

CONTESTED TERRAINS:

CONFLICTS BETWEEN STATE AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES OVER THE MANAGEMENT AND UTILIZATION OF NECH SAR NATIONAL PARK, SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

In Ethiopia, development models have been borrowed from different countries since the mid 19th century. Despite their difference in discourses over political and economic ideologies, successive regimes in the country shared similarities in their relationship with the society. The Ethiopian state has been perceived as predatory state for its exploitative nature and because of its reliance on the poor in extracting revenue. In 1991, Ethiopia experienced a new political order that ostensibly promised the society with rights of self-government, decentralization of power and local development through empowerment of local institutions. Nevertheless, the top-down and centrist approach in the planning and management of development schemes have been the features of the current regime. Taking the case of Nech Sar national park as a case study, this paper argues that the official narratives of development and conservation contradict local conceptions and ultimately fail to ensure both conservation and development missions it intends to achieve. Rather, state intervention threatens the livelihood of local communities and sustainability of biodiversity in the park.

Keywords: Development, Conservation, Local communities, Conceptions of nature

INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopian history, the territories in the southern part of the country have been represented as a natural space 'unspoiled' by human activities where as the people are portrayed as 'close to nature'. In a close investigation of the north-south dichotomies in Ethiopia, an analogy can be drawn with Europeans' perception of Africa during the colonial conquest. In other words, the north has been represented as 'historical' while the south is viewed as 'natural' or 'wilderness'. David Turton (2009) argues that the Ethiopian state used the 'wilderness' notion in peripheral south as a mechanism of state building, control of the people and territories, and for building legitimacy through so called development and conservation schemes. Following the incorporation of the south into the Ethiopian empire in the late 19th century through military conquest, the state-society relationship has been paternalistic in which the state is perceived as predatory because of its policies of suppression and exploitation.

A new political landscape was introduced in 1991 following the institutionalization of ethnic federalism and its policy instruments of decentralization, self-government and local autonomy (Clapham 2002). Ostensibly, the new political order was thought to redress past injustices and inequalities. In principle, ethnic federalism grants ethnic based self-government to different ethnic groups and presumably ensures decentralization of power as vehicle of local development. According to Mohammed Salih and John Markakis (1998), the Ethiopian experiment of ethnic federalism envisions development harnessing ethnicity as a vehicle. They contend that;

Decentralization in Ethiopia is not seen merely as device for the satisfaction of ethnic political demands, but also as the path leading to democratization through devolution of decision making in a manner that enables more people to influence the political process. Furthermore, since *decentralization and democratization are regarded as requisite to development, the empowerment of ethnicity is intended to harness ethnicity to the purposes of development* (Mohammed and Markakis, 1998, p. 8, emphasis added).

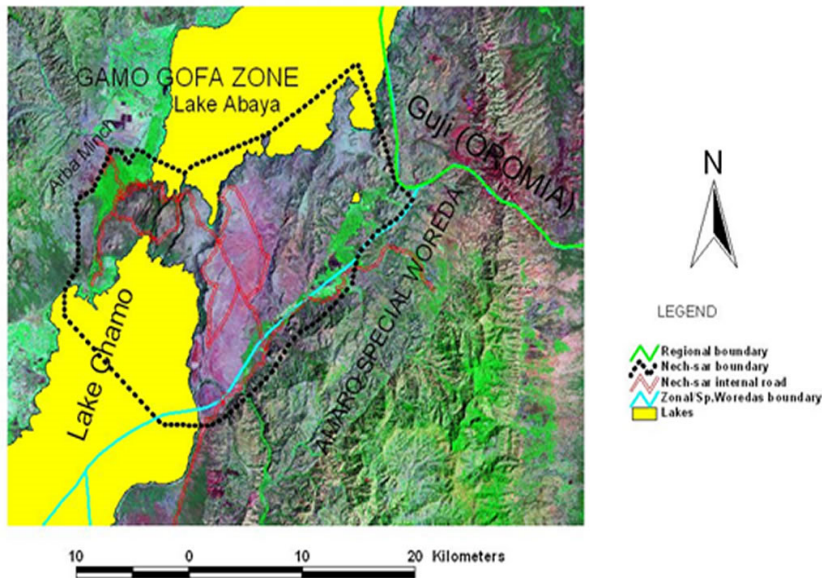
Although institutionalization of ethnic federalism is supposed to ensure self-government of the constituent nations and nationalities in Ethiopia, different critiques have been outlined by scholars, particularly regarding its practical implementation. For instance, as Dereje (2006) contends in his study of the Gambela case, despite a promising start (formal and symbolic empowerment) ‘the political blessing’ has turned out to be a curse for the majority of ordinary men and women who experienced the federal experiment as escalation of conflict. The message implicated in the argument indicates persistence of disparities between the national discourse of the experiment and its actual realities at local levels. Likewise, based on his fieldwork analysis among the Siltie in South Ethiopia, Zerihun (2004) contends the presence of hierarchical structures in state-peasant relationship in development programs despite the rhetoric of participatory development advanced by the government. He further argues that the concept, “development”, itself is perceived and being practiced by elites and ethnic entrepreneurs as a technocratic process to be administered and planned by the state rather than negotiated with, and contested by, the peasants (Zerihun, 2004). In line with this concern, Mohammed and Markakis critically point out that it is crucially important to note that the success of this unfinished altruistic project depends on “whether the formal i.e. constitutional provisions of decentralization and democratization are realized in practice” (1998, p.8).

