

# THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PERIPHERY AS ‘UNOCCUPIED’ LAND IN ETHIOPIA

THE CASE OF THE WESTERN OROMO AND THE GUMUZ

[Ameyu Godesso Roro]



TEXT AND  
PHOTO ESSAYS

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MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
**DEPARTMENT ‘INTEGRATION AND CONFLICT’**  
FIELD NOTES AND RESEARCH PROJECTS XXIII

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The Representation of the Periphery as 'Unoccupied' Land in Ethiopia:  
The Case of the Western Oromo and the Gumuz (Text and Photo Essays)

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# SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

(GÜNTHER SCHLEE)

## ABOUT THE SERIES

This series of *Field Notes and Research Projects* does not aim to compete with high-impact, peer-reviewed books and journal articles, which are the main ambition of scholars seeking to publish their research. Rather, contributions to this series complement such publications. They serve a number of different purposes.

In recent decades, anthropological publications have often been purely discursive – that is, they have consisted only of words. Often, pictures, tables, and maps have not found their way into them. In this series, we want to devote more space to visual aspects of our data.

Data are often referred to in publications without being presented systematically. Here, we want to make the paths we take in proceeding from data to conclusions more transparent by devoting sufficient space to the documentation of data.

In addition to facilitating critical evaluation of our work by members of the scholarly community, stimulating comparative research within the institute and beyond, and providing citable references for books and articles in which only a limited amount of data can be presented, these volumes serve an important function in retaining connections to field sites and in maintaining the involvement of the people living there in the research process. Those who have helped us to collect data and provided us with information can be given these books and booklets as small tokens of our gratitude and as tangible evidence of their cooperation with us. When the results of our research are sown in the field, new discussions and fresh perspectives might sprout.

Especially in their electronic form, these volumes can also be used in the production of power points for teaching; and, as they are open-access and free of charge, they can serve an important public outreach function by arousing interest in our research among members of a wider audience.

# AUTHOR'S PREFACE

(AMEYU GODESSO RORO)

In this volume, I will put together some field notes related to the PhD project I carried out at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany between December 2013 and December 2014. Focusing on the resulting dissertation titled *Transformation in Gumuz-Oromo Relations: Identity, Conflict and Social Order in Western Ethiopia*, the current Filed Note issue provides some selected notes and photos on rural land use, whose aim is to reflect the different strategies that the Ethiopian state has made use of in order to expropriate land in peripheral areas. In my thesis I mainly focused on two groups of people: the Oromo and the Gumuz. I will briefly describe them in the following section.

The choice of the PhD topic as the main focus of my research was the result of conflict circumstances, specifically the violent conflict in 2008, presenting the neighbouring Oromo and Gumuz ethnic groups with the worst crises they had to face since coming to live together more than a century ago. The main question of my PhD thesis dealt with issue of how ethnic identities are transformed into political identities and how politicised ethnic identities trigger conflict, rather than placing the blame for conflict *a priori* on 'ethnic' causes. More precisely, I was interested in the interpretation which argued that the growing state influences, which heralded a political change in 1991, would be a primary cause of the politicisation of identities and intensification of conflict between the Oromo and Gumuz people. Understanding what growing state influence would mean inferred an analysis of border topics including, but not limited to, political and economic centralism. Thus, in my research, I took a diachronic perspective on the political and economic centralism inherent to the state in many cases. In general the discussion starts with the imperial regime (ca. 1890–1974), followed by the socialist regime, popularly called 'Derg' (1974–1991), and ends with focusing more specifically on the current ethno-federal regime (1991 to the present).

Particularly with the current regime, I focused more on the discussion of the issues of identity and the practice of federalism that mark a cycle of conflict in Ethiopia. I did this discussion in relation to the debates about whether ethnic federalism and the expression of ethnic identity themselves could be central issues determining the causes behind most of the conflicts. In contextualising Oromo-Gumuz relations, my study is more specifically focused on local conflicts between these peoples and the way they have been linked to the lack of implementing federal structures and materializing their policies in daily life. My study resulted in the following findings: local conflicts were fuelled by a powerful mix of ethicised political and economic rivalries and conflicts at local level and are simply symptoms of the continuity of political and economic centralism. As explained by Jan Záhorský in 2013, in Ethiopia

this continuity follows the pattern of a ‘dominant ethnic strategy’ (Záhořík 2013: 48) that is based on the dominant role of a certain group of politicians.

This volume, though it is about my thesis, does not deal exclusively with the fieldwork I carried out in the Oromiya National Regional State (hereafter shortly referred to as ‘Oromiya’) and in the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (hereafter referred to as ‘Benishangul-Gumuz’). The volume represents a variant of a chapter of my dissertation thesis that deals with land use. To this point, the current volume brings together my field notes and established researches to explore the principles of access to land on the western peripheral areas of Ethiopia and how it has changed since the areas fell within the imperial state sphere of influence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the state combined the pursuit of territorial expansion with the expropriation of land in the peripheral areas, it applied a category called ‘unoccupied’ land. By doing so, the state expropriated vast lands for the expansion of state farms during the former Derg regime. Under the current Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime, the state has transferred land to private investors.

The villages where I have carried out my fieldwork constitute an excellent example for such cases of state farm and private investment. Some of the photos I took present the ruined state farms of the Derg (from the 1980s) which had dramatically reduced forest land around the Dhidhessa River. When I arrived in my research area and continued to go to one village after the other, I learned that land investment was a major threat to rural inhabitants. In the villages I visited in Oromiya, many farmers seemed to believe that one day their land would be transferred to investors, and they told me that no one had done anything to dispel such fears and that on that matter the politicians remained secretive among themselves. The farmers told me that ‘land inventory’ was a very sensitive issue in the area. In the neighbouring region of Benishangul-Gumuz, the start of the land registration process and rapid land transfer to investors have also become very sensitive topics and have changed the way people gain access to land.

Since 1991, Ethiopia is divided into regional states supposedly to reflect each ethnic groups’ territory.<sup>1</sup> The new 1994 constitution declares that ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ are sovereign in their regional states and the

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<sup>1</sup> My research area, like other rural areas in Ethiopia, experienced significant political changes since 1991. In terms of administrative structure, the country has shifted from an unitary system to ethnic federalism. The new state is a composite of nine regional states, whereas the regional states ‘shall be delimited on the settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent of the people concerned’ (FDRE 1995: article 46.2). In this regard the western peripheral areas, whose settlement pattern features that of shifting cultivators and are populated by smaller Nilotic ethnic groups, became one of the nine ethnic divisions which was called Benishangul-Gumuz.

ones administering access to land. The constitution, for instance, thought to help both Oromiya and Benishangul-Gumuz administer rural land under their territorial jurisdiction. This was a fundamental relief for smaller groups living in lowland peripheries, which had been hitherto affected by central state policies. Most of the groups living in peripheral areas in general, and the shifting cultivators in Benishangul-Gumuz in particular, had no ‘formal’ title to the land they had made use of and also had lived on.

The Benishangul-Gumuz region is a region where its estimated population density (13.23 people per square kilometre) ranked eighth among the nine regional states in Ethiopia (CSA 2007). That region is considered to be rich in ‘ample’ land. There the customary land tenure system of communal ownership was heavily practiced by the so-called ‘indigenous’ ethnic groups (Berta, Gumuz, Komo, Mao and Shinasha among others).<sup>2</sup> The region is also focused on by the government, because it provides commercial agricultural investment. Indeed, to acquire land requires labelling the land as ‘untitled’ or ‘unoccupied’. Tsegaye Moreda (2017: 710) says the transfer of land to investors is ‘largely predicated on the state’s and other elite groups’ perception of abundant “underutilised” or “unoccupied” land in the region [Benishangul-Gumuz]’. For that matter, the Ethiopian state started to set its own mechanism for ‘freeing’ more land. The so-called ‘free’ land is formed by two interrelated state discourses and practices: land registration (certification) and villagisation.

First, land registration officially precedes the authorization of the peasants’ land right. Whatever the other purposes, among shifting cultivators such as the Gumuz, land registration contravenes the flexibility of customary rights of landholdings. Land registration was also causing and justifying the eviction of those groups considered ‘newcomers’ to the peripheral areas, which had been sparsely settled by the so-called ‘indigenous’ peoples and/or were represented as ‘unoccupied’ land.

Second, villagisation was meant to move people to designated villages so that they could easily get access to social services. There is no doubt that villagisation meant state central control and not simply social services delivery. The exercise of villagisation does not solely confine to state development narratives in general, however. In Benishangul-Gumuz, for instance, the local administrators took the opportunity to establish concentrated villages along their regional boundary in order to react against the perceived expan-

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<sup>2</sup> However, Proclamation No. 85 /2010 of the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (2010: article 29.2) says ‘communal lands found in the region shall be changed into private grazing possession gradually’. Ideally, the discourse of communal land excludes groups living in Benishangul, such as the Amhara and the Oromo, who count for an official 34% of the region’s population and are considered as allochthones, even if they were born (mostly the Oromo) or had been installed there by the Derg in the 1980s (mostly the Amharas).

sion of settlement from the Oromo side. (I will come back to this later in the chapter on 'There Transformation of Landscape in Rural Settings', p. 25.)

This volume is a rather retrospective description about what had happened than a direct experience of what was happening during my fieldwork period. The description (text) includes direct quotes and extracts of conversations, voice recordings, and written texts. The main text discussed will be illustrated by some photos I took. Photo essays are inserted between the chapters of the main text to which they relate. The photos cover different aspects of land related projects in the Oromiya and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions ranging from mechanized state farm, private farm and state-sponsored resettlement and villagisation schemes.



# INTRODUCTION

## THE PEOPLES

The Oromo are a Cushitic-speaking people. They inhabit a land that extends from north-eastern Ethiopia to northern Kenya and from Sudan in the west to Somali-inhabited land in the east (Lewis 1984: 590). Most Oromo reside in Oromiya (Ethiopia). Not only the Oromo population of almost 28 million made them the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia (CSA 2007), they are also the largest single ethnic group in East Africa. They have generally been represented in the literature as an egalitarian people governed by the Gadaa system.<sup>3</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, some of the local Oromo Gadaa leaders had abandoned the system and increasingly turned to a hereditary monarchy. The western areas of Ethiopia, colloquially called Wallagga (see Map 1) and part of my geographic focus, were no exception to the rule (Schlee 2003; Ta'a 1986).

The Gumuz are a Nilotic ethnic group. They live in a small area in western Ethiopia (the present-day Benishangul-Gumuz region) and on the eastern border of present-day Sudan. This is an area of bush savanna lowland environment with abundant rivers. As of 2007, there were around 159,418 Gumuz in Ethiopia (CSA 2007). The Gumuz have generally been represented in the literature as shifting cultivators and hunters. They are also represented as a peripheral group in Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2014). This is not only due to the geographic distance but also to social, economic and political detachments which they have experienced from the Ethiopian state. In particular, the Gumuz are considered marginal entities compared to their neighbouring groups such as the Oromo, the Amhara, and the Agaw (González-Ruibal 2014; Markakis 2011).

