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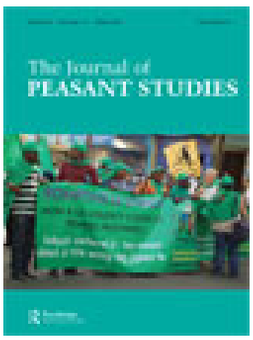

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'Civilizing' the pastoral frontier: land grabbing, dispossession and coercive agrarian development in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes frontier dynamics of land dispossessions in Ethiopia's pastoral lowland regions. Through a case study of two sedentarization schemes in South Omo Valley, we illustrate how politics of coercive sedentarization are legitimated in the 'civilizing' impetus of 'improvement schemes' for 'backward' pastoralists. We study sedentarization schemes that are implemented to evict pastoralist communities from grazing land to be appropriated by corporate investors. It is argued that frontier imaginations of pastoral lowlands legitimate coercive practices of 'emptying' the lowlands for investments. 'Improvement schemes' enroll private investors and enterprises affiliated with Ethiopia's ruling party in the politics of 'thickening' state presence in the pastoral frontier. Agricultural extension packages serve to expand state control over sedentarized pastoralists and make lowland resources more extractable, for investors and for the ruling regime.

KEYWORDS

Ethiopia; frontier; sedentarization; pastoralism; improvement; development

1. Introduction

> I assure the people of South Omo, especially the pastoralists, that the time of losing your cattle or life because of the Omo flood is over. In the coming five years there will be a very big irrigation project and related agricultural development in this zone. I promise you that, even though this area is known as backward in terms of civilization, it will become an example of rapid development. Meles Zenawi, former Ethiopian Prime Minister, speaking at the Pastoral Day Festival in Jinka, South Omo Zone, Ethiopia, 25 January 2011 (Zenawi 2011, 2)

In his speech to pastoralists in southern Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi delivers a portrayal of the federal government as the ultimate agent of civilization, engineer of modernist projects, and redeemer of pastoralist people. The government, he claims, is 'saving' pastoralists from their 'backwardness'. Zenawi thereby mobilizes a civilizing narrative that intends to manage and modernize the 'backward' pastoralist subjects at the margins of the state (Tache and Oba 2009; Markakis 2011; Makki 2012, 2014; Tache 2013). The pastoralist lifestyle is considered an 'archaic' mode of production, a remnant of a 'pre-modern' past.[1] And yet, the lowlands are also imagined as resource-rich areas awaiting modernist

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[1]Ironically, in this civilizing narrative, the Prime Minister portrayed Omo River as a threat to the indigenous pastoralist communities in the region, although several scholars have documented the cultural and economic entanglements of pastoral

technologies, models and experts from the state to be transformed into productive spaces, whose resources are converted into extractable commodities (Turton 2011; Hagmann and Korf 2012; Lavers 2012a, 2017; Korf, Hagmann, and Emmenegger 2015; Mosley and Watson 2016). The state portrays the lowlands as a *frontier*, which is 'empty' but 'full' (Watts 1992; Bridge 2001; Tsing 2005; Korf, Hagmann, and Doevenspeck 2013; Eilenberg 2014; Li 2014): empty of people and proper use, but full of potential. This frontier imagination has made Ethiopia's pastoralist lowlands one of the hotspots in Africa's land transfer to domestic and foreign agri-business investors in the global land rush since 2008 (Rahmato 2009, 2014; Abbink 2011; Makki 2012, 2014; Lavers 2012a, 2012b; Woyts and Kilama 2016). The land rush has in turn accelerated the process of removing pastoralists from potentially valuable land resources in Ethiopia's pastoralist lowland regions (Markakis 2011; Chinigo 2014; Korf, Hagmann, and Emmenegger 2015).

This paper argues that these frontier dynamics not only trigger violent practices of emptying Ethiopia's pastoral lowlands for large-scale investors, but provide impetus for a 'thickening of the state' (Côte and Korf 2018) in the pastoral lowlands: the state 'thickens' through the presence of police and military giving protection to these investors and through implementing *new* technologies of governing pastoral subjects under the rubric of development and 'improvement' (Li 2007), whereby the state apparatus and the ruling party work hand in hand with private investors. In the pastoral lowlands, this new technology is settling and sedentarizing pastoralists in relocation sites and providing them with agricultural extension programs: As pastoralists are moved to new places and settled there to shift to a sedentary lifestyle, the grazing land becomes emptied of people and can be appropriated by the state and investors affiliated to the regime. Agricultural extension packages designed to help pastoralists start a sedentary life serve to expand state control over lowland populations and to make lowland resources legible and extractable, both for investors and for the state and ruling regime. We show how the present Ethiopian Peoples' revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime thereby exports its coercive agrarian politics from the highlands (Segers et al. 2009; Lefort 2012; Chinigo 2014; Emmenegger 2016) to the pastoral lowlands as a mechanism to thicken the state – making these lowlands into the *last* frontier of state expansion (Markakis 2011).

Our material unsettles Ferguson's influential argument that neoliberal investors 'thin out' the state in Africa in a bubble or space of exception (Ferguson 2005), thereby compromising and undermining state sovereignty in favor of multinational companies. Ferguson's sweeping claims have meanwhile been qualified: a growing literature shows that land grabs are often part of a longer history of coercive agrarian politics (Peluso and Lund 2011; Wily 2012; Cotula 2013; Cordoba and Jensen 2014; Li 2014, 2015). This also applies to Ethiopia: land grabbing in Ethiopia's pastoral lowlands takes the form of 'state-mediated commercialization' (Lavers 2012b, 2016), *pace* Ferguson: agribusiness deals provide a mechanism to thicken state presence in the pastoralist lowlands rather than to thin it out. Agricultural investments in peripheral regions enhance the state's capability to control people, resources and revenue streams, and by implication consolidate its power (Lavers 2016; Lavers and Boamah 2016). This consolidation is accomplished not only through asserting de facto authority over land (Lavers 2016, 1098) or the violence of a

societies with the rhythms of the Omo River, a coexistence that has been lived for centuries, long before the advent of the Ethiopian state to the lowlands (Turton 2002; Strecker 2014).

'state of exception' (Hagmann and Korf 2012), but through the seemingly 'innocent' instrument of agricultural extension packages and its everyday practices of coercion and control.