More specifically, the Ethiopian experiment of ethnic federalism and its policy instruments of decentralization and self-government failed to move beyond rhetoric. Centralized and top-down administrative systems are still in place while local communities’ participation in decision making processes is far from practical. In this article, the national discourse of ethnic federalism that ostensibly promotes decentralized governance and local development through empowerment of local administrative units will be analyzed by taking the management of Nech Sar National Park as a case study. By so doing, it probes whether the envisioned and highly applauded ethnic federalism has been translated into practice.

THE NECH SAR NATIONAL PARK: A CONTESTED TERRAIN

Unlike in other African states where national parks and game reserves were established following the commencement of colonial conquest in the late 19th century, Ethiopia entered into international environmental politics (with reference to Protected Areas) in 1960s (Abiyot, 2009). The country began collaborating with international institutions such as UNESCO in early 1960s as a step towards adopting western conservation practices. The first partnership was established when a team of Ethiopian delegation participated in a conference organized by UNESCO in 1962 in Paris that deliberated on “Economic Development and Conservation of Natural Resources: Flora and Fauna”. The Ethiopian team requested UNESCO Director-General to provide the country with necessary support for the survey of potential areas to be reserved as national parks. To this end, UNESCO sent a team that surveyed and recommended three areas: Semein Mountain, Awash and Omo Valleys in 1965. Later on, a British Biologist added Nech-Sar to be established as national park in 1967 that came into effect in 1974 as game reserve (Abiyot, 2009; Tewasen, 2003). It was this partnership that later enabled Ethiopia to adopt the ‘conventional’ or classical conservation approach as implemented elsewhere in colonial Africa.

NECH-SAR NATIONAL PARK



Source: <http://www.southtourism.gov.et/Home/Nature/NationalParks/NNPBigMap.html>

The major initiative for the establishment of the park was “for preservation of the endemic Swayne’s Hartebeest and for its scenic beauty” (Dessalegn, 2004) but later because of its richness in biodiversity, other objectives were included. The park is endowed with over 800 species of higher plants, 91 species of Mammals, 351 species of birds, and others such as insects. The park features a great diversity of animal population with the dominant ones including Burchell’s Zebra, Grant’s gazelle, the endemic Swayne’s hartebeest, Nile crocodile in Lake Chamo, Lesser Kudu, lion, wild dog and other animals (APF Annual Report, 2007). Moreover, the landscape that constitutes underground water forests and the ‘Forty Springs’ add to its scenic beauty. As a result, the park was established with the aim of preserving immense natural resources and generating economic benefits from tourism for the country (Dessalegn, 2004; APF Annual Report, 2007).

Before the establishment of the park, the territory was used by the Guji Oromo agro-pastoral community as a wet season grazing land whereas the fertile eastern escarpment has been extensively utilized by both the Koore and Guji communities for agriculture (Tadesse, 2004; Getachew, 2007). Before the state intervention through conservation program, the Guji lived with the wildlife in mutually complementary manner. However, adopting the western approach that presumes wildlife and people as incompatible mixes, the park management has taken fierce measures against local communities throughout the three regimes. The local Guji and Koore communities were evicted from the park in two phases. The first was in 1982 under the military regime while the second was in 2004/5 under the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front) that is on power since 1991. Following the eviction of the local people from the park, wildlife, particularly the herbivorous, were reported to have migrated with the people. Perhaps, this experience is against the ‘conventional’ conservationist thought that presumes local people as threats to wildlife in and around protected areas. This scenario raises a fundamental question on what implicit relationships exist between the people and the animals. Thus, this paper attempts to investigate different conceptions of nature and the implications that such disparities invoke on conservation practices in and around Nech Sar national park. It also probes into human-wildlife

relations in and around the park. As points of departure, this paper raises questions which include: How do the Guji conceptualize/perceive their environment? What are the basis of relationship between human and non-human 'worlds' in Guji's cosmological scheme? What approaches has been followed by the park administration in Nech Sar national park? What conservation implication does the different conception of nature entail?

With a total size of 514 km² (official figure during its establishment), the park adjoins Arba Minch town in the west, Amaro Mountains in the East, Lakes Abaya and Chamo in the north and south respectively. In fact, parts of the two lakes are included into the park territory in 1990s. It should be noted that following change in administrative systems at national levels, the park was also reported to have undergone changes in size. Local communities and some academic sources indicate that the official figure is far less than the actual park size (Tadesse, 2004). It is rather estimated to be over 1000km². In terms of interaction with human population, in the west Arba Minch town dwellers and in the east Guji and Koore communities heavily rely on resources in the park for different livelihood purposes. While urban dwellers exploit forest resources for charcoal, firewood, timber, and construction materials, the Koore extensively use the eastern border of the park (sometimes inside the park territory) for agriculture. Similarly, the Guji agro-pastoral communities graze their cattle in and around the park while cultivating crops such as maize, coffee, banana, sweet potato and avocado in a contested lowland area that adjoins the park and the Koore people. It has been claimed that the whole territory now designated as national park was Guji's dry season grazing land since 16th century (Getachew, 2007).