## THE SETTINGS

The location of the groups I will delve into is on the western periphery to the south of the Blue Nile (hereafter referred to as the Abbaya River). Historically, the specific territorial area was under the domain of the Leeqaa Naqamtee of Wallagga.<sup>4</sup> This had been an area of Oromo dominance at least

<sup>3</sup> Gadaa, or the Oromo Gadaa, is a system of generational classes that succeed each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative and ritual responsibilities. The Gadaa system has been studied by scholars such as Andrea Nicholas (2010), Asafa Jalata (2012), Asmarom Legesse (1973, 2006), Günther Schlee (1989, 1998), Marco Bassi (1994, 1996, 2005), and P. T. W. Baxter (1978).

<sup>4</sup> Leeqaa Naqamtee was one of the former Wallagga Oromo kingdoms (notably the present East Wallagga zone) in the western parts of Ethiopia established by *Motii* (King) Bakare Godana (1841–1868), during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The other Wallagga Oromo kingdom, to the west of Leeqaa Naqamtee, was Leeqaa Qellam founded by Joote Tullu in 1870. It included a part of the present Qellam Wallagga,

from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were several reasons for this. One of these is worth noting. By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century the Oromo had occupied much of the present-day Ethiopia, including the particular area in question, whereas the Gumuz have a more recent history in the former Wallagga region. It has been suggested that the Gumuz first moved into Wallagga in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (James 1986). They had crossed the river from the north, settled on its banks, then moved south-eastward along the Dhidhessa River, a tributary of the former, and eventually settled on a slight portion of the lowland areas in Wallagga (compare Map 2 and 4).

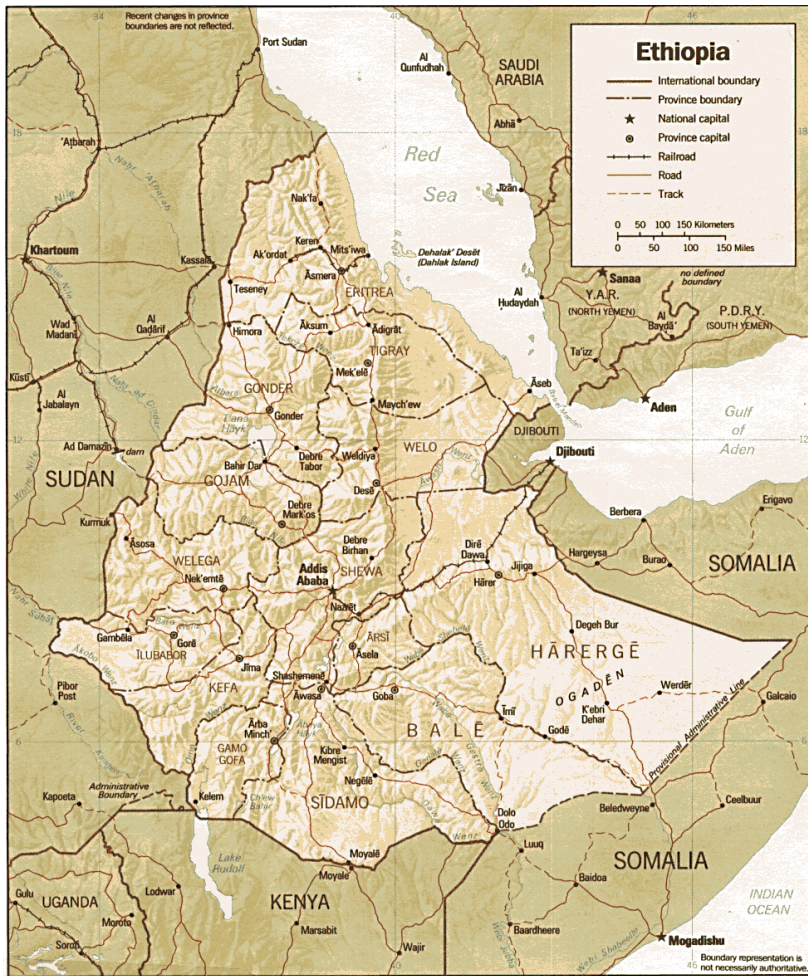
Furthermore, the Oromo were able to own and acquire land based on the Gadaa laws pertaining to landholding known as the *Qabiyyee* system (Ayana 1995: 69), which recognized the right of precedence or pioneer settlers (Bartels 1983; Ayana 1995; Ta'a 1980: 21). The land was owned communally at clan/*gosaa* level. This had been the case before a certain man named Bakare Godana founded the ruling house of Leeqaa Naqamtee. Among the stories people tell today are those about how Bakare Godana, by virtue of his military rank in the Gadaa system, managed to consolidate power and became the first *Motii* (king) and founder of the ruling house of Leeqaa Naqamtee (1841–1868).<sup>5</sup> He was succeeded by Moroda Bakare (1868–1889) and Kumsa Moroda (1889–1923) who continued to control most of the areas south of the Abbaya River (Ta'a 1986).<sup>6</sup> In the wake of these events and the development of feudalism and feudal relations, many Oromo people were deprived of the right to landownership and neither had the right to communal nor private ownership of land.

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West Wallaga and Assosa zone.

<sup>5</sup> The Leeqaa, like several other Oromo groups in the region, had been governed by the Gadaa system. Oral sources indicate that Naqamtee had long been an important Gadaa centre, a *Gumii* (a meeting ground of the Gadaa assembly) and a sacred site where political and religious rituals took place before it began to be ruled by the powerful family of Bakare Godana in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Bakare Godana held the position of *Abba Duulaa* (war leader) and was one of the members of the Gadaa council. He managed to build up a position of power around 1950 after his elective period has passed. According to the Gadaa rule, an elective period lasts only 8 years. A multitude of factors, such as the expansion of mixed economy, trade and internal dynamics/conflicts that brought about accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of Bakare Godana finally led to the breakdown of the Gadaa system. As Bakare continued to rule the area for about thirty-three years, the formation of a monarchical state gradually emerged among the Leeqaa Naqamtee (for more details see Ta'a 1986).

<sup>6</sup> After Kumsa's death in 1923, governed by two other members of the ruling house: Dajjazmach Habte-Mariam Kumsa (r. 1924–1935), and Dajjazmach Fiqre-Silassie Habte-Mariam (r. 1955–1958), the relative autonomy of Leeqaa Naqamtee was brought to an end by Emperor Haile Selassie's program of political centralism and direct control in the early 1940s. When the emperor recovered his throne from the Italians in 1941, he appointed Ras Kebede Tessema as the first royal appointee governor of Leeqaa Naqamtee. Now Leeqaa Naqamtee was put under a *neftegna* landlord system (Amhara solider-settlers).



Map 1: Ethiopian political map pre-1991 federalism  
 (source: <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/ethiopia.gif>; Base 801432 [B00975]: 90; 1990)

As noted before, the Gumuz have recently moved into Wallagga and their movement had its origin in parts of Gojjam north of the Abbaya River (James 1986; Wallmark 1981). The Gumuz movement dramatically increased due to the growing harsh treatment in the form of enslavement and heavy taxation through the hands of the Mahdist in Sudan and the Amhara and the Agew groups in Ethiopia. As a result, they were escaping and seeking protection by the Oromo at large and the ruling house of Leeqaa Naqamtee in particular.

Traditionally, the Gumuz at clan level took the clan name of the Oromo under whose protection they settled (Qanno 2011; Endalew 2006). (The peoples known collectively as the Gumuz are melding together of what were separate clans in the past.) This is called *kooluu* (joining for protection), a means by which latecomers had access to the land already settled by the



Map 2: The region of Benishangul-Gumuz with the main roads and outposts of the Italian Period. In capitalised italics, the name of the ethnic groups that inhabit the area (González-Ruibal 2014: 6)

Oromo clans. But such relations based on land tenure had changed during the imperial time (ca. 1890–1974) because of *gabbar*.<sup>7</sup> By that time the average Oromo, except the ruling house of Leeqaa Naqamtee and a few landlords, became tenants.

In general, we can say Ethiopia’s lowland areas have experienced unprecedented centuries-old centre-periphery relations and territorial state expansion. It is also clear that the Oromo and the Gumuz, as two distinct groups of people, have differently experienced and felt various forms of marginalisation since they had been incorporated into the imperial Ethiopia. The reason therefore lies in the fact that the status which the Oromo and the Gumuz have held in the political space of the Ethiopian state in general, and in the western Ethiopian region in particular, differs enormously. This holds specifically true for their earlier socio-economic relations, without, however,

<sup>7</sup> The *gabbar* system is a system based on the extensive confiscation of land from indigenous peoples which was then distributed among the Amhara royal families, the state, the Amhara nobility, the Orthodox Church, and officers and soldiers who participated in the conquest and settled in the annexed territories.

## Administrative Regions and Zones of Ethiopia



Map 3: A map of the regions and zones of Ethiopia as of April 2000; all boundaries are approximate and unofficial. (source: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Ethiopia\\_zone\\_region.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Ethiopia_zone_region.jpg), USAID/Ethiopia Map Room, 2000)<sup>8</sup>

fully exploring the current events changing these relations. For instance, Jean Nicola Bach’s (2015) article ‘New Trends, Old Views: The Ambivalent Centre/Periphery Paradigm in Ethiopian Studies’ emphasized the importance of ‘the role of the peripheries in the negotiation of state norms, ideologies and institutions’ (Bach 2015: 281).

In the aftermath the administrative change in Ethiopia in 1991 and the introduction of ethnic federalism, the former Wallagga province split into the West Wallagga and East Wallagga zone (Oromiya), and the Assosa and Kamashi zone (Benishangul-Gumuz). Under ethnic federalism, onetime peripheral and semi-peripheral groups (the Gumuz and the Oromo respectively) now were part of the new political order of self-rule and shared rule. In the wake of this event, a questionable Gumuz territorial area emerged under a new political administrative unit of the Kamashi zone. This new administrative structure defined the Gumuz as autochthone to the zone and others like the Oromo as foreigners/alien.