Using a case study of sedentarization and agricultural extension programs in the agro-pastoralist South Omo Valley, we illustrate how the thickening of the state is actually taking place through forced dispossession and coercive sedentarization practices to absorb 'underutilized' spaces into 'productive' uses for the state. We investigate: (1) how frontier imaginations justify and legitimate the forceful imposition of sedentarization programs in our study site; (2) how private investors collaborate with government officials in 'disciplining' pastoralists, and (3) how agricultural extension packages, implemented by development agents, become *new* technologies of rule, disciplining pastoralists and extracting rents from their meager incomes. Finally, (4) we allude to the tactics of resistance to, or rather evasion of, this state presence (Scott 1985, 1990, 2009; Li 2007) that pastoralists resort to and that undermine some of the state's attempts to thicken its presence.

Fieldwork was conducted in Benna-Tsemai district in South Omo zone between February and July 2015 and in January 2016 by the first and second authors. The study was done on the Tsemai agro-pastoralist communities who were resettled during the process of leasing out their customary grazing lands to three cotton plantation investors, namely Omo Sheleko, Nassa and Sagla agribusiness companies. These sites have been selected to demonstrate the nexus between large-scale agribusiness projects, extractive agrarian politics and the thickening of the state. The three cotton plantations are owned by investors from highland Ethiopia, with some affiliated to the ruling party. The investors employ migrant workers while the indigenous communities are almost totally excluded from the system on the pretext that they are not familiar with farming. The investigation focused on three resettlement sites – Enchete, Duma and Gisma villages – to which about 509 households of the agro-pastoral Tsemai ethnic group have been sedentarized since 2011, and to which some 200 further households have been made to move, particularly to the Enchete village, during the early 1990s.

We conducted in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participatory mapping as major methods of data collection. Thirty-seven research subjects (from local communities, agribusiness companies and local government authorities) participated in interviews, while five focused group discussions were arranged exclusively with local communities resettled adjacent to the three agribusiness projects. More specifically, 27 respondents were from the Tsemai ethnic group who were resettled due to the land transfer to the companies, three respondents were managers of the three cotton plantations (two from Amhara and one from Tigray), and five were government authorities at different levels of state structure – region, zone, district and village levels. While the government officials were selected because of their position relevant to investment permission and land transfer, local communities mainly composed of elders (men and women) were selected purposively based on their knowledge about the historical trajectories related to state expansion to the area, resource expropriation and other issues pertinent to the study.

Cramer et al. (2016) have described well the tensions and animosities that research critical of government interventions can produce in Ethiopia. Similar challenges emerged in our fieldwork. In our case, for example, it was difficult to collect data about the multiple connections between investors and the ruling party, or about the implication of regional political elites in the implementation of these schemes, as these topics were politically 'too hot'. Also, we often failed to gain access to government documents about resettlement

schemes. We concur with Cramer's conclusions that while this situation might constrain the collection of data, these processes of political interference in fieldwork are themselves part of the evidence for describing frontier dynamics.

2. Sedentarization, agrarian politics and regimes of extraction in Ethiopia

It is no coincidence that a significant amount of land that the Ethiopian state has enclosed and 'grabbed' to lease out to large-scale investors is located in the pastoralist lowlands. The government considered this land to be available for investment, because it had, in the government's perspective, not yet been properly utilized. Over successive political regimes, Ethiopia's highland elites, despite differences in approaches and political ideologies, have considered the lowland peripheries underdeveloped territories to be colonized and developed. This land is claimed on the premise that it is empty or underutilized and therefore can legitimately be appropriated by the government to submit it to more productive purposes.

Central to this representation of pastoral lowlands is the frontier imagination of '*terra nullius*' (Makki 2012, 2014) or '*herrenloses Land*' (Schmitt 1950[2], 171; cf. Hagmann and Korf 2012; Korf, Hagmann, and Emmenegger 2015). The *terra nullius* representation frames these pastoralist lowlands as 'underutilized' or 'unproductive', i.e. as not yet reaping the developmental potential inherent in this territory. *Terra nullius* is not painted as 'empty' territory in a strict sense: these pastoral landscapes are simply represented as being inhabited by people who are not 'civilized' enough to make 'proper' claims to the land: The land is considered *herrenlos* in the sense that its inhabitants are represented as not being governed by a legitimate ruler, or that no legitimate ruler would hold effective authority over these territories. In Ethiopia today, and in many other places of the global post-colony, the *terra nullius* claim – that the territory is not utilized 'properly' or to full potential – is used to justify violent practices of emptying the pastoral frontier to make its resources available for investment for non-pastoralist actors.

These highland elites – mainly the Amhara and Tigray absentee feudal lords under the imperial regime, the military officers under the *derg*, and the ethnically diverse co-opted elites under the EPRDF regime – denigrated the ways of life and culture of the people in the pastoralist frontier and treated them as kinds of 'internal colonies' (Markakis 2011; Turton 2011; Hagmann and Korf 2012; Korf, Hagmann, and Doevenspeck 2013; Fantini and Puddu 2016).[3] The practice of sedentarization (in the form of villagization)[4]

[2]Carl Schmitt, whose deeply reactionary and racist politics as 'Crown Jurist' of the Nazi regime needs mentioning here, used the term 'herrenlos' to explain the legitimation of colonial land appropriation (what he called *Landnahme*). While we do not share Schmitt's normative project, we nevertheless think that the term 'herrenlos' denotes succinctly the frontier dynamics through which intruders or colonisers deny indigenous populations the status of being legitimate rights holders – the land is without a legitimate 'master', and can therefore be forcefully and violently appropriated from these indigeneous inhabitants.

[3]In line with this logic, some scholars even went to the extent of depicting the people in the south, including those in South Omo Valley, as being close to nature, the 'Noble Savage' having only culture without history, in contrast to the north that had history (Ullendorff 1965). Of course, that resonates with Eric Wolf's critique of colonial representations of certain 'People without History' (Wolf 1997), only in this case, it is Ethiopians describing groups of their own Peoples as being without History.