From its establishment till the downfall of the military regime, the park management was typically state-centered, top-down, exclusionary and coercive against local people. In a similar approach to the classical protectionist conservation approach, it used 'fences and fines' and considered local people as hostile to nature, particularly to the wildlife. Oral narratives of the communities (particularly Guji's and Koore's) indicate that the park management strictly controlled any access to the park by establishing police stations and taking coercive measures against the people who are found utilizing resources in and around the park territories. For instance, at present if a person is caught hunting or grazing his cattle in the park, he would be jailed for six months and would pay fifty Ethiopian Birr (about three dollars) per head of cattle. In short, customary rights were criminalized whereas indigenous knowledge of resource management was denigrated. To make the matter worse, the military regime forcefully evicted over 2000 Koore and Guji communities in 1982 (Dessalegn, 2004). During the eviction, houses, crops, and properties were burnt to ashes. Many cattle died in shortage of water and pasture en-route to new settlement areas. Since the state did not prepare any resettlement areas for the displaced people, they were prompted to compete over resources with other neighboring communities such as the Konso and Burji. This led to protracted inter-ethnic conflict that further destabilized the region and impoverished the people.

Following the regime change in 1991 and the subsequent legal and political vacuum created for a while, both communities returned to their previous settlement areas. But the people's attitude towards the park and their relationship with the wildlife was changed to hostility. Informants from both communities recall memories of how people reacted against wildlife and resources of the park. Some further pointed out that "people began to associate the animals with the state because it was for those animals that the state evicted the people" (informant, Shanxara Halake, May 2011). As a result, both groups began massive killing of animals for food and commerce. Moreover, the Guji started grazing their cattle far inside the centre of the park while hundreds of Koore community moved down to the Sermale basin for agricultural activities.

On the western side where it adjoins Arba Minch town, massive destruction of forests for timber, charcoal, firewood, and construction materials were reported to have been taken place (APF Annual Report, 2007). Informants from Arba Minch town bitterly recall that the period was a time when people destroyed resources as if it were enemy's property. Although some sorts of administrative decentralization have been put in place in post 1991 period (the park was administered by SNNPR – Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region – from 1991 to 2004 and then was given to African Parks Foundation), the conservation philosophy was not changed across the three regimes. The fundamental protectionist approach of the pre-1970s that advocates complete isolation of protected areas from human interaction and perceives local people as foes to the 'wilderness' continued to date. As a result, since late 1990s, resettlement programs were proposed as the only strategies to 'sustainably' manage the park and its resources. In a preparation to transfer the management of the park to The Netherlands-based Multinational Company (African Parks Foundation – APF), the resettlement process of the Guji and Koore communities became an inevitable option. While over thousand Koore households were resettled to Abulo and Alfacho villages (some 50km to the south bordering Konso and Burji ethnic groups) in 2004/5, the Guji community initially refused to move. Finally, the SNNPR government deployed a police force against the Guji and pushed them away from the Nech-Sar plains at gunpoint. Reports from oral informants and other sources indicate that 463 Guji houses were burnt during the eviction while about 5000 people were evicted (Dowie, 2009).

The justification on the side of the park and government, particularly SNNPR, for the resettlement program is that local communities have continuously been encroaching into the park territory for pasture, water, agriculture and poaching. Therefore, it is claimed that increased competition between livestock and wildlife would threaten the survival of the latter and by implication affects the economic gain to be earned through tourism. It is also argued that further agricultural expansion into the park territory threatens homes of wildlife while hunting actually risks the life of the animals.

In contrast to what community-based conservation advocates propose, the actions of Ethiopian government and the APF in the early years of the new Millennium clearly fit into the classical conservation discourses that used to promote strict isolationist approach. According to Zube and Busch (1990), for sustainable environmental management, involvement of local peoples becomes uncompromised. The authors emphasize that sustainable community based conservation strategies in protected areas include four possibilities: 1) a condition where local people are involved in managing the park and/or reside in the park, 2) park management delivers services for people residing outside the park, 3) maintenance of traditional uses inside the park (from outside) 4) local people's involvement in tourism related activities (Zube and Busch, 1990, p. 117-126). As it has been noted above, this view itself does not address the dichotomous perceptions on human-non-human relations. It rather tries to seek a rights-based solution to local communities. As it was clearly stipulated in the agreement between the government and APF, the Ethiopian government took the mandate and responsibility to resettle the local people so that the company would proceed in fencing the park to deter any human and livestock entrance into the territories designated for the park (APF Annual Report, 2007). In this regard, the resettlement program would detach the local people from their customary land because the sites selected for the resettlement were located at a minimum of 50km to the south of the park. It had also economic consequences as it dislocates the communities from the fertile lowland area called Tsalke, which is drained by Sermale River. The fertile Sermale basin provides year round opportunity for agriculture through irrigation. Currently, the people produce mango, avocado,

coffee, banana, enset, maize, and root crops. For the Guji and few Koore communities who still live adjacent to the park, the Sermale valley provides a means of survival that cannot be compromised.

The agro-pastoralist Guji community has had long history of interaction with the wildlife. Therefore, an insight into their cosmologies, perceptions on development and conservation approaches gives us a clear understanding of the implication of difference between national and local discourses on development and conservation. Since the Guji are one of the major local actors who influence the dynamics in the park, this paper focuses on different levels of confrontation between the Guji and the state over the park.