Against this background, it is pertinent to analyse more closely the relations of the Oromo and Gumuz people in the peripheral context, where the relations

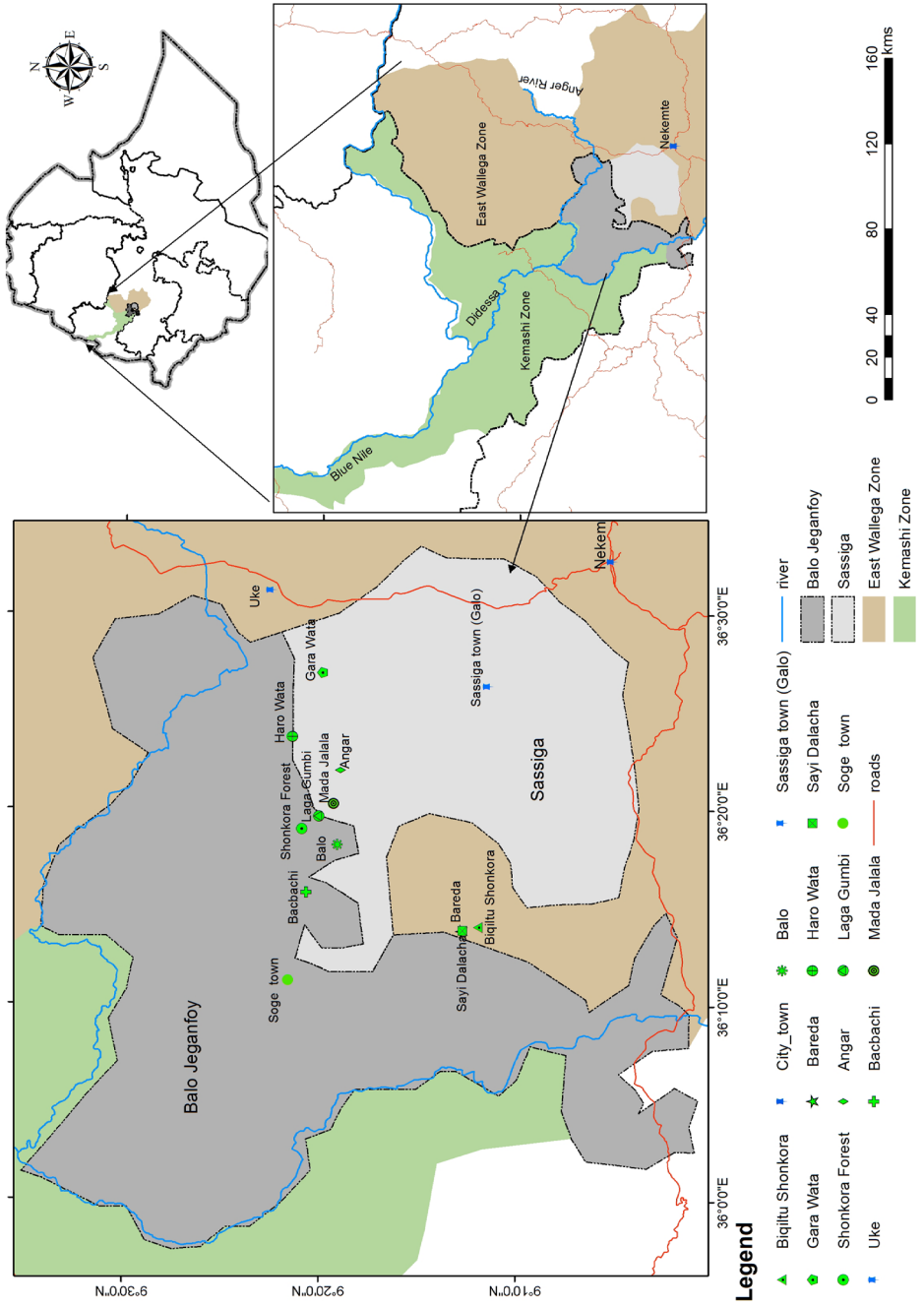
<sup>8</sup> This map has undergone several changes since 1995 due to further divisions of one zone into two or more zones or into special zones. For instance, the former East Wallagga zone was later divided into two zones – while its western part remained in the former East Wallagga zone, the eastern part of it became the Horo Guduru Wallagga Zone. There has also been a merging of zones, for example, in BGRS Tongo became a part of Assosa.

are not fixed but are changing over longer periods. Among those communities straddling on both sides of the new ethnic-regional administrative boundaries are Oromiya and Benishangul-Gumuz (see Map 1 and 3). If geographic distance or being frontier is actually at the heart of the specific types of the centre-periphery model of Ethiopia, one should expect similar patterns among the communities living across a border between two regions.

My fieldwork specifically focused on two bordering districts, namely Sassa (Oromiya) and Balo Jeganfoy (Benishangul-Gumuz, see Map 4). The district Sassa is located in the East Wallaga zone on the western border of Oromiya. Sassa has a total population of 80,814 (CSA 2007), the majority of whom are the Oromo ethnic group (96.15%). The majority of the population are subsistence agricultural farmers. Agriculture is mainly based on rain-fed cultivation of maize and sorghum. Coffee is the main cash crop. Irrigated root crops are cultivated in the lowland areas close to the newly arrived settlers from the eastern part of Oromiya, popularly called Hararge. Among them, livestock is also a vital household asset and a source of income.

The district Balo Jeganfoy is located in the Kamashi zone on the south-eastern part of Benishangul-Gumuz. Balo Jeganfoy has a total population of 30,143, of which the majority belongs to the Gumuz (CSA 2007). The majority of the population are shifting cultivators. Sorghum is mainly cultivated. Prior to ethnic federalism, administratively the people of Balo Jeganfoy were reporting to the former Sassa district, an area formerly twice the size of the current Sassa district under the East Wallagga zone. The former Sassa district in turn reported to the Wallagga Province which in turn reported to the Ethiopian central government.

Map 4:  
The field sites along the adjacent  
Balo Jeganfoy and Sassa districts.  
The administrative boundaries (from Country  
to District [Aanaa] level) are based on  
the data set extracted from the GADM data-  
base ([www.gadm.org](http://www.gadm.org)), version 2.8, November  
2015. The coordinate reference system is  
longitude/latitude and the WGS84 datum.  
The point data represent locations of cities and  
towns that were recorded with GPS in the  
area where the researcher conducted his survey  
(Map made by Sifan A. Koriche).



# ‘PERIPHERY’ AND ‘UNOCCUPIED’ LAND

The key terms in this discussion are ‘periphery’ and ‘unoccupied’ land. I will come to the second term later. A ‘periphery’ gains relevance in relation to a ‘centre’. In this volume, I am neither particularly interested in advancing a theoretical centre-periphery model nor defining the periphery too precisely. I would rather use the term ‘periphery’ as a heuristic tool to understand how land in the peripheral areas is represented and used.

## CENTRE-PERIPHERY MODEL

The centre-periphery model is perhaps the most important one in studies of state building, state-society relations as well as the interaction or conflict between central and peripheral elites (Lipset and Rakkan 1967 cited in Zarycki 2007). In his studies, as Tomasz Zarycki noted, Stein Rakkan emphasised the political and cultural dimension of centre-periphery relations. The centre, in this approach, is understood as the core of political and cultural dominance, which uses state machinery, and religion or language to subordinate the entire territory of a country itself. Provinces resisting these activities are the peripheries (Zarycki 2007). At the same time, the centre-periphery model is of particular importance to classical economic theories, for instance, Immanuel Wallerstein’s first volume on *The World System Theory* (Wallerstein 1974). In the economic dimension, the centre-periphery approach above all considers exploitation and marginalisation.

The subject centre-periphery has been dealt with in anthropological and historical studies of Ethiopia. It is an extensively discussed subject in Ethiopian policy (Gnamo 2014; Donham and James 2002; Markakis 2011; McCann 1995; Sherman 1979). Most of the scholars who work on the subject do differ on precisely what really a centre or a periphery is and what the centre and the periphery might constitute. As Donald L. Donham writes ‘[w]hat was “peripheral” was always relative to a particular level of the hierarchy of the centres’ (Donham 2002: 24).

Historians and anthropologists think the centre is the Ethiopian’s highland. The centre is believed to be largely founded on Ethiopia’s highland socio-economic and political setup, where the domestic ox-plough agriculture production is situated (McCann 1995). Taken as a whole, the centre-periphery approach considers Finfinne (the Oromo name for Addis Ababa) as the centre of Ethiopia (Sherman 1979). The surrounding regions and above all border regions are seen as ‘peripheral’ areas. Or we can follow Christopher Clapham, whose ‘great tradition’ (2002) takes the central highlands as the one and only repository and representative [core] of Ethiopian state forma-



tion. The core that reinforced the peripheral position in the state was represented by ‘Amhara domination’.

In making this argument, Clapham was putting himself in the mainstream of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopian culture. But we have to consider that the centre still depends on a dominant peripheral elite helping the former to administer the periphery (Markakis 2011). And also in Ethiopia, the centre-periphery linkage is rather dynamic and ‘complex given the geographic, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the Empire’ (Gnamo 2014: 212).

#### LOCATING THE OROMO AND THE GUMUZ IN THE CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS OF ETHIOPIA

In a very influential book, *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* published in 2002, one of its editors, the anthropologist Donald L. Donham, approaches the centre not as rigid fixed boundaries and indicates the existence of three kinds of centre-periphery relations in Ethiopia:

‘First, those areas previously independent kingdoms that were made directly tributary to the crown; Second those where the so-called *Gebber* [Gabbar] system was established, where the northern governors were appointed and local peoples made into serfs and finally those areas in the peripheries inhabited by hunters, shifting cultivators and pastoralists’ (Donham 2002: 37).

If we accept Donham’s classification, the western Ethiopian periphery generally fell into two of the three types: that of the independent kingdoms and the peripheries inhabited by hunters and shifting cultivators. The most important kingdoms were those of the Oromo; namely Leeqaa Qellam and Leeqaa Naqamtee. The others were the four Sheikhdoms or Islamic enclaves established at the Ethiopia-Sudan frontier. The Sheikhdoms were founded by Muslim leaders of Sudan origin who consider themselves as ‘Watawit’. The term *Watawit* refers to Arabized Berta people who had entered and settled in Benishangul as traders and Islamic teachers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Bela-Shangul, Assosa, and Khomosha emerged to the south of the Abbaya River, the fourth sheikhdom – the sheikhdom of the Gubba – emerged in the Gumuz inhabited western fringe of Ethiopia to the north of the same river.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the climax of Ethiopian state expansion. It was aggressively started by Menelik (King of Shewa 1870–1889 and Emperor of Ethiopia from 1889–1913), doubling his kingdom’s scope by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Makki and Geisler 2011). In 1880s Menelik directed his attention to the western regions of Ethiopia. From 1882 to 1986, a certain man named Gobana Dache brought the two important Oromo Kingdoms under Menelik’s imperial rule. According to Etana Habte Dinka (2012), this was attained by the peaceful submission of Jote Tulu of Leeqaa Qellam and

Moreda Bakare of Leeqaa Naqamtee. Until the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, imperial rule was largely ‘indirect’, with the Menelik ruling house endeavouring to insert themselves into local tributary arrangements.

The Leeqaa Naqamtee, which is the focus of my study, perfectly came under Menelik ‘indirect’ rule around 1886. For now the region was under a powerful *Motii* (king) Kumsa Moroda. Though the peaceful submission allowed Kumsa autonomous status, Menelik was no longer content with just his submission. He wanted to gain more decisive benefits. Kumsa Moroda for his part, for example, agreed to pay Menelik annual tribute. Donham (2002) argues that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the core Abyssinian (Ethiopian) regions on which the state had heavily relied on contributed very little to Menelik. As a result, Menelik also found Kumsa very helpful for his generals, primarily Gobana Dache, who carried out his own imperial expansion extending the frontier of the Ethiopian Emperor westward and conquering the peoples living along the Sudanese-Ethiopia border (Marcus 1994; Markakis 1974).

It was then that Kumsa, as king of Leeqaa Naqamtee – with its relative autonomy and its strategic geographical location –, was able to maintain his father’s territory and also get opportunities for increasing his land possession and influencing the tenants living on those territories. It is a period when land was now predominantly owned by private landlords who strictly controlled land use and access through sharecropping agreements (see also Schmitt 2003). Kumsa had tributes amassed through payments and extractions at his disposal. The more Menelik needed an increment in tribute, the more agricultural lands were carved out of the forest land increasing the support of the landlords liable to Kumsa. The tenants were required to submit payments calculated on productivity in exchange for using the land under the domain. Payments are collected by those who are called the *qoroo*.<sup>9</sup>

Above all, there is no question that land and labour are the primary forces of production and power. In the 1880s, during the early incorporation period, Kumsa’s ruling house had rested upon agricultural land and tenants from core Leeqaa Naqamtee territories. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kumsa also found the Gumuz as a source of labour (Ta’a 1986).<sup>10</sup> (The Gumuz had already become important for the Oromo at large and for his father Moroda Bakare

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<sup>9</sup> *Qoroo* represents a title used in the Oromo king system, equivalent to the governor of a certain area in which chiefs collect tributes and deliver them to those who are ranked above them.

