

Pathways to Resilience in the Karamoja Cluster
A regional conference on recent research and policy options
21-23 May 2019, Moroto, Karamoja, Uganda

WORKING PAPER

Distress Sell of Cattle by the Bodi

Agro-Pastoralists Subsidizing Sugar Industrialization in the lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia

Fana Gebresenbet

Assistant Professor, Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University
E-mail: fana.g@ipss-addis.org

Abstract

Ethiopia's lower Omo valley is undergoing a rapid environmental, socio-economic and political transformation. This transformation is enticed by the aggressive resource extraction interests of the Ethiopian state, through the building of the Gibe III dam on the Omo River and the establishment of large-scale sugar estates. Based on a long term engagement and a focused research in July and August 2018, this paper argues that the Bodi—a small community which had to bear the earliest and the highest cost of damming of the River and sugar industrialization—are undergoing a state-imposed impoverishment. This impoverishment is a result of distress selling of animals to cope with aggressive and violent state interventions. The Bodi mainly sell animals for reasons related to insecurity and inability to access key resources: 1) coping with hunger; 2) coping with high incidence of animal diseases; 3) coping with high rates of imprisonment of men; and 4) drinking. As continuation of their old penchant, town residents and government officials/experts stress that the Bodi mainly sell animals to simply get drunk. By not providing food aid and veterinary services and through the continuation of a vicious cycle of insecurity, the state essentially is coercing the Bodi into selling animals. Although prices got higher through the years, the state-managed sugar industry is benefitting from availability of cattle in local markets at lower prices. In effect, the Bodi are subsidizing sugar industrialization on the land taken away from them against their will.

Introduction

Ethiopia's lower Omo valley is undergoing a rapid environmental, socio-economic and political transformation. This transformation is enticed by the aggressive resource extraction interests of the Ethiopian state, through the building of the Gibe III dam on the Omo River and the establishment of large-scale sugar estates. These transformative projects commenced following then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's speech at the 13th National Pastoralist Day celebrations in Jinka in January 2011. He asserted the government's commitment to make South Omo "an example of rapid development," through the deployment of the Ethiopian Developmental State project in the valley in the form of sugar estates and factories. This was supposed to provide the conditions for a "stable" and "secure" life of the local agro-pastoral communities (Meles 2011).

The reality on the ground could not have been more different. The filling of Gibe III hydro-electric dam's reservoir meant agro-pastoral communities downstream could not practice retreat agriculture. On top of this, the establishment of sugar estates covering large swaths of land had negative implications for the strategic mobility of pastoral herds. The government also initiated a sedentarization scheme with the stated objective of providing a range of public services. In practice, the sedentarization scheme served as a social control strategy to cut potential resistance to the land alienations.

Going beyond earlier works' focus on political economy and resistance to the sugar estates (Asnake and Fana, 2014; Buffavand 2016; Tewolde and Fana, 2014), this paper examines the implications of these investments to livestock marketing trends in Samalago district. This paper draws on data and insights from long term engagement in the lower Omo Valley, particularly Salamago district, since 2012. Primary data was collected through participatory group exercises, interviews with government officials and experts, community leaders and livestock traders, and focus group discussions with members of the local community, the Bodi. Proportional piling exercises were used to have an estimate of the proportion of primary reason for selling animals.

The following is structured in five parts. The first sets the context of the lower Omo Valley for the reader, with a particular focus on ecology, people and forms of livelihoods. The second, third and fourth sections provide the findings of the study. The second section gives a brief overview of the development interventions in Salamago district. The third shows the link between the development interventions and increasing insecurity in the district. The fourth links increased insecurity to livestock marketing trends in the study area. The last section concludes that the increased tension and insecurity is forcing the Bodi into selling more animals, rather than benefiting from created market opportunities. As such, it is concluded that the Bodi are forced into inadvertently subsidizing sugar industrialisation through distress selling of animals.