[4]The 'villagization' program in Ethiopia is officially called *Mender Masebaseb*, which literally means 'collecting people to villages'. However, in the context of pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities, it denotes both villagization and sedentarization because by first collecting people to villages (villagization), it transforms or aims to transform pastoralism into sedentary agriculture (sedentarization).

by itself is an act of governing the behavior and practices of 'unruly' subjects through 'both force and a pedagogy of conversion intended to transform "unruly subjects" into lawful subjects of the state' (Das and Poole 2004, 9). This fixing in place – moving 'moving people' (pastoralists) into fixed sites (Pankhurst and Piguet 2009) – also serves to squeeze and confine pastoralists' use of their territories, which they customarily claim rights to. These territories are then appropriated to be available for agribusiness investments. By framing the pastoral lowlands as frontiers – unproductive and empty spaces but potentially rich in resources – agricultural investment, villagization and sedentarization programs have been important tools for central governments to 'cast themselves as heroes' (Mosley and Watson 2016, 455).

Congregating pastoralists into villages and prescribing a sedentary lifestyle is *sine qua non* to making them legible for the state (Scott 1998; Harawira 2005; Saugestad 2005; Li 2007). Government-supported investment programs have often come with what James Scott (1998) has called 'high-modernist' visions of a rational design of social order, making people and their environment 'legible' by re-ordering it administratively (Mosley and Watson 2016). Many of these improvement schemes, as Tania Li calls them (Li 2007), have legitimated large-scale displacement, resettlement and dispossession under the rubric of improving – modernizing, developing – the lives of those living at the 'margins of the state' (Das and Poole 2004, 9). And contrary to Ferguson's critical assertion, that Scott's framework has become redundant in a neoliberal age (Ferguson 2005), the development schemes that Scott reviewed in *Seeing like a state* (Scott 1998) resonate with past *and* current investment schemes in southern Ethiopia's lowlands, even though they might have neo-liberal elements by coopting private investors into the development plans (Mosley and Watson 2016).

Governmental practices of land grabbing, forced sedentarization and coercive agrarian politics have, indeed, a long history in Ethiopia (Rahmato 1984; Pauseweng and Zegeye 1994; McCann 1995; Zewde 2002). Following the conquest and incorporation of the southern, southwestern and eastern parts of the country into the Ethiopian Empire in the late nineteenth century, state predation and extraction of resources in the low-land agro-pastoral and shifting cultivation areas were exercised in the forms of tribute, taxes and other means of extraction such as livestock raiding and hunting for ivory (Cohen and Isaksson 1988; Donham 2002; Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008; Puddu 2016). A number of authors have argued that throughout successive political regimes – the imperial regime (1890s–1974), the military regime (1974–1991) and the current EPRDF government (1991–present) – the majority of Ethiopian peasants and pastoralists have experienced a state that extracts revenue from them (McCann 1995; Donham 2002; Abegaz 2005).

Successive political regimes in Ethiopia implemented large-scale agricultural development schemes in the pastoral lowlands, where land appeared to be underutilized by the indigenous populations and could be appropriated for such purposes (Pankhurst and Piguet 2009). The Haile Selassie regime (1930–1974) introduced large-scale agricultural projects in the 1960s, such as the Chillalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU), Wolayita Agricultural Development Unit (WADU), Awash Valley Agricultural Projects and Godey Agricultural Development Project (Kassa 2001; Clapham 2006; Hundie 2008; Müller-Mahn, Rettberg, and Getachew 2010). These programs, particularly the last two schemes, resulted in the displacement of local communities, but mostly failed in developmental terms (Betru 1975; Schulz 1981; Agricultural Extension Task Force 1994, Clapham

2006; Markakis 2011). The subsequent military regime of the *derg* (1974–1991) propagated a transformation of the country's economy through agricultural socialism and implemented villagization and collectivization programs that forced many peasants to abandon their customary land (Zewde 2002; Rahmato 2014). The *derg* also resettled, for example, large numbers of people from the over-populated and drought-affected northern part of the country (mainly Tigray and Wollo) to the southern peripheries (Gebre-Mariam 2005; Abeje 2009; Rahmato 2009).

In the post-1991 political order under the EPRDF rule, the government introduced the economic and rural development policy of Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization (ADLI), which allowed the regime to maintain a strong hand over the rural peasantry. More specifically, state ownership of land allows the government to have strong power over the peasantry to the extent of deciding what they should produce and how they ought to produce it (Dercon and Hill 2009; Rahmato 2009). In the pastoral lowlands, the EPRDF has renewed, since 2003, the military regime's resettlement program by relocating people from densely populated areas to the pastoralist lowland areas. When global demand for arable land rose after the 2007/2008 food crisis, the government decided to make land resources in the pastoralist frontiers available for large-scale agribusiness companies (Makki 2012; Lavers 2012a). This policy became further consolidated in the Ethiopian government's ambitious national Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) of 2010. The GTP proposed large-scale investment projects in the pastoralist lowlands, such as mega-dams, irrigation systems, sugarcane plantations and agribusinesses, as part of the government's plan to accelerate economic growth (Woldemariam and Gebresenbet 2014).

The South Omo Valley, our study site, has experienced a number of major development interventions, which have led to dispossession and resettlement of pastoralists (Buffavand 2016; Kamski 2016). Following the incorporation of the valley into the Ethiopian empire in the late nineteenth century, state expansion has been unfolding for over a century (Bassi 2011; Clack and Brittain 2011; Girke 2011). Successive Ethiopian regimes represented the Lower Omo as a 'wasteland' (Turton 2011) or pristine wilderness (Clack and Brittain 2011). This negated existing modes of resource use whereby pastoralist communities from surrounding highland areas used to move down to the valley as refuge for their livestock during droughts and for flood-retreat agriculture along the banks of Omo River (Turton 2011). Over the last two decades, the Ethiopian government has been heavily engaged in turning the Lower Omo into an industrialized irrigation site for biofuel production, sugarcane plantation and hydropower generation (Buffavand 2016; Kamski 2016).

This increased state presence in the pastoralist frontier is a new development compared to the persistent negligence of the region by successive regimes since the incorporation of the region into the Ethiopian empire in the late nineteenth century. According to Ivo Strecker who conducted fieldwork in the region for about four decades, state institutions were confined only to towns such as Jinka, Key-Afer and Omorate, with limited control over territories outside these towns except sporadic campaigns for collecting taxation and cattle raiding and served to contain major inter-group warfare (Strecker 2014). Under the EPRDF rule as well, the first two decades can be characterized as periods of administrative reordering in which the government used local elites through the model of ethnic federalism as a mechanism of slowly extending its power to the periphery.