GUJI COSMOLOGIES

The Guji people belong to the larger Oromo nation and inhabit southern part of Ethiopia. Currently, they live in Oromia regional state in Borana and Guji zones with few members of the community included in NSSP (Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples) regional state in Sidama and Gedeo zones. The Guji community perceives the advent of park administration as an intervention into their historical harmonious relationship with the wildlife. The historical conservation practices among the Guji were entwined with their cosmological schemes and embedded in their culture, beliefs and norms. The Guji are among a few of Oromo nation who have strong cultural connection with their environments (Van De Loo, 1991). For the Guji, culture, peace and supernatural power, *Waaqa* (God) are strongly entwined. Baxter (1991, p. 9) explains that “Guji, like other Oromo society, are keenly aware that the maintenance of their culture depends on the maintenance of *Nagea*: Peace, that is amongst them considered as a community and between them and God. But this peace is not a free gift; its maintenance requires continuous, earnest application, and is never sure or certain”. According to Baxter, the duty of maintaining peace rests on the shoulder of elders and requires them to provide continuous rituals, prayers, sacrifices, blessings and obeying the rules of *Waaqa* (Baxter 1991). The Guji elders provide rituals and prayers to *Waaqa* on behalf of all people, cattle and their environment at large. The Guji believe that failure to maintain harmony with *Waaqa* may inflict by withholding the rain on which all animals and humans absolutely depend. The author remarks that “For fertility to continue and for all people and things to grow and mature, the Earth, the cattle and the women must all be moist” (Baxter, 1991, p. 10).

Among the Guji community, cattle herding and possession of large herd of cattle are associated with cultural pride, economic values (wealth), sense of Guji identity and provides social privilege in marriage arrangement and inter-societal relationships. Tadesse (2006, p. 209) describes that though the Guji practise mixed economy of animal husbandry and crop cultivation, “their real wealth consists of cattle, sheep, goats and horses. Emotions and pride are centred on stock. People who do not own cattle are not considered to be proper Guji”. In Guji culture, beyond the economic values, cattle are used for rituals, transition rites, gift, bride price, compensation during reconciliations, and as a symbol of social prestige. Therefore, the Guji count not in terms heads of cattle but of *moona* (kraal) that ranges from seventy to hundreds. (However, the stock – source of wealth and reflection of Guji identity – is currently under serious depletion because restriction to pasture land and change in climatic conditions in the horn of Africa.) Their strong attachment to the stock provides the Guji with knowledge about their environment. As Van De Loo (1991) indicates, the Guji possess deep knowledge of the anatomy, disease and remedies that they acquired through religious practices and experiences.

Despite owning large number of livestock, the Guji have traditionally no meat feeding culture. In most cases, their food constitutes barley, maize, and milk products. Meat is eaten only on special occasions such as festivals, reception of a special guest, weddings and so on. Traditionally, it was culturally prohibited among the Guji to eat the meat of wild animals. While the reason for low meat consumption culture in reference to livestock is related to the value they give to cattle; the Guji claim that traditionally they do not eat meat of wild animals for many reasons. This prohibition was associated to religious belief, social implications and health factors.

The first one is closely related to their cosmological scheme in that they have an oath to safeguard the animals under the protection of the supernatural power, *Waaqa*/God. For the Guji, their relationship with wildlife is part and parcel of their connection to the supernatural power, *Waaqa*. Guji's worldview puts the biophysical, the human and the supernatural in one integral component of the environment. They argue that the relationship between the three is based on reciprocity. They state that;

Waaqa created us with cattle so that we look after them, care for them and use them for our needs. But these animals [wild animals] do not have shepherd except God Himself. *Waaqa* gave us the responsibility to care for the animals on his behalf and he cares for our cattle, people and generally *nagaa* Gujii [peace of the Guji land]. Therefore, if one kills the one that God looks after, he will inflict through famine, drought, disease and instability that destroys livestock and people. But, when we care for the animals, *Waaqa* reciprocates us with fertility, abundance, rain, and peace. Therefore, from our forefathers until today, we lived with these animals in peace and harmony. They are also peaceful to us (Group discussion, Ergansa, April 2011).

Through a reciprocal relationship, they expect *Waaqa* to bless them with fertility, peace, abundance, and health which they would get only by doing something good to the environment, especially caring for animals. In Guji worldview, all living and non-living things in their environment were created by a supernatural power, *Waaqa*. They believe that *Waaqa* created them with their cattle and gave them water and pasture to nurture their animals. It is their inherent conviction that they were born pastoralists, to look after cattle. At same time, they are conscious about the presence of other 'cattle' whose shepherd is *Waaqa* himself. These are what other people call wildlife. The Guji do not categorize "wild" and "domesticated" in a strict sense of the words. The dichotomy prevails only when it comes to place of residence and ownership.

The Guji maintain a balance of food chain by safeguarding the prey wildlife, particularly herbivorous animals who seek refuge close to their homesteads in fear of big predators. A Guji elder said that "we care for the animals by providing grass and water, for example if we come across an animal in process of delivery or attacked by a predator. We do this because we want to save the life of the animals. Its owner loves them as we love our cattle" (interview with Danbala Badacha, May 2011). This also goes to what Tim Ingold (2000) explains as trust and reciprocity in human-non-human relations. According to the people, the preys developed trust upon the people and approach them seeking protection.