<sup>10</sup> See also Abreham Alemu Fanta’s (2015) PhD thesis ‘Ethnicity and Local Identity in the Folklore of the South-Western Oromo of Ethiopia: A Comparative Study’, footnote 19. Alemu notes the existence of a narrative which says, for example, ‘there were no Gumuz people in the Wollega area prior to and during the Oromo settlement in the same’ (p. 239). It was *Motii* Kumsa Moroda ‘who “imported” them from the Sudan, where they had been living before they were sold into slavery by their own brethren and brought to be used as farm hands on cotton and coffee plantations of the king in the lowland area[s]’ (p. 240).

in particular.) They were involved in extractive activities, for instance hunting and mining (Endalew 2006). By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Handaq* forest right of the Dhidhessa River, a place where the Derg established its state farm in 1979, was already famous as a favourite hunting ground for elephants and was visited regularly by the Oromo located in the nearby villages.

After Moroda had controlled the forest area, a small number of Gumuz were now becoming the dominant labour force not only in hunting but also in the cotton fields planted by his ruling house. In this case, the Gumuz are typically regarded by their Oromo neighbours with disdain, frequently represented as ‘servants’ for the kings of Leeqaa Naqamtee. This view has ensured that even the poorest tenant from the Oromo considered himself relatively better than any Gumuz. This was partly reinforced by their precedence status in the region and economic inequalities created in pre-imperial Ethiopia. Drawing on Donham’s (2002) types of periphery, there is an element in this description to say that the Gumuz occupied peripheral status to Oromo economic and political domination. It should be noted that such an element was integral to aspects of the relativity of centre-periphery relations.<sup>11</sup>

In general terms, the fact that emperors (kings) have desired lands beyond their boundaries to enrich and empower themselves (Wallerstein 1967) worked as much for Kumsa as for Menelik as well as their successors. Since the rise of the imperial system, therefore, state power and land have always been linked. Perhaps the single most important difference as far as the linkage was concerned was the degree of central control. Unlike the past, for instance, since the 1940s Emperor Haile Selassie managed to exert direct control over local governors. By far the most recent and influential exploration of this linkage is John Markakis’ book *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* published in 2011.

He describes and explains the presence of the state in peripheral areas in the process of state building in imperial, socialist and federal models and argues that land is more at the core of this process. Some indication of how important land was for the process can be estimated in the historic presence of the state in the lowland peripheries. Following Harvey (2003), I argue that these historical relations constitute a political process aiming to control the periphery and maintain century-old centre-periphery relations by applying a process of accumulation through dispossession.

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<sup>11</sup> Historically, the territories located right of the Dhidhessa River including *Handaq* were an area where one of the several Oromo sub-clans under the Leeqaa groups (*Warra Leeqaa*) had owned and depended on for livelihood. Since the area came under the control of the ruling house of Leeqaa Naqaamtee, however, there had been a gradually trend towards involving labour force for the extraction of mainly forest-based products. In particular, the Gumuz who had already been familiar with forest life were chosen to serve as labourer.

## UNOCCUPIED LAND: RESOLVING THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

Seeing land as an active component of state building draws attention again to the nature of the ascription set to lowland peripheries. This ascription assumes several forms. The highly visible form is the use of ‘unoccupied’ or ‘wilderness’ as a metaphor to describe peripheries. According to Teshale Tibebu (1995), the concept of empty (‘unoccupied’) land in Ethiopia is used as ‘a metaphor’ since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By looking for an integral metaphor of ‘unoccupied’ land, it is vital to see how the metaphor has been created and maintained. Tibebu says the metaphor is used for ‘land to be occupied by force or, if necessary the rights on it transferred to the new occupying authorities’ (1995: 40). As to Lavers (2012), it is authorities in those state regimes who constructed vast tracts of lands as ‘empty,’ using law, policy, and violence to commodify state lands.

The metaphor has to do with the power difference between peripheral peoples and that of the ‘centre’ of the state. Also of importance are law and policy connected to land tenure, which includes a bundle of rights (access, use, and control) and corresponds to a specific socio-economic and political hierarchy. For these reasons, state actors considered the lowland areas like in the western peripheries, populated by shifting cultivators and hunters, as ‘unoccupied’ and ‘wilderness’. The lowlands have lower population densities. In contrast, the land outside of this ecological zone was considered the ‘occupied’ land populated by peasant farmers who lived on lands allocated to individual landlords, to whom they were forced to provide labour and pay tribute.

After having presented the long-term attitude of the state towards land in peripheral areas in the context of imperial Ethiopia, I will elaborate on the form this attitude took after the imperial’s regime had collapsed. That is I give an account of the forms in which the successive regimes, namely the socialist model of state building (Derg regime) and the federal model of state structuring (EPRDF regime) developed their presence in the western lowland peripheries. It is important to note that most of the land labelled as ‘unoccupied’ and taken by these successive regimes were taken by conquest leading to the expansion of the imperial Ethiopian state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I have already said that the centre-periphery relations have considerably shaped and persisted the manifestation of lands in peripheral areas as ‘unoccupied’ or ‘unused’. Key among these lands are the western lowlands to the south of the Abbaya River. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the sites where I carried out my fieldwork and their immediate surroundings saw land-based policies in the form of state farms, resettlement, and villagisation. The policies exhausted the lowlands dominantly used by the Oromo inhabitants. As a result, the current EPRDF regime turned its eyes to the sparsely populated and fertile land in the present-day Benishangul-Gumuz. Today, large-scale land transfers to investors have become a routine phenomenon in

Benishangul-Gumuz (see also Labzaé 2015; Markakis 2011; Moreda 2017). The land transfers have also gone hand-in-hand with villagisation schemes and landholdings' registration.

#### ON THE DERG'S STATE FARM

In 1974 the abrupt overthrow of the last king of the Ethiopian empire, Emperor Haile Selassie, by the Derg made abolition of the private land ownership or feudalism an imminent necessity. What made the Derg unique in history was its radical land reform. Embarked on a socialist inspired 'land to the tiller' slogan it called for the transfer of land tenure rights to peasants who should cultivate the land (McCann 1995). Peasants were given usufruct rights to a maximum of ten hectares. The Derg also passed The Land Reform Act of 1975, putting all landholdings under the direct possession of the state.

The land reform, especially redistribution, however, did not go as promised. As noted by Clapham (1988) the reform policies promised by the revolutionaries, which bore the potential to transform centre-periphery relations, was never realised. In the beginning, it looked like the peasantry may have gotten rid of the kind of relation it had built with its previous local landowners. It eventually encountered new policies of the socialist state, however.

In 1980s, the policy of reforming agriculture through mechanization, later known as 'State Farm', had become a popular form of socialist economic policy. Most of the state farms were created on the lowlands of Ethiopia. The greatest concentrations of such farms were the lowlands in the western realm. One of the farms was established in late 1979 as the Wallagga State Farm (in the following shortly referred to as the 'state farm').





Photos 1–2: A rural village with ruined parts of the 1980s state farm: warehouse and agricultural machines, Angar Camp (A. GODESSO, 2014)

The significant portion of the state farm was established on largely flat areas between the big Dhidhessa River and its tributary Angar (see Map 4). People interviewed in the area spoke of everyday survival and their displacement from these areas to the nearby forest and settlement in villages in the years of the state farm. While talking with elders, I became aware of the area's reality before it took its present shape in 1979. As I walked from one village to the other, I was overwhelmed by the camps emptiness, the warehouse and agricultural machineries left behind scattered throughout the area.

It was obvious that this part of the area had not looked like this before. It was covered by a dense forest, where the state farm had been established in the inner part of it. A substantial part of the forest land was cleared, bulldozed, and converted into crop fields. The Derg claimed that the state farm was established on 'unoccupied' or 'empty' land.<sup>12</sup>

The local people ignored the claims arguing that even if the forest land was not physically occupied it was a source of their livelihood. It is also no-

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<sup>12</sup> Today, Oromo elders claim that within their domain there remains no 'unoccupied' land. They state that long ago, under the *Gadaa* system and later under Leeqaa Naqamtee, land was owned at clan/*gosaa* level. These clans belonged to *Warra Leeqaa* (the house of Leeqaa). The forest land that the Derg claims as 'unoccupied' was under the holdings of a clan called Nya'aa. If newcomers, including the Gumuz, wanted to benefit from the land and its natural resources they were expected to fulfil their ritual and social obligations to members of the original inhabitants. The Gumuz, for instance, were expected to take the name of the Oromo clan who allowed them to benefit from their land and its natural resources. After the decline of the *Gadaa* system the land under Oromo clans was controlled by the monarchical ruling house of Leeqaa Naqamtee.

table that the state farm included a small portion of the agricultural plots and grazing fields owned by the Oromo peasants at the eastern outer periphery of the dense forest. These are the peasants who had not actually quenched their thirst through the new land reform which was supposed to grant them landownership. The peasants had to either work for the farm or join cooperative farming.

At the western and eastern parts of the state farm were now the Gumuz shifting cultivators and the Oromo peasants respectively. The majority of the Gumuz fled to the nearby forest, lived on the banks of the Dhidhessa River, and remained distant observers to the state farm.<sup>13</sup> In 1985 to the eastern part of the state farm, there emerged small village clusters as a result of a new program known as ‘villagisation’. This was just ten years after the land reform. The program grouped the scattered Oromo peasants surrounding the state farm into villages. In practice, villagisation was intended, among other things, to enforce collectivization. Like the state farm system, where there were no private land holdings, the cooperative system called for the pooling of land, labour assets and other resources. The state farm and the cooperative systems somewhat constrained the Oromo who lived in the highland areas from moving seasonally to the lowlands located to their west.

As described elsewhere, even if the Oromo do have farming on the highland areas, they used to move into the lowland areas and visited the Gumuz seasonally. The places the Gumuz inhabit were forested and could be considered rich in terms of livestock grazing, cotton and sorghum cultivation, honey production and collection, and hunting. The Oromo then seek to maximize their benefits from these forest products. The possible strategies that can be taken to achieve those goals are determined by local institutions. There exists an Oromo institution called ‘michuu’, literally ‘bond friendship’. *Michuu* works towards the best solution regarding the Oromo and the Gumuz mutually benefitting from the available resource base.

It is worth to mention that during autumn the Oromo sent their cattle to the Gumuz *Michuu* in hot lowlands for better grazing, popularly called *darabaa*.<sup>14</sup> The Oromo call a hot lowland a *gammoojji*. An Oromo gave she-goats

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<sup>13</sup> Though, the first and essential reason for the state farm establishment is the mechanization of agriculture, it is also an attempt to encourage the Gumuz to separate themselves from the practice of shifting cultivation. Few of them were involved in the state farm during the early trial stages but later on when the cultivation required digging by hand. (By that time, they were able to practice shifting cultivation, hunting and work on the state farm side by side to earn their livelihoods.) The more the state farm expanded, the more the Gumuz lost their natural resource-based livelihoods and the more they became distant from it.