In the case study that follows, we show some of the mechanisms through which development interventions in the Lower Omo Valley, in particular the sedentarization of

indigenous pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities, evince the thickening of state power – making (agro-) pastoral subjects and resources legible to the state in its lowland frontier. This process of sedentarization is implemented through newly designed technologies of government, most importantly the instrument of agricultural extension packages, which the government sells to pastoralists, including chemical fertilizers, improved seeds, pesticides and herbicides (Chinigo 2014). The government replicates a model implemented in the highland agriculturalist areas, particularly in Tigray – the home base of the ruling party – and Amhara regions (Segers et al. 2009; Lefort 2012). The agricultural extension packages are distributed through local development agents (DAs), who have, as David Chinigo has powerfully shown for the highland areas (Chinigo 2014), a double role as technical extension experts and political agents who define what pastoral subjects are allowed and not allowed to do. Thereby, the government implements a technology of government previously unknown in the pastoral lowlands.

3. The case study: agricultural extension programs in South Omo

This case study of two sedentarization schemes in South Omo illustrates (1) how frontier imaginations legitimate dispossessing pastoralists; (2) how investors are implicated in disciplining practices under the rubric of improvement; and (3) how agricultural extension packages are coercively implemented. The case also alludes to (4) the marginal space left to evade these coercive practices.

3.1. The study sites

In 2011, a sedentarization program (*mender masebaseb*) was introduced in South Omo to provide socio-economic services for pastoral and agro-pastoral communities in order to transform the livelihoods of these societies to sedentary agriculture. This program received funding from the World Bank and the Ethiopian government and is implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and its respective bureaus in SNNPR[5] State (personal communication with SNNPR official, April 2015). According to an official in the Pastoralist Bureau of SNNPR, nearly 5000 households were sedentarized in four districts of the South Omo zone, namely Dassanech, Nyangatom, Solamago and Benna-Tsemai, between 2011 and 2014. Although we could not verify this government figure, our own observations in these sites indicate that the sedentarization program has moved very large numbers of the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities into villages.[6]

Our analysis focuses on two sites in Benna-Tsemai district: (1) Enchete village and (2) Duma-Gisma villages. These sites illustrate our argument that 'land grabbing' has already been taking place for some time, but received new impetus after 2008. The villages were founded to make space available for Omo Sheleko Agro-Industry, a private commercial company. In the 1990s, Omo Sheleko was granted about 5490 hectares of land to grow cotton, and diverted part of the Woyito River for irrigation purposes. Two hundred households were moved to Enchete village in the early 1990s. They lost access to the Woyito

[5]Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR).
[6]Part of the difficulty in verifying the data is related to government authorities' reluctance to provide documents related to such programs.

River, on which the agro-pastoralist communities in the region depended for growing sorghum and maize through flood-retreat irrigation system (Turton 2002).[7] Nearly 509 households were collected to the villages Duma and Gisma between 2011 and 2014 as part of the new large-scale program of sedentarization (*mender masebaseb*). These communities moved to the newly established villages, adjacent to Nassa and Sagla Cotton Farms, in anticipation of getting water from the plantation farms to irrigate their fields. In 2009, Nassa Cotton Farm was allocated nearly 2000 hectares of the land that Tsemai people used for flood retreat agriculture and for grazing livestock. A third cotton agro-industrial company – Sagla Cotton Farm Plc. – began cultivating cotton in 2012 on 1500 hectares of land (Figure 1).

3.2. Frontier imaginations and the 'dark side' of improvement

Government officials at regional, zone and district levels use frontier imaginations of 'empty, but full' to explain the rationale and benevolent character of the sedentarization program to improve pastoralists' livelihoods. As one of the higher officials at the regional level in the bureau of investment at the SNNPR explained to us:

> The investment schemes in pastoralist areas of our country are part of the government's broader program of transforming the economy of the country to the status of Middle Income status. Most of the time, the federal government is mandated with leasing out *empty* and *underutilized* lands to foreign and domestic investors. Because the projects are for the purpose of *improving* the life of local people and transforming the country's economy, we also collaborate with the federal government and facilitate resettlement of the people. (Government official in bureau of investment, Hawassa, December 2016; our translation from Amharic, our emphasis).

The official justifies the resettlement of (agro-) pastoralists and the land appropriation for investors as a necessary step to enhance pastoralist communities' economic transformation. Similarly, the head of Agriculture and Pastoralist Development office of Benna-Tsemai district told us

> According to the [Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP)], the country wants to transform the life of these pastoralist people to better and modern life. Moreover, the country wants to benefit from the rich untapped resources in our zone. We are rich in fertile land. We have big rivers for dams. We have also livestock that can be traded in the international market. However, the land stayed for many centuries without proper utilization. I can say *it has been an abandoned resource for too long*. That is why we should collect the people into villages and provide them with good social services. The government or investors can *use the empty land* for different development projects. (Head, Agriculture and Pastoralist Development Office, Key Afer, April 2015; our translation from Amharic, our emphasis).

This government official uses the empty-but-full logic of frontier expansion, when he talks about 'untapped, but rich' resources, about land that is not 'properly utilized' and about 'abandoned' resources. He is also very explicit that the empty land is used for large-

[7]Our informants insisted that, in the early 1990s, Tsemay pastoralists initially thought the resettlement was genuinely intended for their betterment and they moved to the village (anonymous informant from Enchete Village, May 2015). Local government officials and Omo Shekele promised to provide infrastructure and social services to improve their ways of living. Once they left their homes, local authorities told them not to graze their livestock in their former customary grazing area because it was given to the investor, which deprived them of their ability and right to derive benefits from the grazing land.