Another restriction is related to culture. Among the *Qaalluu* clan (a clan from where *Qaalluu* religious leaders are hereditarily elected), there are restrictions on many food items. *Qaalluu* institution is a religious institution that regulates the relationship of people with *Waaqa*. The leaders are seen as intermediaries between the two. The restriction includes

poultry items, cabbage, meat from all wild animals, and some cereals such as millet, *teff* and sorghum. Many of the Guji around Nech Sar national park are from Alabdu clan – the clan known among the Guji as *Qaalluu* clan. Therefore, in traditional context, they were prohibited from eating the flesh of wild animals. Social taboos contribute to biodiversity conservation by imposing different levels of restrictions on members of a social group. Colding and Folke (2001) identified six types of social taboos exercised by indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. These include segment, temporal, method, life history, specific-species and habitat taboos (see Colding and Folke, 2001 for details on each category). In the context of *Qaalluu* regulation, a specific-species taboo applies to Guji's restriction on consumption of specific animals. However, in traditional context, Guji's prohibition of the killing of all wildlife, except those used for cultural pride, can be related to general social taboo regardless of species specificity. Colding and Folke argue that such restrictions are mainly associated with beliefs in that "in some traditional societies taboos are enforced through beliefs that spirits will sanction violators by invoking illness upon people" (2001, p. 589). Likewise, the Guji believe that violation of the ancestral oath with *Waaqa* would invoke disasters on their livestock, people and the environment by causing drought that would lead to famine, the spread diseases and the disruption of peace. Moreover, avoidance of specific food items, including wild animals is meant to maintain their legitimacy as religious leaders.

Restriction to bush meat is also related to social implications it perpetuates. A person who kills wild animals for food is categorized among the poor because killing wildlife for food is perceived as derived from poverty. Poverty implies low social prestige, which in turn is reflected in marriage arrangement and other interpersonal relations. An elder from the Ergansa village recalled the tradition that "if a person is once labeled as killing animals for food, people would not give him their daughters for marriage. They would label the person saying he is from those who eat bush meat but now everyone abandoned the *safuu* (norms)". Moreover, the Guji link the prohibition of bush meat with health conditions. They claim that eating bush meat spoils one's mouth and destroys teeth. It is also explained that it causes diseases (Getachew, 2007).

But it should be noted that there are exceptions in Guji's prohibitions of the killing of wild animals. The first is when they need the meat for medicinal purposes. Even in the past, the people used to selectively kill some animals for medicine but once they kill a single animal, its meat can be kept for long period of time. The second exception is killing big game animals out of motives related to cultural honor. The Guji kill also big game animals for *midda* (honor). The killing of animals such as lion, buffalo, elephants and rhino give the killer a prestige of *midda* (Tadesse, 1994). The Guji claim that they were given *midda* culture by *Waaqa*. It is a culture through which they reveal their pride, greatness, bravery and thus the Guji believe that all these are given to them from *Waaqa*. However, today, it is only lion that exists in and around the park.

As indicated above, institutions of resource governance and ethics pertaining to the utilization and access to resources among the Guji have been entwined with their cosmological schemes. Their attachment to their environment as part of their connection to *Waaqa*, religious institutions such as the *Qaalluu* institution, the socio-political system called the Gadaa system and other social norms and values are important local frameworks that guide the nature of resource management among the group. It is also worth mentioning that the livelihood engagement of the people, that is, pastoral activity prompts the people to systematically utilize the resources (pasture and water) in order to cope up to local climate variability. Among the Guji, access to resource is decided by clan elders in which all members of the clan are eligible to

common pasture and water grounds. However, granting water sources and pasture to members of other clan or ethnic group(s) is considered as future investment during times of scarcity or in cases of drought. There are also other social networks such as marriage and trade that necessitate sharing resources. The Guji say that letting livestock to die by blocking access to water and pasture is considered as transgressing Guji's oath with *Waaqa*. Such act is believed to bring infliction by the *Waaqa* who would hold back rain or causes diseases.

For the Guji, conservation and development are understood from cultural point of view. For instance, while caring for the environment is part of their cosmological schemes of local knowledge and belief, what they consider appropriate development scheme is something that is compatible to local values, customs and livelihood traditions. Although they have expectations to get schools for their children, road connecting to the nearest markets, health centre, mill machine and access to pure water, any 'development' program that disrupts their traditional livelihood system – pastoralism – is not acceptable to the ordinary men and women. As stated earlier in this paper, livestock signifies beyond mere economic purpose among the Guji. Thus, state's development conception that gives emphasis to settled agriculture and ecotourism project in the area is seen by the Guji as a challenge to their livelihood and a restriction on their customary rights of resource utilization.

THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE: THE STATE'S CONCEPTION OF DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION

Following the birth of the modern Ethiopian state in the late 19th century through military conquest of the then autonomous states in the south, the state was noted for ethnic-based political dominations, economic exploitation and socio-cultural marginalization upon the subjected people (Vaughan, 2003). During those periods, peasants were restricted from their customary land rights while pastoral communities were highly marginalized from access to any social services (Hagmann and Mulugeta, 2008). Thus, because of its exploitative nature, the Ethiopian state remained predatory over the people, particularly in the south. As Donald Donham (1986, p. 24) remarks on exploitation of the subjected peoples of the south, "By the early twentieth century, extractions from northern peasants lightened, just as those from southern peoples were made more heavy". Donham bemoans that the Ethiopian state comprised a dual system in which the political economy of the north was sustained by massive transfer of wealth from the southern regions and that the peoples of the south were, notwithstanding their region's contribution to the national economy, denied access to political power, economic resources, and cultural autonomy.

