's economic growth. Concentration of poisonous substances in the contaminated Awash River may therefore be expected to lead to the deterioration of Afar health. To this should be added the use of various insecticides, notably biocides, which poison the livestock and cause poor health in people. Pesticides, insecticides and herbicides are causes for high human and livestock mortality in the valley.

The effects on the Afar of development in the valley has been given little consideration, since, being pastoralists, they have been thought able to move to alternative areas. This attitude, and the lack of consideration for compensation, has engendered a loss of confidence and deep skepticism on the part of the Afar. More than anything else, it is responsible for the intense suspicion that Afar show towards the motives of any outsider, and for the antagonism they show regarding actions they do not understand. The Afar feel that they have been cheated and often say that "foreigners tell lies".

Land degradation is taking place in the irrigation schemes, resulting in salinity and sodicity. The irrigation water induces temporary saturation in the

roots and thereafter the excess water recharges the ground water, causing it to rise. Several thousands of hectares of land have been abandoned due to salinity and sodicity in the valley, thus causing loss of yield and limits on the varieties of crops that can be grown.

There is flourishing firewood and charcoal sale in the Middle Valley, leading to the destruction of trees, bushes, etc. The devastation escalates during drought periods when the resources from livestock are depleted. There is a growing incidence of livestock diseases brought about by the poor condition of the animals. Some Afar attribute an increase in internal parasites to the crowding of livestock at grazing and water points.

The government has attempted to provide alternatives for some Afar displaced from the valley. These past attempts to solve the pastoral problem have included settlement, farming on small holdings and irrigated pastures. These settlements were not initiated by the Afar, and none has been very successful. In the Amibara settlement scheme, the Afar were ignored in the design of government projects intended to benefit them. This neglect has been a source of strife. The settlements at Amibara and Dubti have not been successful. Only 300 persons were settled, on non-sustainable schemes. The Third Livestock Development Project's (TLDP) 3,000 ha irrigated pasture at Angelele will probably suffer from similar problems. Here, 1,500 Afar households were expected to participate in the scheme, each managing a separate unit of land.

#### Commercial Farming in the Awash Valley

Since the last quarter of 1992, some Afar elites who belong to the differ-

ent mushrooming political groups have started leasing riverine land for irrigation purposes, on behalf of prospective entrepreneurs, at the rate of about US \$80/ha/yr. Another group of entrepreneurs came with capital and labour and proposed sharing the produce with these local political groups. The political groups are allocated 40% of the shares and 60% go to the entrepreneurs. Three of the Sultan's family members are also currently cultivating 2,500 ha. These new sites for cultivation are all on irrigable land theoretically being returned to the pastoralists by State Farms. Thus, in principle, State Farms are being replaced by commercial farms. However, pastoralists and agropastoralists are still kept out of sight, and the recipients tend to be the rich and powerful, so the impact of this policy has been negligible.

#### Loss of Access to the Awash Game Park

The government established the Awash Game Park in the Middle Valley between Meta Hara and Awash Station, an area of 830 km<sup>2</sup>, in 1966. The park surrounds a dry and wet season grazing area which is reserved for wild animals and tourism. The park currently conserves 46 mammal species and over 400 species of birds. However, the Afar have been evicted from the park and no compensation has been made for lost grazing land. Some Afar have also been fined for grazing their animals in the park.

For the past 20 years it has been the National Wildlife Conservation Organization's policy to relocate people within the parks to places outside them. However, adequate funds have prevented this from being carried out. During the rains, grazing by Afar livestock within the park boundaries is permitted, as



long as peaceful behaviour is observed and the wildlife is not molested. There is no plan for long-term reconciliation of the conflicting interests of the Afar and the people in charge of the park, but there seems to be room for accommodating livestock in the park.

### Conflict and response to state interventions

#### One People, Three States: Implications of Afar Territorial Conflict

The Afar live in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea. Most Afar in Eritrea would like to be part of Ethiopia because of historical and socio-economic ties. Their political aspiration is for self-determination if the first choice does not work. The Afar in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea will ultimately decide their own fate and may come together to form a nation. Whether this will materialize or not is to be seen. Security will be a challenge for the respective governments as long as the Afar are split between the three countries and democratization is not in the making.

#### Afar Response to this Major Cause of Crisis

The Afar have not been passive during the process of peripheralization, but have adapted survival strategies in order to escape from the scourge of starvation and permanent habitation in relief camps. Some of the strategies include agricultural activities, irrigated farming, wage labour in Djibouti, sale of fire wood, sale of charcoal, tending Oromo cattle, etc. (Ayele 1986; Helland 1977). But these productive activities are carried out by few Afar and the income earned is meagre, so most Afar cannot depend on them (Ayele 1986).