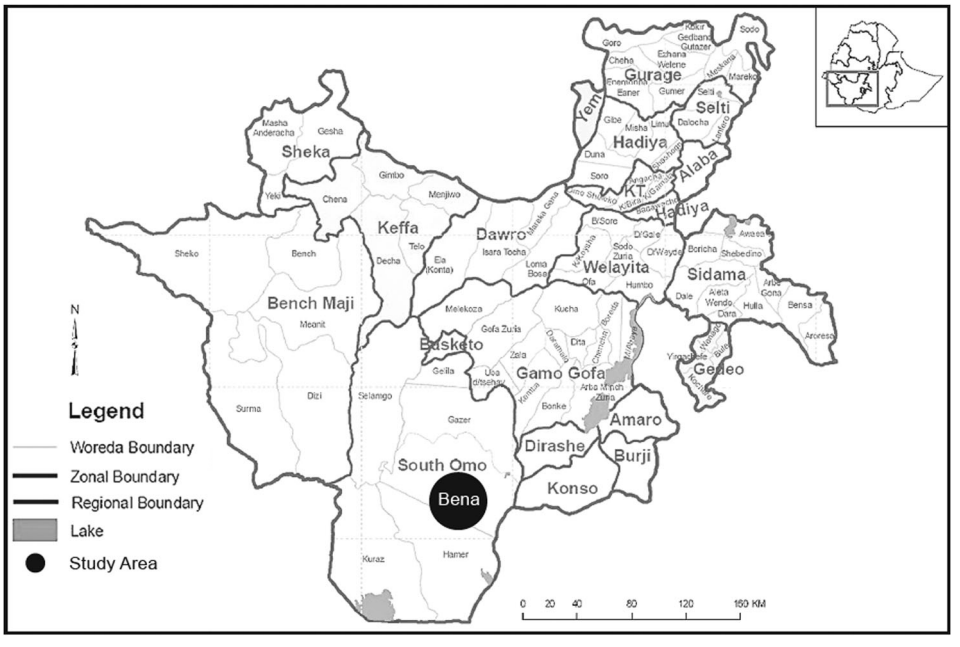

Figure 1. Map of southern nations, nationalities and peoples' regional state (drawn by Martin Steinmann, based on the following base map: http://www.ethiodemographyandhealth.org/SNNPR.html, accessed on 2 March 2016).

scale investments in line with the national ambitions of the GTP. Implicit in this formulation is the claim to take away the pastureland from the lowlanders to transform it into more productive use in the service of the nation ('can use the empty land for different development projects'), which is, at the same time, couched in benevolent terms ('provide people with services').

The same official explained the 'civilizing' mission of the government to 'modernize' pastoral communities, if needed, even against their own will:

> Our country is … working hard to catch up with the fast growing countries. However, our zone is particularly lagging behind. The culture and ways of life of our people in this zone do not encourage transformation and modernization. […]. Pastoralists do not worry about their contribution to the country's development. They don't even worry about the improvement of their own lives. As government representatives, we have the responsibility to develop and modernize these people. […] We provide them with social services such as water, education and healthcare once they are fully sedentarized. […]. *Therefore, we should overcome resistance from the people and convince them to move to new villagization centers*. (Government official, Key Afer, April 2015; our translation from Amharic, our emphasis).

This statement needs some unpacking: first, the official hints at the stubborn 'backwardness' of the people in that place ('their way of life does not encourage modernization', 'they do not worry about improvement'), to justify the government's civilizing mission ('we have the responsibility to modernize these people') and benevolent intention ('facilitate service provision'). The key point comes at the end of this quote – that resistance to this civilizing mission 'should be overcome' and people should be 'convinced'. Many

officials use the label 'anti-development' as a proxy for resistance to the government, the ruling party and its ambitious plans, in order to justify coercive action against any resistance.

It is not surprising, then, to observe that sedentarization was conducted in a form of what Turton (2002, 110) describes as 'deceitful and nominal participation'. Various accounts by our informants illustrate the practice of deceitful participation cloaked in unfulfilled promises. Elders from the Duma and Gisma sites recalled how the government encroached on their land, first during the military regime and since then under the developmental state regime, as one elder from Duma describes below:

> The land in the current farm of the Omo Sheleko, Sagla and Nassa investments was our home and our grazing land before the investors came. […] Government people told us we should pack what we have and come to this village. We didn't have any option therefore we came. Government officials had deaf ears to our questions. They promised us that many things would be fulfilled for us but nothing [came of these promises]. The Nassa project owner always tells us that his project is just like a crawling baby [that needs constant support]. He claims that he cannot support us until his project grows. We do not know for how many years his project crawls but he tells us the same reason always. […] It has been many years now but we have never received any support from him. (Anonymous informant, May 2015, Duma; our translation from Tsemay).

The elder in the above quote expresses the carrot-and-stick approach that the officials implement: they give promises, largely unfulfilled but steadily repeated, while they make clear that the pastoralists have no space to negotiate the sedentarization program itself, because the land has to be vacated to make place for agribusiness investments. A chairperson of one of the villages explained that the people were only given a few weeks' notice of the move to the resettlement areas. According to this informant, the district authorities insisted that there was a strict order from top government officials at the federal and regional levels to move the people to new villages, and that nobody had the right to question it.

Our informants told us that officials insisted that they should give up their backward practices and turn to sedentary agriculture. But this form of land use, our informants explained, was not sustainable. An elder from Gisma village described how the sedentarization program undermined the livelihood strategies of pastoralists:

> Before we were moved, we were able to use the flood silt for agriculture around the banks of Woyito River. *But development agents, politicians and investors insisted that our agricultural practice was backward. They told us to modernize it through agricultural extension programs and by the support from investors*. They convinced us to come to this place. But we got nothing new. No water for our crops and no pasture for our livestock. As you can see my farm over there, crops are dying due to lack of rain. I have been waiting for the rain, but this year no rain yet. Now, I continue herding my goats and abandon the farms. (Anonymous elder, Gisma village, April 2015; our translation from the Tsemay, our emphasis)

Another informant explained to us how the new program leads to impoverishment, because the allocated land was too small and there were no irrigation facilities. The officials put the blame for crop failure on the pastoralists who should simply abandon their livestock and apply the government's extension packages, but the informant considered this a way of life that is not dependable:

> After the investor took our land, the government provided us with 0.5 ha of land per each household regardless of family size. For instance, I have 10 children. I know others with 20 children and four wives. In my view, it is insane to think that this small hectare of land can feed this huge family given that our agriculture depends on the rain. *The DAs and government authorities preach that we should abandon cattle herding and take what they call agricultural extension packages to improve our living*. How can we completely abandon our livestock? This is completely impossible. They are our life security more than farming. We don't get good harvest from farming. As village manager, I should implement government policies and programs, but I am not convinced myself about the program. (Manager of one of the villages, May 2015; our translation from Amharic, our emphasis)