Despite their contribution to the national economy, the peoples in the subjugated regions of the south were not given equal opportunities in the national economic, political and social affairs of the country not least their representation as 'backward' and 'close to nature' as portrayed in the legend of 'Great Tradition' (Donham, 1986; Levin 2000; Turton 2009). Such history of domination continued for over half a century until mid 20th century. In the 1960s, the pervasiveness of Amhara domination provoked a reaction from the subject peoples. Grievances that they were being economically-exploited, administratively-oppressed, socially-marginalized and culturally-stigmatized by the few Amhara elites operating within ethnic-based oppressive system fomented a sense of ethnic self-awareness among the subjugated peoples. People who shared the historical experiences of oppression began to witness their dichotomized existence of privilege and deprivation based on ethnic distinctiveness. They harnessed on a repertoire of traditional values and deployed them as a fortification against the Amhara/Ethiopian ethnic hegemony (Bassi 1996; Seyoum 2001). Gradually, ethnic consciousness – a sense of awareness of being oppressed, exploited and marginalized on ethnic basis by elites of a

particular ethnic group – grew up into sense of ethnic nationalism, mainly among the educated segments of the oppressed ethnic groups who later contributed to the rise in ethnic self-representations and sense of identity among their respective groups.

Among possible factors that transformed ethnic grievances into consciousness and later into ethnic nationalism, the role of education was significant. In the post 1941 period, the expansion of modern education, specifically the opening of a university and colleges, brought a particular group of students close to the centre of political activity. Born in rural conditions, this group of students had direct experiences of the depredations of the ethnic-based oppressive system. The opportunity of higher education enabled them to conceptualize Amhara hegemony within Ethiopia in a broader international dimension of colonial oppression. This cohort played a pivotal role in articulating ethnic grievances as ethnic consciousness and transforming the latter into ethnic nationalism, thereby in generating support for ethno-nationalist liberation movements who included issues of ethnicity in their political agenda.

In effect, ethnic nationalism was articulated by the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) in the 1960s. This opened a new chapter for ethnic politics in the country where talking about ethnic diversity was condemned as a threat to national unity. The ESM was first organized by Hailesillassie I University (now Addis Ababa University) students as a protest against the exploitative class relations under the imperial regime, which had impoverished the rural life. After mid 1960s, the movement added ‘the nationality question’ into the list of political agenda (Balsvik, 1985).

For the activists of the ESM, Marxist-Leninist philosophy was initially their inspiration for setting their political agenda. The solution they prescribed as a cure of the problem of national oppression – right to self-determination of nations and nationalities including secession – was brought to public attention in 1969 by an article written by Walleign Mekonnen, one of the leaders of the student movement who was killed in 1972 during an attempted hijack of (Balsvik, 1985; Merera, 2003). The article sparked a political bombshell to the regime by explicitly addressing ethnicity and exposing the Amhara dominance and oppression to the public. A portion of his article reads as follows:

Is it [Ethiopian national identity] not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy? Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian religion is? Ask anybody what is the national dress? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigray!! To be a ‘genuine Ethiopian’ one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity, and to wear the Amhara-Tigre *shama* in international conferences. In some cases to be an ‘Ethiopian’, you will even have to change your name. In short, to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (Quoted in Balsvik 1985, 277).

Walleign’s article broke the ice of silence on the issue of ethnicity among Ethiopian students. His was a strong condemnation of the century long illusion of the success of the imperial regime’s ‘nation-building’ project. Thus, the political, historical, economic and social realities of the country expressed in the form of ethnic-based oppression became the basis for the rise of ethno-nationalist movements devoted to a struggle for liberation from the century long ‘colonial experience’ or ‘national oppression’ (Merera, 2003). In short, ethnicity became an aspect of the call for political change of the major liberation fronts such as the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) and many others since the 1960s.

In the process, the last feudal regime was toppled in the 1974 revolution that brought a military junta to the political scene. Although some signs of recognition to issues of diversity were seen during the early years of the military regime, it could not move beyond rhetoric (Clapham, 2009). Clapham argues that the early promises of the military regime (i.e. the *derg*) that attracted popular support became a nightmare to most of the Ethiopian masses as the centralist policy undermined local autonomies of those who contested the structure of the state itself (ibid). By the end of 1980s TPLF managed to organize other ethnic-based movements and formed Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front/EPRDF. In part because of its failure to address the nationalities questions, the military junta was ousted by the combined forces of different liberation movements. With EPRDF's seizure of state power in 1991, ethnicity has been formally institutionalized as the foundation of ethnic federalism as a new political arrangement (Clapham, 2002; Turton 2006).

As a brainchild of the student movement, TPLF/EPRDF emphasized on rights of nations, nationalities and peoples to 'self-determination' (Clapham, 2009). In contrast to its predecessor, the military regime, which attempted to resolve the country's most difficult issue – ethnic question *vis-à-vis* unity – through class struggle, the TPLF/EPRDF sought resolution to the issue through 'voluntary' federalism based on ethnic based autonomous units in a pursuit for forging national unity (Clapham, 2009). In this manner, the federal arrangement was conceived in the Transitional Charter of 1991 but was enacted by the 1994 constitution that came into effect a year later.

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 can be described as comprehensive for embracing essential democratic values and declaring Ethiopia to be a party to all major international treaties on human rights and public law (Abbink, 2009). Article 39 of the Constitution, with its reference to rights of nations, nationalities and peoples, reveals the centrality of ethnicity as the organizing principle of the new political system:

Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession...Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history...Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and Federal governments (Art. 39:3 of FDRE Constitution, 1995).