Ecology and People of the Lower Omo Valley

The Lower Omo Valley constitutes the low lying lands watered by the Omo River before it reaches Lake Turkana. The lowlands surrounding the River and Lake are arid and semi-arid areas which cannot support settled farming, thus (agro-) pastoralism is the only production system which could exploit the erratic resources. The diet of communities living in the Valley come from a combination of flood retreat agriculture after the peak of the Omo floods (after mid-August), rain-fed agriculture in mid-altitude areas farther from the River and pastoralism on the vast rangelands (see Turton, 1989; Fukui, 2001).

South Omo Zone, where the fieldwork for this paper is on, is found to the east of the River (except Nyangatom and parts of Dassenech districts), is the most ethnically diverse administration within the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regional state. The Zone is home to sixteen indigenous ethnic groups. Most of these are agro-pastoralists. The numerical majority Aari and Maale ethnic groups, accounting to half of the Zone's population, are agrarian (Asnake and Fana, 2012). The remaining fourteen ethnic groups are pastoralists, residing in six pastoral districts. Sugar

industrialization works are restricted to Salamago and Ngangatom districts, with activities starting much earlier in the former. Four ethnic groups are indigenous to Salamago district, i.e., the agro-pastoralist Bodi and Mursi, fishing community of the Kwegu and the agrarian Dime. The study was conducted among the Bodi.

While local economic life of the Bodi is dependent on retreat and rain-fed agriculture, social and political life and culture is mainly linked to livestock. With little state and market intervention, the local economy is subsistence oriented with intermittent and limited exchange with surrounding communities. As the state was dis-interested to extract anything meaningfully from these lowlands, local livelihoods and economy were only reacting to pressure coming from environmental change and competing adjacent groups. The extent of state and market penetration is very weak in most of the Zone's pastoral lowlands, dis-incentivized by the little development of the 'state accessible economy' (Scott, 1998), the difficulty of governing and extracting from/taxing the agro-pastoralist population, and the hot climate of the lowlands (Markakis, 2011). Posting to the area was taken as punishment during the imperial era (until 1974), and there was no real interest to significantly interfere in and transform the lives and livelihoods of the agro-pastoral population until the early 2000s. The main interest of the government in the 1990s was reducing pastoral conflicts.¹ This has translated into a dismally low level of socio-economic development in the Zone.

The Bodi (as all agro-pastoral groups) are viewed as 'irrational', 'traditional' and 'backward', and to an extent as being against 'modernity'. They are blamed in official government discourse as not making efficient use of local resources, and as being 'hot tempered' and 'warmongers' fighting at the slightest opportunity. Perceived as simply 'surviving' through 'basic' skills, agro-pastoralists are understood as lazy (see for example a report from Government Communication Affairs Office, 2015). Pastoralists' complex local knowledge and skills (see Abbink et al., 2014) are simply glossed over in government development discourse and practice.

Enabled by the above dichotomized state view, South Omo is viewed as a resource frontier, an area 'empty of social relations, but full of potential' for economic invigoration (Bridge, 2009). This justifies aggressive high modernist visions (Scott, 1998). These modernist visions are deployed in South Omo in the name of creating stable conditions for and improving the lives of agro-pastoralists (Meles, 2011) and reducing pastoral conflicts.² Moreover, these modernist visions were encapsulated in the overarching national project of building the Ethiopian developmental state. The next section details the mega-development projects affecting life in the lower Omo Valley.

'Dawn of Development' in South Omo

On 25 January 2011, in a speech delivered at the 13th Pastoralist Day celebration in Jinka, capital of South Omo Zone, Ethiopia's late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced his government's desire and plan to 'civilise' these pastoral lowlands. He stressed that his government will transform the valley from being an example of backwardness and tourist attraction into an example of rapid development. He insisted that pastoralists want a 'stable, improved life' which the government managed development will deliver (Meles, 2011; for a critique see Turton, forthcoming). This in the government's perspective could be taken as the 'dawn of development' to the valley.