Moreover, these informants told us the government promised to alleviate the persistent water shortages by diverting the Woyito River to their villages, as the investors did for their projects. In Gisma village, government officials had stated that the villages had been established adjacent to the cotton plantation projects in order to enhance technology and skills transfer, and to facilitate access to water for irrigation (anonymous informant from Gisma village). Our field observation and information from, local informants revealed, however, that people received water from the irrigation projects of the companies only at times when the projects did not need extra water, and they discharged excess water to the neighboring villages as waste disposal rather than for community service. The sedentarized pastoralists in the newly created villages therefore had to rely on the rare rainfall for their crops. Even worse, investors discharge water to the communities irregularly, for example during field visits of government authorities and most often during rainy seasons. This practice does not provide water when it is needed for cultivation. Rather, it had negative effects: it created swampy breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

These statements show how the government forcibly removed pastoralists from the land they had used for grazing under the pretense of improving their lives. Pastoralists were forcibly resettled and felt they had no option to resist the government, even though they did not find the alternatives offered sustainable. Instead, government officials insist they should cultivate the land using agricultural extension packages provided by the government.

3.3. Thickening state presence through agricultural extension packages

The agricultural extension packages are a new instrument that did not exist in South Omo prior to the implementation of the relocation and sedentarization program. They are part of the government's attempt to transform pastoralists into agriculturalist subjects and to cast their web of control onto the pastoral society. These packages have been very unpopular among the pastoralists, who consider them to be extracting their resources rather than improving their livelihoods. In this section, we show that the implementation of agricultural extension packages aims at thickening state presence and the intrusion of the ruling party into the local society of the pastoral frontier.

Agricultural extension packages (chemical fertilizers, improved seeds, pesticides and herbicides) are sold to newly sedentarized agro-pastoralist communities by DAs. These DAs serve as the frontline force of the local government authorities for enhancing control over rural residents. The delivery of these extension packages helps the extension of party–state powers in which DAs are the main vectors of state–society relations (Chinigo 2014; Planel 2014). As Planel (2014) has shown, the DAs are strong agents of state power in

channeling down not only agricultural extension packages but also the ruling party's political and economic strategies.

What Chinigo (2014) describes for the highlands applies also to our study sites in the lowlands: the DAs' technical knowledge is limited and they often know little of the local context, but have double subjectivities as government administrators and technical experts. Most DAs do not have the technical expertise to apply their knowledge to the variations of local conditions and to provide meaningful advice according to the site-specific needs of farmers. While they try to gain legitimacy through their limited technical skills, their connection to the government and their exercise of coercive power in forcing the local people to buy the extension packages brings them into tension with local communities. They simply distribute the extension packages and recover full or partial payment of the cost in cash.

Because the packages are so unpopular, the DAs employ strategies and tactics to convince people to buy the extension packages, for example by co-opting the traditional chiefs called *Bogolko*. Among the Benna and Tsemai ethnic groups, *Bogolko* traditionally serve as highly respected chiefs as well as rainmakers who have at their disposal considerable powers of blessing, cursing and sanctioning. DAs and other government authorities engage *Bogolko* leaders to convince their people to accept the government's sedentarization program. Often, these Bogolko are bribed into supporting the government authorities' attempts to convince pastoralists to accept the sedentarization programs and to buy the extension packages, for example by providing them with material privileges. Some of these co-opted elites were given special support for their farms and were later labeled 'model farmers'.

Furthermore, DAs mobilize the full force of the local government and party set-up, whereby administrative arrangements and organizational structures of the ruling party go hand in hand through a series of arrangements, called '1 to 5', 'development army/groups' (*limat budin*) and party cells (*meseretawi dirijit*).[8] Both structures are organized in a cascade of clusters of residents or party members in a nested system of small groups. One DA reported to us how he mobilized this system: the leader of each 'development group' identifies and reports to the village chairperson or to the DAs about members of his/her group who resist taking agricultural extension packages. The interface between different levels of party structures and administrative arrangements at local level is formed by assigning members of the *hiwas* and *meseretawi dirijit* leadership of '1 to 5' and 'development' groups, respectively. Through this mechanism, individuals who refuse to accept the agricultural extension packages, even for reasons of economic hardship, are identified and branded as 'anti-development'. As a result, people live under a state of suspicion and insecurity, because administrative officials take strong measures,

[8]The '1 to 5' groupings and 'development groups' are organized by clustering all residents of a village into smaller administrative units. Accordingly, the '1 to 5' are composed of five to seven members whereby the leader of the group (commonly called '*ternafi*', which literally means hook), catches disobedient members within the group and reports them to the 'development group', locally called *ye limat budin/ye limat serawit*. 'Development groups' are formed when seven to 10 clusters of '1 to 5' arrangements come together. The leaders of a development group and of '1 to 5' groups are always members of the ruling party (EPRDF). The party structure, on the other hand, begins from the smallest unit, called '*hiwas*', which literally means cell. The number of *hiwas* members ranges from seven to 45 individuals, with each *hiwas* having its leaders. Different *hiwas* groups form *meseretawi dirijit* (roughly translated as 'party pillars'), which also constitutes the village administration. While Chinigo (2014), Emmenegger (2016), Lefort (2012) and Segers et al. (2009) all report from the highlands, we found these structures now being implemented in the pastoralist lowlands.

including imprisonment and fines, against 'change-resistant' individuals with an 'anti-development' attitude. The double subjectivity (Chinigo 2014) of the DAs as technical experts in the extension program and as political agents who represent the agenda of the government (and the ruling party) at the grass-roots level has thereby shifted strongly toward the latter. In the months prior to the May 2015 national election, for example, many DAs stopped their technical jobs and became fully engaged in organizing public meetings for the election campaign – on behalf of the EPRDF, the ruling party.