<sup>14</sup> *Darabaa* is an institution among the agricultural Oromo focusing on herd splitting which helps to provide better grazing land for livestock and improves the animals’ success at reproduction. It also helps to preserve the environment by reducing overgrazing in the highland areas.

to his Gumuz *Michuu* and they divided the breeding males between them. Every year new forest land was cleared, which was cultivated through the use of hoes, and a Gumuz would be enlisted to chase birds and monkeys from the cultivated land of his Oromo *michuu*. The Gumuz also visited their Oromo *michuu* once a year, usually after harvest (autumn). Gumuz took crops such as *gába* (cotton) and pepper to sell for cash at the market or to exchange for important items such as *sánã* (salt) and grains. The Gumuz often visited their Oromo *michuu* the day before a market day (Saturday) and usually returned to their village the following Monday. They spent an average of three nights with their respective Oromo *michuu*.

Ten years on, the activities of the state farm have continued until the Derg regime ended in 1991. Much has changed in the interim. There were a number of reasons for this. Fundamental to the state farm is the subtle change in the perceptions of spatial relations between the two communities and their environment, which have not risen before the advent of the state farm. The ‘lowland’ landscape once seen as a place of social and economic engagements was now obtaining a different role. The land where the farm had been established became a ‘state’s domain’ and a buffer zone between the Oromo and the Gumuz who were already kept at the extreme sides of the state farm. All told, the forested landscape around the Dhidhessa River remained least accessible to the Oromo because of villagisation and collectivization. The Gumuz also less frequently visited the market located in Oromo villages. As we have repeatedly seen, there was a mutual recognition between the two peoples concerning rights to use forest land. Mutual life was disrupted but not completely lost during the Derg time.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the Derg period, the Gumuz seemed obviously to settle in the forest near the state farm along the Dhidhessa River bank. (In the Gumuz area, the forested landscape extends to the bank of the Abbaya River, where the Dhidhessa River joins the former.) Only after the introduction of ethnic federalism (1990s) did some of the Gumuz emerge from the forest around the river. Even then, most chose to remain in the forest. From their new base in Dhidhessa, the Gumuz began to establish their hamlets on the state farm periphery such as in Balo. An old man witnessed that Balo is the area where the first adult literacy school for the Gumuz was founded by the local Derg officials; he was among the Derg officials, in the 1980s. Taking the name Soge, a three-classroom hut grew gradually to the level of village and then district town after 1991 (see Photo 3 on page 16). Soge is now the administrative centre of the Balo Jeganfoy district. As I walked out of the territory

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<sup>15</sup> The Gumuz had to affiliate themselves to one of the Oromo clans to have access to land (particularly the lowland areas) and the affiliations are reinforced by institutions like *michuu*. While regular physical goings to lowland areas were rarely found and the mutual connection between the two groups was disrupted, the historical cultural bond friendship, however, provided some flexibility.





Photo 3–4: Balo Jeganfoy District Administrative office. Partial view of the houses on the main road. Soge (A. GODESSO, 2014)

of the state farm to the nearest Gumuz areas and villages, I became aware of how really distant from the state farm they were. Since their villages including Soge looked fairly new, it was evident that their current residential areas were not part of the state farm.

When the state farm ended in 1998, the Gumuz increasingly attempted to advance their movement from their new villages towards the state farm’s territory. However, they were constrained from their movement by the Oromo people who already continued to occupy the cultivated farmland and the camps constructed under the state farm. While some of them are those who came as daily labourers, others are the neighbouring Oromo communities who came back to the failed state farm to claim the land they felt was rightfully theirs. Throughout my observations, it was clear that the populations in the camps under the state farm reflect much more about the Oromo than the Gumuz. The issues raised here may have far-reaching implications.

Among these, I find that the state farm, which once appeared as a buffer zone between the Oromo and the Gumuz, becomes a marker of boundaries in the current ‘ethnic-based’ federal arrangements. What happened? In this specific location, the western outer periphery of the state farm adjacent to the Gumuz in nearby settlements became a boundary between the Oromiya and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. The territory of the state farm matched that of Oromo localities and went to Oromiya. In contrast, the forest land sparsely settled by shifting Gumuz cultivators became part of Benishangul Gumuz (see Map 3).

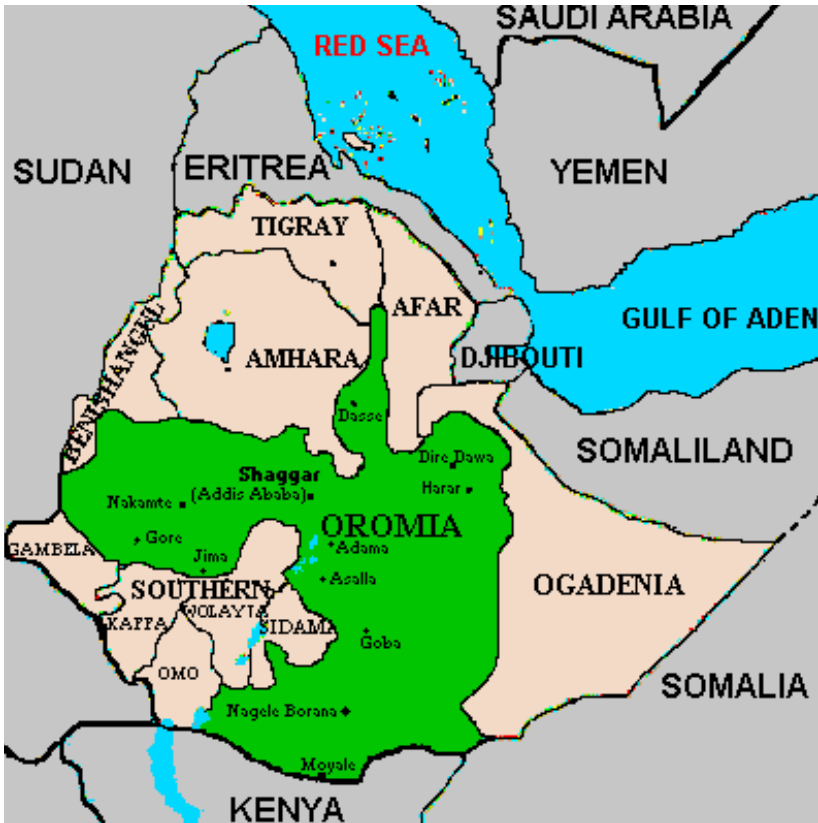
It is interesting to note that the idea of centre-periphery relations has some effects on EPRDF settling the new boundaries of regional states. Dereje Feyissa (2009) made this point very clear in his study of the ‘Conflict in

the Gambella region', another peripheral region in western Ethiopia. Seeing the construction of regional boundaries between Oromiya and Benishangul-Gumuz, Feyissa's position seems to make much sense. The centre-periphery approach was eventually used as a set of references in this particular location. The state presence would imply that the territory of the state farm was no longer considered peripheral to the 'state' nor to the domain of peasant economy. The land cultivated under the state farm was now no longer considered as 'unoccupied' or 'underutilized' land (literally speaking it is an 'overutilized' one).

Today the making of the new boundaries, however, is contested in terms of the history of the Oromo and the Gumuz in pre-ethnic-federal territorial emergence and administrative setup. For the Oromo, both the relationship to the territory and the state structures they signified were valuable historical and political currencies in dealing with their relation to the Gumuz. In western Ethiopian territories, according to oral accounts, 'the first' to have inhabited the area were the Oromo. Available written sources also suggest that the Oromo to the south of the Abbaya River were joined by the Gumuz in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (James 1986; Wallmark 1981). By the same token, while there is a long history of social interaction between the people of the Oromo and the Gumuz in particular through *michuu*, many local groups continue to view Gumuz people as in-migrants with limited and sometimes temporary rights to land access and other natural resources. Besides, as noted, those Gumuz had lived under Oromo rulers and were referred to the territories perceived to be under the jurisdiction of Leeqaa Naqamtee until the abrupt overthrow of the feudal system in 1974.

In 1974 the feudal system was replaced by the Derg regime. The Derg abolished the landlord-tenant system. Ideally, under the socialist ideology of the Derg regime, the established hierarchical relations among groups, including those between the Oromo and the Gumuz, were thought to be obsolete. Until the final days of the Derg rule, however, most of the district governors and local officials and other representatives of the state in large parts of the former Wallagga zone (which includes parts of the present-day Benishangul-Gumuz south of the Abbaya River), were Oromos.

Among the stories Gumuz elders tell today are those about how rulers in the successive Ethiopian regimes, as well as their Oromo neighbours, consider them as a mobile people without even having any historical attachment to the land they were living on today (see also Balcha 2007). As such, the territorial independence of the Gumuz as an administrative unit that is separate from its neighbours, for instance from the Oromo, is presented as an outcome of external influences, not as the product of local circumstances. For the Oromo elders, the political and economic (land resource) interest of EPRDF offered an unprecedented opportunity for the declaration of territorial autonomy to the Gumuz.



Map 5: Oromiya boundary according to the Oromo Liberation Front: taken from the Oromo Liberation Front website [http:// oromoliberationfront.org/en/category/news/](http://oromoliberationfront.org/en/category/news/) accessed on August 16, 2018.

Furthermore, this political interest has fed into OLF’s political map of Oromiya<sup>16</sup> (see Map 3 and Map 5 and compare their size.) For these and other reasons, in the post-federal setup the legitimacy of Gumuz territorial autonomy is far from convincing. No matter how much opposition the Gumuz might experience, instead of their place of origin they place importance on their actual place of residence for claiming regional autonomy in the current ethnic-based federal setup.

Above all, the Oromo end up blaming the EPRDF for granting the Gumuz territorial autonomy. The new inter-regional boundaries can thus be

<sup>16</sup> The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is a political organization established in 1973 by Oromo nationalists in order to lead the national liberation struggle of the Oromo people. The fundamental objective of the Oromo liberation movement is to exercise the Oromo peoples’ inalienable right to national self-determination, terminating a century of oppression and exploitation, and to form, where possible, a political union with other nations on the basis of equality, respect for mutual interests and the principle of voluntary associations (see <http://oromoliberationfront.org/en/mission/>).

viewed as a ‘new’ frontier of social fields in the previously ‘established’ periphery. The new frontier is a converging and diverging point for social actors which are stimulated by new interests and power. The new interests associated with spaces in this frontier are a prime preoccupation in the social relations of these actors. Since 1993, claims extended to land and territory across borders between the two regions were expressions of landed authority and assertions of ethnic claims to a locally constituted legitimacy (see also Fentaw 2009; Kefale 2009). As such the intervention of local authorities on each side of the ethnic boundary, for instance, made access to land resources across the border more ethnic based.

As noted, the state farm had a deleterious impact on the local resource base, translating into a very generic logic of ‘depletion’. Soil degradation causing poor productivity and little vegetation and forest cover has compelled the Oromo to look for arable land and grazing land in the Gumuz localities surrounding the state farm. One has to ask how difficult it is for farmers living on the arable land cultivated under the state farm when access to land is mediated and managed by ethnic relations. The ethnic-based land access even became more strict in Benishangul-Gumuz with the rapid increase of large-scale land transfer to investors in the region.