Development in these lowlands took a different form than the standard in the smallholder highlands. It started with the building of the Gibe III dam further upstream, outside the lower Omo valley, and continued to encompass sugar estates and mills and a sedentarization scheme (see Asnake and Fana, 2014; Tewolde and Fana, 2014). The construction of the Gibe III dam, which started in 2006 and completed in 2015, opened the lower Omo resource frontier for state invigoration.

¹ Interview: Expert in Zone's Security and Administration Office, October 2017.

² Interview: Senior Experts at the Zone's Administrator's Office and the Zone's Security and Administration Office, October 2017.

Regulation of the River's flow volume by Gibe III dam is crucial for promotion of irrigated agriculture in the valley (Stevenson, 2018). The chosen crop to 'conquer' the vast 'unused' lowlands of South Omo is sugarcane, linked with the establishment of sugar mills. In the early 2010s, as much as 175,000 hectares of land was planned to be covered with sugarcane to supply five factories. In addition to creating job opportunities to at least 400,000 Ethiopians, these plantations and mills were expected to generate foreign currency and electricity (for details see Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2010; Tewelde and Fana, 2014). By 2016, only 10,000 ha was covered with sugarcane and an additional 13,000 ha cleared (Kamski, 2016). Only one factory is operational (officially as of 14 October 2018).

The government also commenced a comprehensive scheme of 'modernizing' the Bodi, which was premised on the necessity of sedentarizing the pastoral community in planned villages where the government will deliver 'modernity packages', such as schools, clinics, veterinary clinics, grinding mills, potable water, and establish the lowest administrative level with a police (sub-)station. Furthermore, the government also provided free food for about half a year to lure people into the newly established villages (for details see Tewelde and Fana, 2014; Stevenson and Buffavand, 2018). Settled farming is promoted with the 'distribution' of land with promises of access to irrigation (from the facilities of the sugar estates). Although the initial plan was to give the pastoralists all the allocated land, in due course the government decided for the ESC to grow sugarcane on 0.75 hectare of the 1.25 hectare in a contract farming arrangement, over which the pastoralists had little say.³ The irrigation water however did not reach them. What is more interesting is that the government's interest to implement the sedentarization scheme steadily declined after a peak in 2012 and 2013, when the land clearing and upgrading of the road linking the district to Jinka was at its peak. This is interpreted by the pastoralists as evidence to the ill-intentions of the government (Fana, forthcoming). As one elder emphasized, the government is "interested to take ... [the land] than give us different services."⁴

The great enthusiasm and energy of experts seen in 2013 was gone by 2017. The newly cleared lands for agriculture and homestead were covered with grasses and bushes in 2018. This personal observation and many accounts from the local community attest that this modernizing project failed to bear fruits. The promise and enthusiasm of government experts and officials to 'introduce' pastoralists into modernity was dashed in less than half a decade. In a nutshell, the opening of the South Omo frontier for state resource extraction interests was very rapid and was felt as a rupture by the local community.

Development in Practice in South Omo: Little Gains, More Violence

Even in government's own admission, the development interventions in South Omo failed miserably. Ethiopia continues to face sugar shortages let alone generate hundreds of millions of dollars as planned in 2010. Currently, the plantation acreage is reduced to about 100,000 hectares and factories reduced to four. Although the government projects failed to be realized in any meaningful manner as of yet, the consequent negative implications are severely felt by the Bodi. As there is no flooding as of 2015 (due to filling of Gibe III dam's reservoir), the pastoral communities could not practice flood-retreat agriculture. Moreover, due to threats of conflict with the Konso settled in the mid-altitude areas on the old border between the Bodi and the Dime (Ayke, 2005), the Bodi cannot practice rain-fed agriculture. This has made the local communities food insecure,⁵ forcing pastoral households to increasingly rely on the market, i.e., exchange livestock for grain.⁶

³ Interview: Experts, Bureau of Agriculture and Pastoralist Affairs Office, Salamago district, October 2017.

⁴ FGD: Elders, Salamago district, October 2017.