Some of the DAs – those who belong to the local community – therefore find themselves in an awkward position: they have to implement impractical and coercive policies toward their own people, even though they had high motivations to change the lives of their people for the better. These groups of the DAs are mostly young graduates originating from the local community. In doing their job, they find themselves trapped in the carrot-and-stick approach of their superiors. The government has included criteria in promotion decisions for DAs that include the amount of agricultural inputs distributed and the amount of money collected from local people, based on progress reports that the DAs write. But the criteria do not consider practical increases in production and productivity in the villages. Those DAs who are found reluctant to coerce people in the implementation (distributing extension packages and collecting fees) are labeled as 'anti-development' and risk being seriously punished. One DA explained to us the pressures he felt between wanting to serve his people and the 'stick' he felt from his superiors, which has very serious repercussions for him:

> It was my very interest to serve my people after I graduated from college. In actual practice, however, I found out that the extension program is more political rhetoric than based on scientific evidence. It is unworkable because: first, fertilizers are not needed for our village because the soil is very fertile. Second, as you can see from the empty irrigation canal over there, the government didn't provide water for irrigation. We know that fertilizer is just like stone if it doesn't melt instantly. Thirdly, when we oppose the practice as impractical, they torture us psychologically, detain us, and deduct from our monthly salary. Last year, I was detained for 15 days only because of my stand against the extension practice. Now as you can see I tell the people everything the politicians want us to say and I am doing what I am not convinced to do only because I have no other option. (Anonymous DA, June 2015; our translation from Amharic).

A DA's performance is evaluated based on the amount of fertilizers distributed and money collected in return. On the basis of these reports, villages, DAs, districts and individuals are ranked as 'developmental' and 'model' and thus promotion and other privileges follow, regardless of whether or not productivity has been increased. As the head of a certain 'model village' states:

> Last year, my village was selected as a model village and I was also nominated as model village administrator and participated in big meetings with higher officials. I traveled to many parts of the country. I even attended a big meeting where the Prime Minister attended – this year's Pastoralist Day Festival in Afar. They used me and my village as demonstration, but the selection was not based on changes in the life of my people. Rather, it was because we collected the highest amount of money from these poor people as fee for fertilizers and improved seeds. They gave special inputs (large plots of land, technical supports and water from the irrigation canal) to a certain individual. He got good harvest. His field was video recorded and they used his field as if everything in our village is like his. But everything is false. (Village Chairperson, June 2015; our translation from Amharic)

At the same time, a number of DAs consider the pastoralist communities to be resourceful people from whom taxation and payment for agricultural extension packages can be extracted, and these DAs implement the program aggressively. We observed this practice during a weekly village market in Bra'ile where agro-pastoralists from different villages of Benna-Tsemai district (Gisma, Duma, Enchete, Bola and Bra'ile) meet for exchange of their commodities. Three DAs from Enchete busily recovered the fees for the extension packages from the people the moment the latter had sold their goats. One DA whom we interviewed in the market where he was collecting fertilizer fees from locals, said, 'These pastoralist people have money, they are rich but they do not use their wealth. The government should gain income from the resources and in return it gives them other services such as schools' (DA in Enchete village, April 2015).

As we observed during our fieldwork, the DAs prompt the local people to purchase fertilizers and improved seeds, and they coercively collect fertilizer repayments. Such coercion is reflected in the following expression from a Tsemai elder:

> These DAs are not different from the police. They always come to our home and order us to collect fertilizers. Once we receive it, they come again in few months to collect the money – the loan. Although we tell them we didn't get yield, they force us to sell our goats or cattle and pay it back. (Anonymous informant, February 2016; translated from Tsemai language)

Another elder from Gisma village explained:

> The DAs simply take money in the name of fertilizers, improved seeds and many others. They ask money, money and money. These DA people always talk about paying money for this and that. They expect us to give up herding and turn to agriculture. They don't care even if we give up and die tomorrow. (Anonymous elder, Gisma village, April 2015)

Many people feel they have no option of rejecting the extension packages, at least publicly. The government determines the price of the extension packages through its conglomerate company, Guna Business Group Plc., which is the sole provider of fertilizers, improved seeds, pesticides and herbicides to peasants all over the country. The local people fear the conglomerate is an arm not only of the government, but of the ruling party itself. If a DA assesses a household to lack the financial capacity to pay in cash, the head of the household is forced to take credit from Omo Micro Finance (OMF). People complain that OMF imposes high interest rates of nearly 10 percent per annum, while the interest rate from banks is only 5.5 percent. One former village chairperson described this situation as follows:

> The price of fertilizers is increasing from year to year. In two years, it has increased by over 560 Birr and now reached 1570 Birr per 100 kg. The people pay for fertilizers by selling their goats. At times when our crops are destroyed due to lack of rain, the government does not compensate us. Rather, the DAs ask us to pay the fees for the extension package and they don't care whether our crops are destroyed or whether we get a good yield. Their major task is reporting the amount of money they collect from people. When we are not able to pay, they ask us to sell our goats or to take loan from Omo Micro Finance. Life is miserably tough in this district. (Former village chairperson, July 2015; our translation from Amharic)

The implementation of extension packages thereby thickens the presence of the government and the ruling party, and, at the same time, becomes an avenue to extract revenue from the lowlands.

3.4. Evading state presence

Pastoralists can hardly escape the thickening of state presence in the lowlands and the increasingly coercive politics of party control. The EPRDF rule is not the first phase of authoritarian and coercive agrarian politics that Benna and Tsemai ethnic groups have experienced, and this affects the ways they respond to the current situation. Already under the imperial regime, the process of forceful incorporation into the central state had started to expand and deepen. Their memory of the armed resistance during the early encounter between their ancestors and the imperial army still lingers in their minds. That confrontation ended in massive loss of life and destruction of property on their side (Strecker 2014). Since then, they have viewed the state as predator and themselves as prey. Because of this history, they do not consider formal armed resistance against government interventions to be a viable strategy, but they apply a number of tactics to undermine the effects of these interventions or to evade the government's outreach altogether. The people might employ some 'weapons of the weak', as James Scott (1985) calls this, but these 'weapons' are only 'tactical' in nature (de Certeau 1984), i.e. they circumvent and evade power rather than openly confront and transform it.

Pastoralists respond to government interventions in a way that will not put them at risk, and avoid direct confrontation with government officials. Instead, they employ, speak and perform what Scott (1990) calls public and hidden transcripts. By mimicking the rhetoric of development and the advantage of 'extension packages' at public meetings, the residents of the new sedentarization sites try to placate government officials to avoid repressive responses from the latter. At the same time, people apply different tactics to deal with the forced use of fertilizers, including negotiations with the DAs on the amount of fertilizers to be applied to their fields, selling fertilizers to neighboring communities, burying fertilizers or dumping them into water, and excessive use of fertilizers to destroy crops.