Besides the envisioned promises of the political order in granting opportunities of self-government to nations and nationalities, it was also highly applauded by many scholars as a vehicle to harness local development through economic decentralization and empowerment of local institutions (Mohamed and Markakis, 1998; Kidane, 1997). However, as Asefa Fiseha (2006) contends, the Ethiopian 'experiment' of ethnic federalism suffers from rifts between rhetoric and practice lacking genuine devolution of power and precarious regional and local administrative units with strong intervention from federal state. Although over twenty years have elapsed since the implementation of the political model, its success is still contested among scholars (Dereje, 2010). Apart from the view of detractors who skeptically see the experiment from a political dimension, the practice of ethnic federalism is still far behind the rhetorical promises (ibid). Although it opened some degree of political spaces and granted freedom of expression free before 2005, the new political order is at weakest point as far as genuine decentralization and local empowerment are concerned (Clapham,

2009; Dereje, 2010). Therefore, the success of the political order should be assessed on the basis of whether the discourse is translated into practice. The contestations and claims between different actors over Nech Sar national park illustrate how local conceptions of development and conservation confront with the national discourses.

CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN LOCAL AND NATIONAL DISCOURSES OF DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION IN NECH SAR NATIONAL PARK

An analysis of the existing conditions in and around Nech Sar national park can be posited within the contexts of local claims of entitlement (claims of customary rights, recognition of local knowledge, local livelihood conditions and questions of benefit sharing and participation), inter-regional conflicts of interests, issues related to self-government (the constitutional provisions versus the practice on the ground) and differences in conceptions of development and resource governance. In this section, I analyze how these conflicting views are contested, negotiated and acted upon. By so doing, the implications of such contestations on development and conservation in and around the park will be elaborated by drawing on whether the national discourses are translated into practice.

The Guji challenge the state intervention into what they consider as their customary right drawing on historical claims and cosmological schemes. Historically, they argue that their ancestors were prior settlers in the area since the 16th century (Getachew, 2007). According to this claim, all the territories located to the east of Arbaminch town (including the town itself) were traditional Guji lands. Place names such as Siqala, Secha, Bishaan Hare, Haro Rophi, Bonke and many others were all Afan Oromo names – the language the Guji speak as all other Oromo groups. It was following the establishment of the town of Arbaminch and the national park in 1974 respectively that the Guji were pushed out to the eastern part of the park. Besides reliance on history of settlement, the Guji seem to have systematically used the law (the constitution) to defend their rights to the land. According to Article 43 (2) of the FDRE (1995), Nationals have the right to participate in national development and, in particular, to be consulted with respect to policies and projects affecting their community”. However, in 2004/05 when the government agreed to transfer the management of the park to APF and took the responsibility of resettling the Guji and Koore communities who reside in and around the ‘park territories’, the local communities were reported that they have been removed from their land at gun point without consent (Dawie, 2009). This contradicts with the official narratives of participatory development and decentralized government that advocate empowerment of local institutions in decision-making processes.

From cosmological dimension, the Guji challenge the ‘modernist’ approach espoused by the state contending that while the state institutions present conservation from isolationist perspective, the local people have inherent wisdom and belief that holistically treat human and non-human nature because of their connection to the supernatural power. A view of a Guji elder substantiates this argument in that:

If we or our ancestors didn’t care for the animals, wouldn’t it be that they would have been perished long time ago? Who cared for them before the coming of the state? Who cared for them 50 years ago? It was our grandparents, our parents and ourselves. But, these people [the park authorities] came yesterday [recently] and began telling us what to do and what not to do. We rather know how to live with the animals. We care for the animals as we do for our livestock not because of their order but because of orders we received from our Waaqaa through our ancestors. We care for them so that our cattle would multiply (interview with Gaga, April 2011).

The Guji challenge state's paternalistic approaches in which it imposes what to do and what not to do. In development spheres as well, successive Ethiopian regimes had similar views on pastoralist communities. For instance, pastoralist areas were noted as threats to the national security as a result of their trans-border movements and infiltration of small arms. As a result, they faced heavy forces of suppression in the hands of the central state. On the contrary, the country heavily depends on pastoral communities for its export items like hides. Since 1991, the federal arrangement produced more of sedentary lifestyle based on more permanent and less flexible boundaries (Hagmann and Mulugeta, 2008). Such differential treatment of livelihood engagements that represents some activities as more preferred than others prompts one to ask whether the constitutional provisions are really translated into practice. As evidenced in 2004/05, after the Guji refused to move to the proposed resettlement site, the police force of the SNNP regional state forcefully displaced them burning their huts and confiscating their properties. Ironically, Ethiopia's federal constitution determines that "Ethiopian pastoralists have the right to free land for grazing and cultivation as well as the right not to be displaced from their own lands" (FDRE 1995, Art. 40).

In the process of transferring the management of the park to APF in 2004/05, the SNNP regional state government convened several meetings with representatives from Gamo Gofa zone, Amaro district, park authorities and regional bureau of agriculture. However, except in one meeting, no representatives from Oromia regional state were availed. To make the rhetoric of participation more questionable, there was no genuine involvement of local communities in the planning of resettlement program not least in the management of the park. Informants from both Guji and Koore communities argue that they were informed about the resettlement through local government authorities as inevitable government policy of development. One Guji informant remarks that;

We don't know if this government is really a government of the people or government of animals. Animals were better treated than our children, our livestock and ourselves in the past. We thought this government [EPRDF] would improve our conditions but still no change. They came and told us to go to Abulo Alfacho or elsewhere in Oromia. But we have nowhere to go. This is our ancestral land (interview with Danbala Badacha, May 2011).