⁵ Interview: Elders and Administrators, Nyangatom district, August 2018.

⁶ Interviews and FGDs with members of the local community, Salamago district, July 2018.

This negative repercussions of the large-scale investments on welfare and local livelihoods also led to intensification local conflicts. Of the six pastoral districts of the Zone, Salamago used to be better in terms of pastoral conflicts and other forms of violence before the ‘development’ interventions (Markakis, 2011). As an expert in the district government stated, civil servants in Hana, the district capital, were “more afraid of wild animals attacking them in the long trek/drive to Jinka,” than fearing the Bodi or the Mursi a decade ago. As the road linking the Hana with Jinka, the Zonal capital, was very bad, very few vehicles braved the road and even then the about 100 km distance used to take more than one day. The road was improved in mid-2000s to facilitate the resettlement of landless and food-insecure Konso community (Ayke, 2005). Then another round of road improvement happened in early 2010s for sugar-related activities. However, civil servants with long experience in the Zone and district stress that the experience from a decade ago was better: as the local community—the Bodi and Mursi communities—were friendly to outsiders and did not attempt to ambush vehicles.

The increasing traffic volume and speed of vehicles is taken as trigger to violent reactions by many. Now many trucks and 4WD cars frequent the roads, while a decade back one might be lucky to get transportation from/back to Jinka. Repeated car accidents often lead to revenge attacks. For example, after a Bodi pastoralist was killed by a truck on 4 December 2017, the Bodi revenged by attacking vehicles and drivers killing at least twelve on the same day.⁷ Although this case shows an exceptionally high number of killings, the threat and feeling of insecurity is high. Two further examples could also be provided to illustrate the degree of insecurity and fear in the district. First, the district government imposes and enforces a curfew at 10:00 PM in Hana town. All the bars and restaurants, mainly serving the labour force working in sugar related activities, lining both sides of the town’s only major road will be forced to put down their generators and close. This has been going on at least since mid-2016. Second, on Saturdays, a market day in Hanna, many Bodi pastoralists come to town to sell livestock. This will often be followed by heavy drinking, and quarrels/conflicts amongst themselves and with others. To prevent this, the district government closes the market early (around 2 PM) and the police will then limit the mobility of the Bodi to the outskirts of the town. In both cases, the Bodi are viewed as threatening the other Ethiopians living in the town.

Such government security actions did not start after attacks by the Bodi against state interests though. One of the very first government actions before the actual land clearing and other works started was a ‘security campaign’. These campaigns last for weeks, and are implemented with the aim of putting individuals who committed various crimes in the past in prison. This is a reflection of the state’s weakness to ensure peace and security in these lowlands in a predictable manner. As a consequence of such campaigns conducted since 2012 (on an annual basis), now more than 300 men from Salamago district are in Jinka prison facility.⁸ In addition to the state objective, the local community has a strong perception that these campaigns are meant to pre-empt potential resistance against the sugar development and sedentarization schemes.

Actual violent conflicts were more common and intense with the Konso settlers, the Bodi insisting that the government told them that the Konso will leave there for five years and that they should return. The Konso however became very profitable sesame farmers, brought their kin and expanded their land. While the Bodi initially inflicted more harm, in due course the Konso also armed and defended themselves. Moreover, the government always is found on the side of the Konso.

In addition to the structural violence embedded in the dispossessions, the state is committing various forms of direct violence against the local population. The local community reacted violently, mainly to the state sponsored direct violence. Violence begot more violence. In this process, the state

⁷ <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/south-omo-violence-leaves-12-dead> (last accessed 25 October 2018)

⁸ Interviews and FGDs with members of the local community, Salamago district, July 2018.

will also have the opportunity to further construct, reify and consolidate the image of the pastoralist as violent, irrational and backward; thus needing more state action. In this vicious circle the actor which can persist and win eventually is the state.