A young agro-pastoralist from Enchete village describes how pastoralists try to sell off their fertilizer to recover some of the costs that they had to pay for the packages. But this cycle of buying chemical fertilizers at higher prices and selling it to other communities at reduced prices perpetuates poverty and uncertainty about the new way of life:

> Extension agents and politicians told us that we would harvest about 36 quintals (3600 kg) of maize or sorghum from 0.5 ha of land if we utilize the full package of extension program [that means 50 kg DAP [diammonium phosphate], 25 kg urea and 5 kg improved seeds that cost approximately 1747 Birr]. However, the reality on the ground is completely different; we only get about four or five quintals of maize. If we sell each for 400 Birr, it becomes approximately equal to the cost of fertilizers excluding our labor. Therefore, it is easier and sometimes better to sell the fertilizers to neighboring communities like the Konso whose land demands them. At least we get back our money and continue selling our goats to buy cereals. (Anonymous informant, July 2015, Enchete village).

To convince the DAs and other government officials that fertilizers are not really needed in their individual situation, some people added extra fertilizer to show the DAs that excess minerals destroy their crops. In this way, some households were exempted from having to buy fertilizers in the following years. At times when their neighbors were not in need of additional fertilizers and therefore did not buy the excess, some people took environmentally destructive actions like dumping chemical fertilizers into rivers and on uncultivated lands close to their farms. As interviews with DAs from Gisma village and informants

from Duma village confirmed, one such incident took place in 2014 when a woman dumped 50 kg of fertilizer into a small nearby river. This incident received much attention as it claimed the lives of 35 livestock when they drank water farther downstream.

The most systematic response has been a tactic that Scott (2009) might have called state evasion. In Gisma village, when the government's failure to fulfill what it promised them became obvious, many people began to return to their previous homesteads. Rather than abandoning pastoralism, they came to the conclusion that agriculture is a much more uncertain livelihood, because of its dependence on rainfall and because it brings people under the supervision of DAs who regulate what ought and ought not to be done. The return to their previous homesteads can be seen as a coping mechanism for dealing with livelihood uncertainties and government's failure to meet its promises; it can also be seen, however, as a mechanism of escaping from the government's strict control. By returning to their scattered hamlets, they avoid regular supervision by the DAs. During our second visit to the field in January 2016, almost the majority of the households in Gisma village had abandoned the sedentarized village and had moved to their previous homes. While those whose land was not taken by the investors had the possibility of returning to their previous hamlets, others moved to more remote sites where government officials would not reach – very marginal areas with very limited resources for survival.

These margins within the margins become what Jeffrey Herbst has called 'exit zones' (Herbst 2000) – zones used by people as a tactic of escaping from an oppressive and exploitative state apparatus. In his studies of peripheries in pre-colonial and colonial Africa, Herbst describes how African societies escaped from coercive state systems (taxation, administration and labor) to inaccessible zones in the margins of the state. The more the people escape to inaccessible peripheries, the more difficult it becomes for the state to exercise and institutionalize its administrative bureaucracy upon the people; but it also further marginalizes those who evade the state, because their resource base is meager and their access to resources and markets further limited.

4. Conclusion

'This area will become an example of rapid development', promised Ethiopia's late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to 'the people of South Omo' (Zenawi 2011, 2). Zenawi's speech invigorated the EPRDF government's rhetoric of 'development' and 'improvement' of people's lives. He did so on the basis of the frontier imagination that denigrates pastoral lifestyles as backward. This image of backwardness serves as justification for coercively implemented sedentarization programs in the pastoralist lowlands. Contrast this aggrandizing modernizing promise with the sad story of evasion into the margins of the state that some of those 'people of South Omo' chose as a last resort to escape a coercive state. For those people, the Prime Minister's promise has transformed into a curse. It is a story of false promises and coercive practices to 'convince' pastoralists to follow a sedentarized lifestyle, and it is a story of the government emptying the pastoral frontier to clear it for investors, while establishing a firm grip on pastoralist subjects.

In this paper, we have shown how coercive practices of implementing sedentarization programs in South Omo contributed not only to emptying the pastoralist lowlands for foreign, domestic and state investments, but also to making these territories more

extractable and their inhabitants legible to the authoritarian government in Ethiopia. We have shown how the frontier imagination of a land 'empty (of people) but full (of resources, potential)' has legitimated land dispossessions of pastoralists in order to make space for investors through a modernist rhetoric of improvement and uplifting 'backward' societies. Indeed, the pastoral frontier is not empty of people, but needs to be actively emptied in order to be useful and available for large-scale agricultural investments. This emptying is justified by the narrative that resettling and sedentarizing pastoralists allows the state to deliver better services to them, but in this process, to root state and party rule more firmly into local societies of the pastoral frontier. The sedentarization and agricultural extension programs in South Omo Valley congregated pastoralists and agro-pastoralists into villages where they are more easily controlled and can be submitted to taxation, rent extraction and disciplining tactics by the ruling party. Through its frontline technical experts and political representatives – such as the Development Agents – and by clustering people into '1 to 5' groups, the ruling party seeks to control each and every individual, even in the margins of the state: the ruling regime replicates in the pastoralist lowlands a coercive model of agrarian politics that it has successfully applied in the highlands.

We have argued that foreign investors and companies affiliated with the ruling party have been deeply implicated in this thickening of state and party rule in Ethiopia's lowlands (cf. Fantini and Puddu 2016). *Contra* Ferguson's claim that private investors thin out the state and undermine its sovereignty in a neo-liberal era, James Scott's emphasis on the state as a dominant actor in high-modernist development still captures the dynamics of making (agro-) pastoralist subjects legible to the state and how high-modernist visions help frame and justify the dispossession of pastoralists in the lowlands (see also Mosley and Watson 2016). But the state has now co-opted private investors in the form of 'state-mediated commercialization' (Lavers 2012b) and has embedded these into its network of coercion and extraction that brings together private investors, government officials and the ruling party: agribusiness deals provide a mechanism to strengthen and thicken state presence in the pastoralist lowlands. The question is: Will it bring the closure of what Markakis has called the 'last' frontier (Markakis 2011) – i.e. the inclusion of the previously 'ungoverned' lowlands into the purview of the state?

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