#### LAND TO INVESTORS – EPRDF

While the recent experiences of land acquisitions loom large in the dynamics of recent Benishangul-Gumuz political context, they are not without precedent in the historical experiences of the peripheral groups. As I have noted, a successful territorial expansion in the form of 19<sup>th</sup> century state expansion during the imperial and the subsequent economic policy of the Derg have all contributed to land expropriation in the western lowland areas in question. For the new regime, EPRDF, lowland areas have still become a major destination for investment and in these areas land deals are virtually increasing. The EPRDF declared that any arable land currently uncultivated, as well as forest, was ‘unoccupied’ and therefore eligible for designation as investment areas.

Over the past decade, Benishangul Gumuz has – like other peripheral (lowland) areas in Ethiopia – experienced a significant increase of land transfers for the purpose of investment. Out of the total 3.6 million hectares of land to be transferred in the country in 2009, 700,000 hectares were from Benishangul Gumuz (Rahmato 2011; Labzaé 2015). Specifically regarding the Gumuz administrative unit Kamashi Zone, data compiled by the zonal office show that since 2000 about 22 land investment projects, covering approximately 20,588 hectares of land, emerged in four of the five districts of that zone. About 78.98% of the land is located in the Balo Jeganfoy district.

As noted, the Gumuz reside mostly in lowland areas and relied heavily on shifting cultivation to earn their livelihoods. The form of their residence can

range from sheds built on the fringes of the farmland in the harvest season to a hamlet. A hamlet among the Gumuz is called *demetsa*. It is a group of huts built close to one another according to their kinship. People who live in the same hamlet call each other *soka* (kin). At one time, farms of a kin used to be ‘as much as a half-hour walk’ from their hamlet (Qanno 2011: 13). Since the Gumuz practice slash-and-burn agriculture with a hoe, they tend to cultivate a plot of land for three to five years and leave it fallow until it regenerates (see also Rahmato 1988). Therefore, a given hamlet would not stay in one area more than five years. Unlike the past, today each household must stay in a designated village permanently. The Gumuz, who used to move from one location to another over years, are now required to plant crops in a single location. Thus, the tradition of slash-and-burn cultivation appears to have changed very much with villagisation. (I will come to this issue later.)

Another complication among Gumuz stems from the established tradition of communal land tenure. The Gumuz often argue that state institutions fail to capture the critical dimension of land use in lowland areas. The lowland perceived as ‘home’ in the tradition of the Gumuz, and also as a place for resource extraction for the Oromo, is now considered as so-called ‘unoccupied’ or ‘unused’ land. Mehdi Labzaé’s ‘The Authoritarian Liberation of the Western Lands. State Practices and the Legitimation of the Cadastre in Contemporary Ethiopia’ (2015) tells us a remarkably similar story. In Benishangul-Gumuz, as will be discussed in details, land labelled as ‘unoccupied’ is being regularized through landholdings’ registration and certification processes. Labzaé (2015: 5) went on to say that ‘more often than not, land labelled as “free” is actually occupied.’

# PHOTO ESSAY: EXPANSION OF THE STATE FARM AND PRIVATE FARMS



Photos 5–6: A warehouse and ruined agricultural equipment of the 1980s state farm. Hora Wata and Angar localities  
(A. GODESSO, 2014)



Photos 7: Partial view of the state farm during the Derg period. Before and after cultivation season. Hora Wata village (Oromiya region) (A. GODESSO, 2014)



Photo 8: Partial view of barren land during crop growing season. Similar to this particular locality, the vast part of arable land cultivated under the previous state farm is unproductive today. Angar locality



Photo 9: Land ready for plowing and a modern four-wheel drive farm tractor. Bareda area



Photo 10: Private investment farm with water sprinklers built on a corn plant. It is located on arable land that was cultivated under the former state farm. This area and its surroundings are largely occupied by domestic investors. Angar Dhuke locality, Oromiya (A. GODESSO, 2014)



# THE TRANSFORMATION OF LANDSCAPE IN RURAL SETTINGS

As I have already discussed, much, if not all, of the rural landscape of the research area has been altered and shaped by the 1980s state farm expansion and the current large-scale private commercial agricultural investments. With varying degree, resettlement and villagisation schemes were common to the area and are now common in the border area between Oromiya and Benishangul-Gumuz. As discussed below, what is most notable in these schemes are the nature of rural changes they entail.

## RESETTLEMENT AND VILLAGISATION: AN OVERVIEW

Resettlement and villagisation are the most important land-related policies in Ethiopia. They have been a common practice since the end of the imperial regime (Pankhurst and Piguet 2009). According to Gebre Yntiso (2002) '[t]he official objective of resettlement schemes, both in the past and current regimes and as stated in various documents, was to prevent famine (or attain food security) by moving people from drought-prone and over-crowded areas to sparsely populated regions and 'unoccupied' virgin lands' (Yntiso 2002: 33). Moreover, resettlement and villagisation in Ethiopia have been employed as a strategy to sedentarise nomadic pastoralists and shifting cultivators.

Above all, resettlement and villagisation have to be understood within the wider trajectory of population displacement. The role of resettlement in Ethiopia has become one of the most interesting areas of controversy among researchers. There is no question that researchers saw resettlement as the dominant policy in each of the successive regimes. Few resettlement schemes run by the government and non-governmental organizations began in the 1960s and 1970s (Berhane 2003). In this section, I will focus on a key element of the resettlement program under the previous Derg regime and the current EPRDF regime. The Derg's resettlement program intended to move people from the northern Ethiopian highlands to the lowlands in the south. Unlike the past, resettlement is nowadays not implemented at a national level. Each region is responsible to resettle its population into areas considered more 'fertile' and 'unoccupied'.

The greatest Derg resettlement program was related to the drought and famine crises in the northern regions of Ethiopia. The Derg had to resettle more than one million peasants to regions in the south. Many of them moved to the western peripheral lowland areas of Ethiopia. Available accounts suggest that the overwhelming majority of these resettlements took place in the lowland areas of the former Wallagga province, which included the present-

day Benishangul-Gumuz south of the Abbaya River. In 1978, around 7,000 settlers from the then Wollo Province went to the Angar River site located in my research site (Clay and Holcomb 1986: 101). More settlers arrived there as a result of the worst drought which struck the northern part of Ethiopia from 1983–1986. The program has deliberately overlooked the local communities' land use practice and social relations. As I have frequently stated, the forest land primarily helps the Gumuz to secure livelihoods as well as sustain their social-economic relation with the Oromo.

Following the downfall of the Derg regime, it seemed that resettlement was indefinitely suspended. Recently, however, the third set of state-sponsored resettlement schemes has been put in place to tackle the chronic food shortage faced by the population in some parts of the country. The south-eastern part of Oromiya, popularly called Hararge is a case in point. In 2002 and 2003, the Oromiya government resettled hundreds of households to its western lowlands bordering Benishangul-Gumuz. The government claims that these settlers were resettled to the 'unoccupied' and 'fertile' flat laying Dhidhessa area.

# PHOTO ESSAY: VILLAGES AND RURAL TRANSFORMATION



Photos 11–12: Looks like a town:<sup>18</sup> A case of emerging villages and schools. Sai Dalacha  
(A. GODESSO, 2014)



<sup>18</sup> The village (small town) was established together with a primary school founded in the year 1996 Ethiopian calendar (2004). The Oromo elders claimed that similar towns have undergone construction on the edge of border areas by the Gumuz. The towns are meant as regional boundary markers between Oromiya and Benishangul-Gumuz. More corrugated iron houses have been flourishing in such small towns and villages along the so-called ‘common border’.



Photos 13–14: Rice and seedling sites in Sai-Dalacha on one of the Farmer Training Centres (FTC) established among the Gumuz (A. GODESSO, 2014)



Photos 15–16: One of the resettlements established in 2003 and homestead irrigation. Angar area  
(A. GODESSO, 2014)



Photo 17: Villages (resettlement schemes of Oromiya of 2003 and villagisation program of Benishangul-Gumuz of 2010) established side-by-side in the Baredu locality as a testament to the competition over the regional border between the Oromo and Gumuz communities.



Photo 18: Rural road project run by the Oromiya region connecting Sassiga district with Balo Jeganfoy district. Laga Gumbi (A. GODESSO, 2014)



Photo 19: Market day. The only marketplace established in the Gumuz neighbourhood. Sogea town  
(A. GODESSO, 2014)

## DISCUSSION

In this section I am particularly interested in how the space along the new boundaries emerged into concentrated villages as well as how boundaries are used as a political resource to define and affect the communities straddling on both sides of the boundaries.

As noted in the introduction of this volume, the areas surrounding Benishangul-Gumuz saw widespread resettlement from the Oromiya side. This resettlement scheme eventually carried a very different message. Resettlement may advance multiple economic and political agendas depending on the vested interest of different actors. Some Oromo have emphasized, for example, that the resettlement has partly been driven by perceived political advantages and the main aim was to depopulate the south-eastern part of Oromiya. The EPRDF believes that this population might have been supporting the Oromo Liberation Front. In addition, the government wants to slacken the long-standing and yet unresolved cross-border conflict between the Oromo and the Somali communities of the Oromiya-Somali region respectively.

Some Gumuz saw things very much in the reverse. They have emphasized the Oromiya government's resettlement plan as a calculated political agenda. The controversy in resettlement has now revolved around state authorities' aim to exploit ethnic-regional borders. It has been argued that the Oromiya government sought to trespass the territories it shares with Benishangul-Gumuz by bringing more people to the border area. In this case, it will become evident that the introduction of the so-called ethnic federalism in Ethiopia since 1991 provides new frontiers. Another perspective on inter-regional borders also emerged, changing the ways that space, where the boundaries run, is perceived. Spaces along inter-regional borders are now perceived as 'unoccupied' land and therefore a zone of expansion, competition, and conflict. This new frontiers strategy of securing the access to a resource resembles the strategies designed by the 'centre' for claiming the country's peripheries.

As noted, the villagisation program extensively began during the Derg regime. The program had gradually declined towards the fall of the regime in 1991. The villagisation program had the objective of consolidating scattered rural peasants into distinct villages of several hundred households each. The stated rationale was to improve the access of rural residents to improved social services and to organise them into cooperatives. By 1989, the Derg had villagised 13 million people of the 30 million rural peasants planned to be moved into villages over a nine-year period (Wubneh 1991). It is worth to mention that unlike under the current government, villagisation then was not widespread for the shifting cultivator and pastoralist communities. In my study area, however, the program has had dramatic impact on the Oromo as well as on the Gumuz.



After the fall of the Derg, the current EPRDF government had initially terminated the program but brought it back later. EPRDF's policy of villagisation is related to debates about the fate of the country's development in general. There is no question that EPRDF policy makers saw villagisation as the dominant element in development narratives. The villagisation program is taking place in areas (regions) where significant land investment is planned or undertaken. By 2013, the government planned to move 1.5 million people in four regions: Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Afar and Somali.

In Benishangul-Gumuz, the process already started in 2011/2012 and the region envisaged the resettling of 19,763 households from their scattered settlements to designated villages across most of the districts within the region. The indicated rationale was that the designated villages would improve the access of households to better social services (such as school, health and clean water) and modern agricultural technologies. The new villagers often go without the services altogether, as the government does not keep its promise. And yet the villagisation is seen as a kind of 'voluntary project'. My field notes suggest that local populations, often Gumuz shifting cultivators, are being forcibly relocated from their lands and resettled in ways that neglected their original way of life and livelihoods. This has led some intellectuals, journalists and activists to accuse EPRDF policy of being large-scale business oriented.