Implications of Insecurity on Livestock Marketing

Discussions with government officials gives a standard view of Bodi's market averse behaviour. There is recognition of the increasing trend of engagement with the market, but is evaluated as insufficient compared to the Bodi's herd. Moreover, the Bodi are blamed for spending the money on drinking and causing trouble. The Bodi however insist that they are being impoverished by a combination of factors, all linked to insecurity. The most important reasons for selling animals at the time of fieldwork were: hunger (to buy food) followed by animal diseases and covering expenses related to visiting imprisoned men.

Food insecurity is a combined outcome of the absence of the Omo floods after 2015, and insecurity forcing the Bodi to not practice rain-fed agriculture in mid-altitude areas, where the Konso have de facto control now. Had there been the possibility of doing some rain-fed farming, many Bodi insist that they could have better resisted the severe droughts of 2016 and 2017.⁹ The second reason, high incidence of animal diseases, is also linked to insecurity and development interventions. The land area their herd could roam is reduced, thus the possibility of doing 'traditional quarantine' is becoming less applicable, thus likelihood of spread of diseases being high. Veterinary care from district government is demanded as a right, but the agriculture experts are too afraid to step outside the limits of Hana. Thus, the Bodi are forced to sell animals when first signs are seen and also to sell a few and save others by buying medicine from the market.¹⁰

As mentioned above, some 300 Bodi men are imprisoned after 2012, a large number for a community of about 10,000 members. In addition to the obvious economic implications of withdrawal these men's labour from the local economy, it has cultural implications. Culturally, a wife is expected to give birth every two and half to three years. To meet this, many women had to sell animals to cover expenses of travel and stay in Jinka (including for an accompanying man), and most importantly bribing the policemen to smuggle her husband out for an unofficial 'conjugal visit.' This was stopped in 2016, when Aari prisoners protested to get same privileges, although they don't have the means to bribe the officers.¹¹

Drinking only appears as something the Bodi do after spending the money on these three most important reasons.¹² Moreover, given the very recent nature of the cash economy, the absence of the saving culture and the strong culture of sharing, it is not surprising to see money spent on such rudimentary forms of entertainment.

Those Bodi residing closer to the large-scale interventions strongly feel that they are being impoverished through these processes. However, to the owners of the restaurants and the labour force, and by corollary the sugar estate, the Bodi are providing a very important service of providing cheap meat. The organic quality of the meat is neither recognized nor valued. If the Bodi stop selling (mainly during periods of peak insecurity) the district government will be forced to bring animals from some 200 km away. Moreover, given the low negotiation power of the Bodi they are not making the best out of the livestock sells.

⁹ FGD with elders, Hana Villagisation site, 5 August 2018; FGD young men, Salamago, 6 August 2018; Interview: Salamago district expert, with long experience, 3 August 2018.

¹⁰ FGD with elders, Hana Villagisation site, 5 August 2018; FGD young men, Salamago, 6 August 2018; FGD with women, Salamago, 6 August 2018; Interview: Salamago district expert, with long experience, 3 August 2018.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² FGD young men, Salamago, 6 August 2018; FGD with women, Salamago, 6 August 2018.

Conclusions

From the very start, the government viewed the Bodi as irrational and violent ethnic group. Pacifying them was conceived as an integral component of 'developing' them. The security campaigns in effect showed the clear design of the government to have its way in the 'development endeavour.' Through a combination of coercion and persuasion, the government came out as the clear winner in the struggle over visions for the future. The subsistence oriented way of life of the Bodi pastoralists was bulldozed, without obvious 'good enough' replacement. The process has its foundation on viewing the pastoralist as 'backward', 'uncivilized', 'irrational', 'poor' and in need of rationalizing and developing hands of the government.

According to government informants, there was expectation that the Bodi will benefit from high effective demand for their animals at their doorsteps, and start to gear their production to meet the market needs. That is not what happened though. The Bodi are distress selling of animals, due to insecurity. This does not matter for the government, businesses and labour force there, they rather seem to enjoy the availability of cheap supplies. In effect, the Bodi are subsidising sugar industrialization inadvertently, while experiencing deterioration of welfare and going into deeper levels of poverty simultaneously.