Besides their discontent on exclusion in terms of participation in decision making, members of local communities expressed their dissatisfaction on the failed promise related to benefit sharing. Although involvement in ecotourism is not the primary motive of the people, particularly the elders and women, they still question that there is no benefit trickled down from this sector. In the Guji village in Ergansa – a village bordering the park on eastern side, children were observed attending primary school in huts made of wood and grass, were sitting on stones. There is no road connecting the village to the nearest market. The local people had to travel three to four days when they want to take their livestock and other goods to the market. Besides the challenges this invokes in connection to time and energy of the people, it also reduces the price of livestock to be sold as the animals lose weight along the way without enough food and water. The other risky option for the local Guji people to get access to market is traveling on Lake Abaya by the traditional boat. The passengers risk their lives by crocodile and waves that sink the boat. Although the park authorities and other government officials used to tell the people that the income from the park through ecotourism will be used to provide social services to the local people, such promise remained unrealistic. Rather, the park authority sees the local people as threats to the park and works its level best to denounce all their activities labeling them as poachers and criminals.

At this junction, it is imperative to note that the official narratives of development and conservation that has been 'emulated' by successive regimes in Ethiopia contrast with local practical contexts (Clapham, 2006). As Clapham argues, the attempts of emulating foreign development discourses failed in Ethiopia mainly because it lacked harmonization with local contexts and by and large has been exclusionary of local traditions, customs and practices (2006). In this line, I would argue that the state version of development and conservation in the case of 'ecotourism' scheme in Nech Sar national park confronts with local conceptions and in the process brings different levels of contestation, negotiation and display of power positions between different actors involved – the state and its agencies on the one hand and local actors on the other. However, it is worthy to single out the heterogeneity of actors in each category. Among the state category for example, Oromia regional state persistently demonstrated its positions supporting the local Guji claims for entitlement. In 2004/05, the regional government was given a responsibility to facilitate the resettlement of Guji Oromo into Oromia region. However, according to claims from SNNPR regional state authorities, particularly officials in Amaro district and Gamo Gofa zone – the two major actors in park affairs – the resettlement was delayed by reluctance of Oromia regional state. The views from Oromia questions the territorial reconfiguration of the park itself claiming that it was supposed to be administered under the region building its claim on Guji's historical settlement in the area. This poses inter-regional conflict of interests on the governance of the park and the people surrounding it. Because of lack of institutional set-up to solve such inter-regional conflicts, except the Ministry of Federal Affairs, the federal arrangement seems to function through strong intervention of the federal government. That is why the park management has been swinging between private company, SNNPR government and lastly the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority. Office turnover and shifting conditions of management structures have obstructed consistency in management approach and produced mistrust on the part of the local people on whom to account for in cases of breaches in formal or informal agreements.

Another important aspect of the confrontation is its resultant consequence in changing local people's attitude towards the park and prompting them to seek alternative mechanisms of securing their rights. According to James Scott (1990), the powerless would opt to hidden transcripts or hidden forms of resistance under conditions of domination. Likewise, as the domination of state apparatus continues to be stronger and stronger deploying coercive forces, the local people switch differently in covert and overt contexts. For example, they talk the words of the state (development and conservation) in public spaces or with a researcher before rapport establishment. Their defiance of the state programs is evinced through acts of breaking park laws and discussions among members of the group. As signs of contesting the park boundaries, cattle trespass, hunting in the park and collecting forest resources are a few of acts conducted at night. More importantly, scouts employed from local communities also switch between the state and their members contextually. They are paid their salary by the government but they have also strong social networks with the local communities. Besides their connection through kinship and marriage, they depend on the people for much of their livelihood. Depending on government salary does not sustain the scouts and their family. As a result, they keep considerable number of livestock with their kin who live close to the park. As a result, the scouts find themselves in dilemma in the confrontation between the state/park authorities and the local people. As one scout mentioned on conditions of anonymity, they conform to both state and local obligations differently. For instance, when they encounter hunters or cattle trespassers in the park territory, they chase the 'intruders' but report to the officials that the locals escaped the attempts of capture.

Elders from the local people argue that government intervention through so-called development and conservation schemes by evicting the people from their customary had changed the way local people; particularly the youth relate themselves with the park. Unlike in the past when the people considered the wildlife as part of their environment to be cared for, the distinction created by the state between the park and the people has brought a reconstruction of identity among the youth in which they identify the park and wildlife as foes. It can, therefore, be argued that any development program that excludes local values, norms and practices risks its missions. The 'ecotourism' project in Nech Sar national park has not only excluded the local people from their land by criminalizing their customary rights but it created a new hostile relationship between the people and the park. The ultimate effect of such top-down and non-participatory development and conservation program is destructive both to the people and the park resources.

CONCLUSION

In Ethiopia development and conservation models have been 'emulated' from more developed countries with the presumption that similar models would be replicated as they functioned in the host countries. Although adopting development models is not a cause of failure by itself, as it transformed Japan's development to the expected end since the late 19th century for example, the politics of 'emulation' demands consideration of local contexts at best (Clapham, 2006). In the Nech Sar national park case, there are contesting views on conceptions of development and conservation. The Ethiopian state has adopted the western approaches of nature conservation and development through 'ecotourism' that was derived from the protectionist perspectives of colonial period in Africa. This perspective not only excludes local people from their customary land rights, but it denigrates local knowledge of resource governance, management and conservation practices. As a result, the state 'development' and 'conservation' programs have created a hostile relationship between the people and the park and threatens the lives of the people and sustainability of the resources in the park, particularly the wildlife for the protection of which the park was initially established.

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