The Afar have not accepted external

impingement on their land. Time and time again, they have individually or collectively tried to create problems for state or commercial enterprises by attacking and killing the personnel working in these ventures. During these fights several Afar have lost their lives. Furthermore, the Afar graze the cotton fields when guards are away.

During the last seventeen years of rule by Colonel Mengistu, under the DERGUE, the government anticipated turning the Awash Valley into State Farms. When the Afar heard of the government's plan they burnt all the mature cotton from the Upper to the Lower Awash. After this incident, the government backed away from the idea.

As a result of the new government being formed in opposition to the Marxist-Leninist government of Colonel Mengistu, which led to the recognition of the Afar Liberation Front, the Afar seem to be in a better position, but the underlying conflict with the government has not been resolved.

Despite being dispossessed of their land, the Afar have not reverted to agitating for independence and separation from Ethiopia. In fact, during this period of administration by the Transitional Government, they were the first group to call all nations, nationalities and peoples to come together and build one Ethiopia. During the reign of the Transitional Government, the Red Sea coastal areas have been excluded from the newly formed Afar Region in Ethiopia, and this aroused opposition among Afar living in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea.

#### Future Options and the New Government

Dispossession has exposed the Afar to marginalization and subsequent impoverishment. What then is the solution?

The growth of commercial agriculture should be curtailed, and the government should concentrate on aiding the survival of the Afar living in the region. Such a step would cost the State less than allowing the present direction of development to continue. The land taken away from the Afar has to be returned to them. Afar are demanding "give us back our land". Compensation for the lost land does not appeal to them.

As a sign of good will the Ministry of State Farms returned 10,313 ha of irrigated land to the Afar in 1992, but it is not yet clear how the Afar pastoralists are going to use this land. I am not arguing that all irrigated land should be returned to the Afar, but ways should be studied to integrate the Afar into the irrigation schemes so that a sustainable and participatory development approach is followed for the good and well being of the Afar pastoralists. This has been the missing link in the development process over the last 30 years. Even the present trend of leasing land to commercial farmers deprives the Afar of their grazing areas. The end result of this top-down approach to development has been drought, famine, environmental degradation and declining productivity. The Afar have become enmeshed in the cash economy and in international markets, through which they have been victimized.

The Afar must be engaged in the struggle to arrest the loss of pasture and water resources that have been encroached upon by the State and government-sponsored enterprises. Even the Oromo-speaking Boran, pastoralists who live in regions of Southern Ethiopia where there are no irrigation schemes, are not much better off. The situation of the Boran demonstrates that pastoralists may be affected by factors other than land alienation through

irrigation schemes, which has been the plight of the Afar.

If the land is left as it is for traditional grazing, without improving the range, or addressing economic and human complexities, then the Afar will be back to square one. They have adapted an efficient system in this harsh environment but they cannot go beyond it. To just be entitled to land is not enough. Internal dynamics in the society work against the traditional practices of livestock husbandry. The Afar should not be left alone, as in fact history has not left them alone.

### Concluding remarks

The entire rangeland of the Afar was traditionally used for grazing cattle, camels, sheep, goats and donkeys. The Afar depended on multi-species pastoralism for their livelihood.

The global move towards privatization of pastureland is detrimental to the Afar pastoralists and should be discouraged. The current practice is that Afar households have their own farms, which they continue to own as long as they cultivate. Some households enclose grazing areas around the pastoral camp for calves and weak animals to use. Some households even have rights to their own trees, which serve as fodder to livestock.

Since the 1960's external changes which are alien to Afar society, and various dynamics within the system, have lowered the threshold of viability for the Afar as a whole. One of the internal changes in land tenure that has affected the Afar way of life is the acceptance of herding arrangements for Oromo livestock. The external changes include Oromo cattle incursion in Afar rangelands, conflicts with other groups adjacent to the Afars, the damming of the Awash River, depletion of life belt

areas in Borkenna valley, depletion of the dry season grazing reserve in the Awash valley, commercial farming since the end of 1992 and the Awash Game Park. For at least seven months of the year, the Afar are faced with a diminishing resource base of critically important grazing areas and water facilities. Land alienation and alien pastoral encroachment has led to an increase in livestock densities, and a consequent increase in dependence upon agricultural products.

Changes in property relations have generally resulted in the loss of dry season, drought and strategic grazing reserves, overgrazing and overstocking, increased soil erosion and environmental degradation, a reduction in livestock productivity and a break-down of socio-cultural mechanisms. One might argue that the State is trying to control resources in order to share the meagre natural resources among the inhabitants. The truth of this is questionable. The changes in the land tenure were brought by outside influences, especially political forces (ie. the State), operating against the interests of the Afar. Whether future policies will accord with their interests remains to be seen.

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