Acknowledgement

This fieldwork for this work was possible by funding from the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) project of the Institute of Development Studies. I acknowledge the assistance of Jeremy Lind, Ian Scoones and Andy Catley in different stages of the research.

References

- Abbink, Jon, et al. 2014. *Lands of the Future: Transforming Pastoral Lands and Livelihoods in Eastern Africa*. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Paper 154. Halle (Saale): Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. http://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/de/publications/working_papers/wp0154 (accessed on 12 August 2018).
- Ayke, A. 2005. *Challenges and Opportunities of 'Salamago Resettlement'. The Resettlement of Konso Farmers in the Ethnic Land of the Bodi Agro-Pastoralists, South-West Ethiopia*. Paper submitted to the Forum for Social Studies.
- Bridge, G. 2009. Material worlds: natural resources, resource geography and the material economy. *Geography Compass* 3 (3): 1217-1244.
- Buffavand, L. 2017. *Vanishing Stones and the Hovering Giraffe: Identity, Land and the Divine in Mela, South-West Ethiopia*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Martin-Luther University.
- _____. 2016. "The Land Does Not Like Them": Contesting Dispossession in Cosmological Terms in Mela, South-West Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10 (3): 476-93.
- Fana G. 2019 (forthcoming). Villagisation in Ethiopia's Lowlands: Development vs. Facilitating Control and Dispossession. In: *Lands of the Future-Future of the Lands: Anthropological Perspectives on agro-pastoralist, investment and land use* edited by Gabbert, Christna Echi., John Galaty, Fana Gebresenbet and Günther Schlee. New York: Berghan.
- Fukui, K. 2001. Socio-political characteristics of pastoral nomadism: flexibility among the Bodi (Mela-Me'en) in Southwest Ethiopia. *Nilo-Ethiopian Studies* 7:1-21
- Government Communications Affairs Office (of Ethiopia; GCAO). 2015. *The Ethiopian Human Rights Landscape in the Context of Right-Based Approach to Development*. <http://www.gcao.gov.et/documents/10157/107515/The+Ethiopian+Human+Rights+Landscape++in+the+Context+of+Right+Based+Approach> (accessed on 25 September 2015).
- Kamski, B. 2016. The Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP): between 'sweet vision' and mounting challenges. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10 (3): 568-580.
- Markakis, J. 2011. *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Meles Z. 2011. Speech during the 13th Annual Pastoralist Day Celebrations, Jinka, South Omo, 2011. <http://www.mursi.org/pdf/Meles%20Jinka%20speech.pdf> (accessed 22 January 2019).
- Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. 2010. *Growth and Transformation Plan (2010/11-2014/15)*. Volume I: Main Text. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (November, 2010).
- Scott, J.C. 1998. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Stevenson, J. 2018. Plantation Development in the Turkana Basin: The Making of a New Desert? *Land* 7 (1) DOI:10.3390/land7010016
- Stevenson, E.G.J. and L. Buffavand. 2018. 'Do our bodies know their ways?' Villagization, food insecurity, and ill-being in Ethiopia's Lower Omo valley. *African Studies Review* doi:10.1017/asr.2017.100

Tewolde W. & Fana G. 2014. Socio-political and Conflict Implications of Sugar Development in Salamago Wereda, Ethiopia. In: Mulugeta G.B. (ed), *A Delicate Balance: Land Use, Minority Rights and Social Stability in the Horn of Africa* (pp. 117-143). Addis Ababa: Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University.

Turton, D. 2019 (forthcoming). Breaking every rule in the book: The story of river basin development in Ethiopia's Omo Valley. In: *Lands of the Future-Future of the Lands: Anthropological Perspectives on agro-pastoralist, investment and land use* edited by Gabbert, Christna Echi., John Galaty, Fana Gebresenbet and Günther Schlee. New York: Berghan.