The accusation is that villagisation violates the livelihoods and rights of ethnic groups, especially in the country's vast peripheries like Benishangul-Gumuz. While the villagisation process in Gumuz areas have severely influenced the livelihoods of those affected, the loss of livelihoods among the Oromo is even more challenging. Villagisation in Benishangul-Gumuz has spread to places adjoining the villages established during the 2003 and 2004 resettlement program. An increase in population and a growing pressure on regional borderlands in Oromiya generated mistrust from the Gumuz side of the border and compelled local Gumuz authorities to establish more villages.

Villages had already thrived across ethnic-regional boundaries even before the new settlements took place. Prior to the new villagisation program, however, the majority of the Gumuz population lived in dispersed settlements. It was common for these settlements to comprise groups of people related by kinship (*demetsa*). In the new villagisation program, where the majority of villages are concentrated along the administrative borders, there has been a gradual trend towards bringing different clans to the same village. They do not have options other than occupying the border spaces through re-establishing the previous clan-based and dispersed villages or settlements. This type of villages would establish persistent ethnic-based land claims or used as a buffer zone against the perceived settlement.

In this area, a borderland land claim through the current resettlement practice reflects territorial control. For all to compete for the same localities, there

are recurrent conflicts between the Oromo and the Gumuz over borders and land-related resources. Many farmers who are affected by the new villages, especially those who live on the border, are not able to access the land occupied by residential areas. Acting as boundaries, the villages now transformed the Oromo and Gumuz relations into clear-cut ethnic neighbourhoods. Specifically, the newly settled Oromo could not sustain their livelihoods anymore without relying on the land in the Gumuz territory.

Many of the new villages in Oromiya were constructed on the territory of the previous state farm, which is neither suitable for farming nor for grazing because a significant portion of the arable land has been abandoned for the last 20 years due to soil degradation. This is mainly related but not limited to mechanized farming and the extensive application of chemical fertilizers, pesticide and herbicides in the 1980s. As a result many households had to look for grazing land and farm land outside of the previous state farm.

To begin with the problem of grazing, a significant cattle raising practice has been seen in the area since the newly settled Oromo arrived from Hararge. It is worth to mention that the settlers had a long history of small scale cattle fattening in their original area, whereby almost all households which had owned cattle engaged in fattening one or more cattle by tethering or hand feeding. This cattle fattening practice aimed at the target market. At the same time, there is a large part of the cattle as well as goats and pack animals that should graze on open field. The poor vegetation and forest cover around the new settlements, however, has caused most of the farmers to keep their cattle anywhere around the Gumuz settlement areas and beyond. By the time they had arrived in the area, grazing land was easily available. Little by little, they were less able to enter into what was now perceived a 'territory of Benishangul-Gumuz'.

The Gumuz together with *Gojjame*<sup>19</sup> settlers deliberately began narrowing the routes to inhibit or prevent the movement of herds between villages and the grazing land owned by the Oromo. These routes were even getting more and more narrow after the federal government had rushed to demarcate the inter-regional boundaries without resolving such existing issues.<sup>20</sup> The existing problem became even more difficult with the arrival of a new proclamation which, for instance, restricts the movement of animals from a neighbour-

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<sup>19</sup> *Gojjame* (communal name) refers to people from the Gojjam area in the Amhara region. Gojjam forms both a geographical and cultural unit. Its population (*Gojjame*) is distinct from the Gondare in the north and from the Wollo, whose population are largely Muslim and relatively diverse (Oromo, Amhara and so on), in the eastern Amhara region.

<sup>20</sup> The demarcation came after the Oromo-Gumuz regional border saw an outburst of violence on a scale that many said was unprecedented. According to residents in the Oromo villages, the violent incursion by Gumuz militias in May 2008 resulted in the death of hundreds of Oromo and several tens of Gumuz, the displacement of hundreds to thousands of people, and the destruction of many properties.

ing region (one of them is Oromiya) to Benishangul-Gumuz (BGRS 2010).<sup>21</sup> Conflict then occurs when animals trespass on grass and cultivated land and damage crops. Let illustrate this by describing a case from a man (Ahmed) in his forties. I found him visiting a local office at Sai Dalacha village (Benishangul-Gumuz).

Ahmed was one of the thousands of settlers living in a locality called Biqiltu Shonkora (Oromiya). Some of his neighbours were longtime residents. Many of them (Oromo) moved there after the Wallagga state farm had been established. Some of them were born there. By the time Ahmed and others arrived in this area, many of them had been given farming and grazing land by the Oromiya administration, which was now included in Benishangul-Gumuz. This has happened after the boundaries between Oromiya and Benishangul were demarcated by the federal authorities in 2008. The authorities said people like him would be offered their previous land in Benishangul-Gumuz for which they would pay annual taxes. He and others like him have already lost their land as the Gumuz local administrators did not keep the agreement. An increase of informal settlers in the area, who the local people called ‘Gojjame’, increased the land value. The Gumuz in consultation with their local authorities, he said, have rented the plots of land he owned to Gojjame.

The local authorities said litigants like Ahmed would not be displaced if they could prove their legal status to the land they claimed. But Ahmed and others who could prove that they had land in the area at the time of boundary demarcation were refused legal status. While the demarcation was also designed to fix individuals to a specific region, at least for the purpose of taxation, the area from both sides saw a number of involuntary displacements of farmers. Of course those who could not prove that they have occupied plots of the area at the time of demarcation were displaced from that area and were believed to be given plots of land in their ‘home’ region as compensation. Similar stories are told in Benishangul-Gumuz. ‘Nothing has arrived,’ said a Gumuz resident in Agar Mexxi village ‘It were all empty promises.’ He is one of the victims of displacement from the Oromiya region. This man and his fellows were angry because compensation for displaced people has not been forthcoming.

<sup>21</sup> Proclamation No. 85/2010 of the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (article 9.6) says ‘[i]llegal animal movement from neighboring region shall be made through study and made solution for grazing and drinking water; the respective authority shall create a close link and ascertain its execution on regulation to be issued following this proclamation.’



Photo 20: Herds belonging to resettled villages. This is generally a dry season before crops are planted. By this time better grazing is normally not expected. Had not the area been exploited under the Derg's state farm it could have better vegetation and forest cover. Mada Jalala village (A. GODESSO, 2014)

These accounts reflect key problems of land authorities and land claims found across inter-regional boundary. Narratives of land authorities inform and set the context of accounts of more recent events. In 2008, after a violent conflict that led to the boundary demarcation, the authorities on both sides of Oromiya and the Benishangul-Gumuz approached land from an ethnic dimension. For someone to claim land ownership, one has to be in ones own home region or be in possession of a legal residential status. Origins and in-migration are important aspects of land-claim arrangements.

# LANDHOLDINGS' REGISTRATION AND REDISTRIBUTION

Besides villagisation, the EPRDF has other policies for the landholdings' registration and redistribution. Both worked side by side to facilitate land expropriation. In discussing landholdings' registration, I have to focus on Benishangul-Gumuz as landholdings' registration in Oromiya (2004/5) did not cause redistribution. It appears that land in Oromiya is densely populated and any attempt to land redistribution would impose grave challenges.

The process of land registration in Benishangul-Gumuz started in 2010. It has been ongoing since then, although the project was supposed to have been completed before the rainy season in 2014. The start of this process has already caused internal displacement, perceived land shortage, and exclusionary politics towards peasants regarding land access and finally 'evictions' in Benishangul-Gumuz.

I am aware that among the Gumuz, under previous conditions, forest land was ideally owned at clan level and clan elders control over individuals' access to a parcel of land and its use. The process of land registration has already changed the conditions for good. Land registration follows from the principle of a household getting access to a maximum of ten hectares. In the process, cadastre-building helps the state producing legible space (Scott 1998) that would leave much land untitled. The state now would be able to expropriate such kinds of land and transfer it to investors. The so-called 'Federal Land Bank' was introduced to facilitate the expropriation. The taking of more lands by investors has become the object of a perceived land shortage and has increasingly been adopted by the Gumuz officials to argue that the area no longer has 'unoccupied' land for 'outsiders'<sup>22</sup>.

In fact, in the remote rural context of the perceived land, shortage was not only the result of emerging investors but equally a result of local authorities' activities who favoured exclusionary politics regarding land access. State land policies must account for such features: The Benishangul-Gumuz land proclamation of 2010, which authorises the new procedure for land holding registration and distribution of land under local authority structures at a given point in time, would exclude a significant portion of the population (people defined not native to the local 'domain') from ever owning

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<sup>22</sup> Unlike the five groups (Berta, Gumuz, Komo, Mao and Shinasha) considered as autochthones, 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of BGRS autochthones consider the Amhara and Oromo currently living in BGRS, who account officially for 34% of the region's population, as allochthones or outsiders. The outsiders even include those who were born there (mostly Oromo) or resettled to that area (Amhara) by successive governments.

land.<sup>23</sup> Many argue that the identification of peasants to be excluded from landholdings' registration was done by using ethnicity as the main criterion (see Labzaé 2015).

If we pay close attention, we see that state policies of territorialisation of ethnicity, land registration, and exclusion are closely linked. In the eyes of local state authorities, however, exclusion only applied to those who were considered 'illegal' occupants of the region's land.<sup>24</sup> The exclusion was so compelling that it had a direct impact on an appreciable number of Oromo farmers who had mostly resided inside the area of the previous state farm and were often looking for fertile land outside their resident area on the basis of rentals or sharecropping. As noted elsewhere, a significant portion of the arable land under the state farm's influence has been abandoned due to soil degradation. Indeed, the process of land redistribution has attracted the attention of those types of farmers who hoped to benefit a lot from it. Did the Gumuz as an 'ethnic group' benefit from the land reform or the process of land registration and the eviction of 'outsiders'?

#### THE BENEFICIARY?

At face value, the general situation of the Gumuz in the new administrative setup might seem quite comfortable: a major break from the century-old centre-periphery relations. It may appear, for example, that the exclusion of Oromo peasants by Gumuz authorities came from the Gumuz ethnic autonomy. This should not obscure the fact, however, that neither the basic mode of relation has changed, nor did the perennial peripheral attitude of the state towards the Gumuz. (What has now changed in centre-periphery relations, therefore, is only the attitude towards who holds the 'centre', i. e., a change from 'Amhara domination' to 'Tigrayan domination'.) Though the Ethiopian party landscape transitioned towards a multi-party system headed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Tigrayan elites are perceived to still hold significant political power within the essentially one-party state.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that the land proclamation of Benishangul-Gumuz is contingent upon the national land proclamation ruled in 1997 stating that each region representing one or several 'nations, nationalities and peoples' shall administer rural land (Federal Rural Land Administration Proclamation No. 89/1997).

<sup>24</sup> Article 5.2 of the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation No. 85 states that '[a]ny peasant residing in the region shall have the right to hold land irrespective of gender or any other discrimination.' Article 5.3 further states that '[a]ny peasant who occupies prior to this proclamation and will occupy land illegally shall have no holding right.' As far as the term 'resident' is not defined with better accuracy, it may affect those ethnic groups who are not considered as 'allochthones' to the region. In other words, groups who are not included in Benishangul-Gumuz's 'nations, nationalities and peoples' can be considered as 'illegal' occupants.

According to Dereje Feyissa, '[t]he EPRDF has brought a new spin on the centre-periphery model of relation to the extent that a new peripheral political space is created evident in the creation of four regional states, [...] and the affirmative actions connected to that' (Feyissa 2009: 650).<sup>25</sup> An excellent example of this case is the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Following John Markakis ('The Federal in the Periphery' 2011) and his conclusion 'land is the real issue to debate on federalism' (Markakis 2011: 356), I argue that the state presence is manifested in the forms of land policies. Of course, the federal government justifies its presence in 'peripheral regions' or interchangeably called 'less developed regions' in connection with the affirmative action it takes to improve the economic status of those regions. This is more clear on the ground where the federal government claims power to control of large-scale land and distribute parcels. When the federal government bypassed the new proclamations and regional authority structures, questions over the legitimacy of ethnic-based power decentralisation seem open to debate.

When I asked the local community members on the benefit of land reform and land registration, everyone who answered thought that those who have ties with the state are those who benefit. The informants mentioned that the process of the land reform has already created a system where the local majority emerges as landless, with 'others' as investors or 'the dominant landholders'. Without a doubt, the land labelled as 'free' and accessible to investors has typically been land emptied by the internal displacement of the Gumuz often under the guise of villagisation. Conversely, land emptied by land registration and causing the evictions of the so-called 'ethnic outsiders' is a striking fact as well.

The easy answer to the question of why some groups are so successful in having access to land and others are not is related to 'something in their power relations.' In short the EPRDF land reform overtly supported investors who in turn became major implementers of state policy in the study area and attracted the support of an elite segment of the population. The political system of the Ethiopian state that grew out of land policies has also conveniently incorporated some of the local elites – with intermediate status – above the local population but below the investors.

Power-relations should not be totally alien to some local village leaders. This local power relation has now in turn affected the eviction of members of one ethnic group over the other. A move away from communal towards individual landholdings in Benishangul-Gumuz has created an opportunity for the creation of 'unclaimed' land, the land which has not been claimed by any person during the process of land registration. As I highlighted, in the advent of land registration, Gumuz clan leaders have loyally interacted with

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<sup>25</sup> The four regional states mentioned are: Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, and Somali.

their respective local administrators to maximize their benefit from the ‘unclaimed’ land produced from communal land. The interaction also involved other actors arriving there in order to maximize their chance to build a ‘legal’ settler community. In short, the process of getting shared benefit from the so-called ‘unclaimed’ land and building a ‘legal’ settler community takes diverse negotiations and interactions between and among different actors who facilitate different requirements for the settlers in the process.

#### PERIPHERAL LAND: LAND OF ‘SETTLERS’

In the present-day Benishangul-Gumuz and its neighbouring Oromiya region, the emergence of settler communities is a historical phenomenon predating the EPRDF regime. Thus, it is important to emphasise that the emergence of settlers communities ultimately at different areas of both regions is not new. One of the principal in-migrants groups was from the neighbouring Amhara region in the northern part of Ethiopia. Locally, people broadly distinguish between three movements of people.

The first group was displaced mainly from the former Wallo Province in the present-day Amhara region as a result of drought and famine and was resettled by the state on the so-called ‘unoccupied’ peripherals of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. The second group is said to have been voluntarily moved from their villages originating in the Gojjam areas (Amhara region) since the 1990s. This was a result of their regional officials’ advice who needed their people to occupy the so-called ‘vacant’ land in lowlands areas south of the Abbaya River.<sup>26</sup> (There is, I think, a larger lesson here. An explicit set of interest will take you further when the situation is politically motivated.) The third group, variously known as Gojjame, which became the dominant labour force in the newly emerged private agricultural investments in Benishangul-Gumuz, has been arriving at first seasonally, particularly in the farming seasons, but with the intention to settle in most cases.

The process of settling includes diverse negotiations and interactions between and among different actors who facilitate different requirements for the settlers in the process. Usually, the way in-migrants from the Amhara region gained access to land on which to farm and settle depended on the level of negotiations between settlers and their respective hosts. The negotia-

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<sup>26</sup> The forerunner of this ambition is linked to a certain man named Tamrat Layne. He was the former leader of the Amhara National Democratic Movement, a ruling part governing the Amhara region in the current Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Tamrat Layne served as a prime minister of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991–1995). During his rule, he was accused of promoting the settlement of thousands of Amharas in western lowlands, particularly in the East Wallaga and Kamashi zones. The mission has far reaching consequences: the more new Amhara settlers move to the areas surrounding the Amhara region state, the more favourable for the region to request a referendum and easily claim territorial areas beyond its current jurisdictions (see also Gebremichael 2011).



tions took place in order to inform how lands could be acquired, accessed, and how benefits could be shared with the elders of the Gumuz 'clan group' and the local state authorities. Informants told me that in-migrants have often entered into customary contact of share-cropping whereby the land owner takes a portion of the produce accruing from the farm while the remnants go to the in-migrants. This practice is, however, becoming rare as the new 'Land Proclamation 2010' of the Benishangul-Gumuz government introduces individual ownership of land and gives farmers usufruct rights for a maximum of ten hectares.

Today, local administrators play a key role within these negotiations. Labzaé (2015) describes in greater detail how the Proclamation of 2010 increased the influence of local administrators over land. The proclamation authorises local administrators to undertake the eviction of dwellers, considered as 'illegal occupants' of the region, and to send them back to their home region. In 2013, a plan dealing with the displacement of around 100,000 people to the Amhara and Oromiya region was put into action. Earlier this year, there was the eviction of 14,000 individuals (largely Amhara) from the Balo Jeganfoy district.

This expulsion has affected interregional and interethnic interactions and has become a headline topic of mass media, which led the federal government to intervene in order to stop the displacement. This was followed by a mediation led by the embassies of donor countries coupled with the freezing of some programme activities including the land registration project. But this does mean that in-migrants have had (still have) no other alternative to acquire land before facing eviction. In this context, the important consideration is less the nature of involuntary eviction but rather the particular conditions under which in-migrants and host communities reach (or fail to reach) negotiated agreements for shared benefits.

Now, if in-migrants want to take care of eviction and do not want to leave the area, what is the solution? The answer depends on the games played on legal rules held on the basis of 'legal resident'. Should they get legal residential status? Should they negotiate with local administrators to protect them from eviction? The choices are usually not mutually exclusive. Local elders often say 'Land is for sale'. In one of my interviews in a Gumuz village, an elderly man told me about how the local administrators have made land their own 'property' and how Gojjame in-migrants have become a key beneficiary of land under the disguise of land registration in his village and the surrounding areas. The informant said, 'if [that is] left unchecked, our children will become landless.'

According to the informant, the in-migrants enter into a subtle engagement with local administrators. The administrators are the ones who could identify the 'legal residential status' of a person and determine who had to leave in the process of evictions. Thus, an administrator may have still an influence

regarding exemption from eviction of the so-called 'illegal' residents. It is the 'illegal status of a resident' that changes immediately. In some cases, the community leaders let the in-migrants have access to communal land under the guise of rentals.

This rental system cannot save in-migrants from eviction; however, it is for this reason that the in-migrants feel more secure if they are able to get usufruct rights. The negotiation ability of the settlers allows the local administrators to become community leaders' accomplice in their action to commodify communal land. Rentals are followed by 'illicit sales' and granting buyers with the status of 'legal resident', a crucial step to the formalization of landholdings.

The interviews also unfold how such negotiations are changing the previous land arrangement and are increasing inter-ethnic tension between and among in-migrants and the host communities. First, a decline in the customary contract of shared cropping has had a direct impact on the relation between Oromo farmers and Gumuz landholders. The impact is more compelling when the Gumuz still prefer to rent their land for money in more competitive ways. In most cases, they prefer the Gojjame to the Oromo farmers as their immediate neighbours. Unlike the Gojjame, who have more access to cash money, as a wage labourer in an agricultural investment most of the farmers earn subsistence by farming.

## CONCLUSION

All the themes I have raised in discussing periphery, ‘unoccupied’ land and state policies converge of the issues of understanding the changes in the social and economic relations of the Oromo and the Gumuz, or their relation to the state. I have tried to present short views of the existence of three kinds of centre-periphery relations in Ethiopia, arguing that the Oromo and Gumuz areas experienced different modes of state presence. I also keep asserting that these differences are not more than a just one-time problem. For this reason, the study of Oromo-Gumuz relations generated perhaps the biggest controversy of the centre-periphery model during the 1960s and 1970s. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially since the incorporation of the independent Oromo kingdoms into the imperial Ethiopian state, much has happened in the region and in the relation between the Oromo and the Gumuz. In Ethiopia, the presence of the imperial Ethiopian state in its peripheral areas, including the Oromo and Gumuz territorial areas among others, aimed at large scale land access. Such land access (in forms of state farms and private commercial agriculture) represents a continuation of the historical centre-periphery relations (Makki and Geisler 2011). If we pay close attention, we see that villagisation and resettlement are caught in the same political circle that runs very deeply in the Ethiopian state policies from the time of the imperial regime. The continuation is reinforced by the inherent connection between the representation of the peripheral areas as ‘unoccupied’ and the state’s interest for large scale land access in these areas. These are the question about access to ‘unoccupied’ land and development. Do we define used land from the observation of the local settings or from using state policies to reason through law? More often than not, land labelled as ‘unoccupied’ by the state is actually occupied and used. This could have a serious impact on the relations between and among the state and the different groups living in the peripheries.

# GLOSSARY

- Abba Duulaa*: Awar leader among the Oromo
- Abbaya River*: Bule Nile
- Dajjazmach*: Commander of the Gate; or commander of the central body of a traditional armed force (a military title)
- demetsa*: a hamlet among the Gumuz
- Derg*: a committee; the military regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1990
- gabbar*: a tribute paying and personal service rendering peasant
- Gammoojji*: hot land
- Gumii*: a meeting square of the Gadaa assembly among the Oromo
- Gojjame*: refers to people in the northwestern part of Ethiopia
- gosaa*: an equivalent meaning for clan among the Oromo
- kooluu*: joining a new clan for protection
- Qabiyyee*: a system of landholding among the Oromo
- qoroo*: equivalent to the governor of a certain area in which chiefs collect tributes in the Oromo king system or *motii*
- Soka*: people who reside in the same hamlet among the Gumuz
- Michuu*: a bond friendship
- Motii*: a king system among the Oromo
- neftegna*: Landlords; settled soldiers
- Warra*: a house of a clam among the Oromo

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21–22 | 27–29 | 32 | 41–45

## D

- Dajjazmach 2  
*demetsa* 22 | 36  
Derg v–vii | 12–15 | 17 | 19 | 21 | 24 |  
27–28 | 35–36 | 39

## G

- gabbar* 4 | 10  
*Gammoojji* 16  
*Gumii* 2  
Gumuz (clan) v–vii | 1–6 | 10–12 |  
15–24 | 28–30 | 35–38 |  
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*gosaa* 2 | 15

## K

- kooluu* 3

## M

- Michuu* 16–17 | 19  
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## N

- neftegna* 2

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18–20 | 24–25 | 27–29 | 32 |  
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## Q

- Qabiyee* 2  
*qoroo* 11

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