



Original Research

Settling the Angar Valley and Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Relations, Western Ethiopia
(1970-2022)

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Abstract

This research examines the changes in interethnic interactions in the Angar Valley of western Ethiopia between 1970 and 2022, focusing on settlement and agricultural development. Historical research approaches, particularly qualitative methods, were used to analyze migration, land use, agricultural experiments, resettlements, and farmer relations. The study uses oral testimony from local farmers, settler farmers, and former workers of settlement authority to better understand the region's occupancy, farming, environment, and resource interactions. Both legal and illicit methods of settling the valley, according to the study, led to an increase in surplus output and a transformation of social relations. The valley's land use system has evolved due to large-scale migration of farmers seeking better agricultural land, and since 1991, relations between indigenous Oromo and settlers have deteriorated. The settlers assert their ownership of the valley's resources, while the Oromo accuse the settlers of misusing and destroying those resources. Conflicts, relocation, and atrocities have occurred in the valley during the past twenty years as a result of animosity sparked by environmental changes and stark economic disparities between natives and newcomers. This study provides important information that academics, practitioners, and policymakers can use in their work.

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INTRODUCTION

Although resettlement has received much attention in academic circles, studies often overlook settler population-environment interactions and the cost the reception areas incur in the realisation of the programs. Focusing on settler-state relations, studies have described the imperative of resettlement, the political, social, and economic forces

involved in the programmes, and settlers' experiences. Because resources play a vital role in the rise and fall of societies, the population-environment nexus deserves attention in the ideal type of development.

The Angar Valley has experienced violent inter-ethnic conflict with an Oromo-Amhara backdrop for the past 20 years. The causes of

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such violent conflicts have to do with historical relationships, competition for resources, and politicised ethnicity. This manuscript traces the settlement of the Angar Valley and inter-ethnic relations from the first sponsored settlement in 1970 to the worst ethnically framed conflict and displacement in 2022. The intent is to demonstrate how unchecked settlement, land grabbing, and an unregulated land use system restricted access to resources in the valley and ultimately led to conflict based on resources. It begins by describing the valley's topography and traditional land use patterns and then goes on to explain how settlement, the progressive economic and social empowerment of settlers, and the alienation of the native population all worked together to create this situation. Earlier harmonious interactions between local society and settlers were replaced by rivalry because of the settlers' empowerment and the local population's exclusion from the valley area. The study explains that recent resource relations, uncontrolled land usage, and significant immigration have all contributed to the region's ongoing strife and displacement. This case study depicts the effects of valley encroachment and uncontrolled regional migration in most parts of Africa since the 1970s.

The Angar Valley is an extensive area following the two Angar Rivers, stretching from Amuru hills in the north to a largely indistinct merger with the Didessa Valley in the south, between Abe-Dongoro, Horro, and Jardaga-Jarte missives in the east and Gidda-Kiramu plateaus in the west. The catchment area of the Angar River system makes up about 7,901 km² (Melese, 2011). The valley exhibits a humid tropical climate and receives

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high rainfall ranging from 1,509 mm to 2,322 mm. The Angar River is the result of two rivers with the same name (Angar-guda and Angar-qalla), one large and the other with a smaller volume. These two rivers join and form the Angar River before they descend from the Abe-Dongoro plateau into lowland. A number of rivers with varied volumes feed the Angar from Limmu, Gidda, Horro, and other districts of east Wallagga. Rivers such as Waja, Alata, Gorocan, and Ukke join Angar before it joins the Didessa River. The river Angar separates five sons of the Jawi Oromo to the east and the remaining four to the west.

Before the wide campaign to control lowland diseases began in the early 1970s, the valley was infested with malaria and trypanosomiasis. The valley also repeatedly experienced rinderpest, anthrax, and other diseases that hindered permanent habitation and cultivation. Apart from the presence of dangerous wildlife, the frequent occurrence of crop pests also discouraged human habitation and agricultural practices. Consequently, the land use of the local Oromo was to avoid seasons of disease infestation. Among others, the valley was a centre for food gathering, swidden cultivation, salt licks (*hora*), and seasonal grazing. The valley was famous for its forest and wildlife resources, because of which it was rich in agricultural implements and supplementary wild foods. Other than bush meat, skins, horns, and elephant tusks were obtained from the valley. Traditional healers also extracted medicinal plants of different kinds, including epiphytes, herbs, and lianas (Hinew, 2018). The Angar Valley was also a place of shifting cultivation, including sorghum, cotton, cardamom, groundnuts, pepper, and some root crops.

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Above all, the frontier parts of the valley territory, such as Donfe, Gorocan, Mexi, Tuji, Urgessa, Lomica, and Qarsa *abba moti*, were centres for *daraba* (seasonal grazing and saltlick). For this purpose, farmers used to drive their cattle in the rainy season, when malaria and trypanosomiasis were less prevalent (Ambachew et al., 1957).

Land use and access to valley resources changed beginning in the mid-19th century. From early 1841 to 1882, the emerging petty states controlled the valley territories in different directions to control and extract their wealth. Following the incorporation of the region into the Ethiopian state in 1882, the involvement of the local Oromo in the valley for cultivation increased due to the harsh imperial land tenure and taxation in the surrounding highlands. First, landlessness and overtaxation from the imperial government pushed cultivators to the valley. Secondly, the prevalence of livestock disease and the resultant loss of oxen for plough cultivation in the highlands forced farmers to engage in swidden cultivation. In addition, since the 1950s, the local governor and development agencies have initiated settlement in the valley as a means to transfer people from highly populated areas to sparsely populated lowland regions and to open this region to agricultural development. The state also explicitly conceived resettlement as a way to better control people and the environment. As part of the agricultural development, it utilised a vast expanse of lowlands for settlement agriculture, which, as Woods argues, led to the colonisation of grassland and woodlands (Woods, 1982). Settlement and development projects in the valley have transformed it into

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an economic hub in terms of agricultural production as well as business.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The rationale for the study came from the shift of social relations from interdependence and coexistence to ethnic hostilities causing displacement. Owing to the conflict, a number of the inhabitants were killed and displaced, and some migrated to neighboring towns, including Nekemet and regions north of the Abay River. Insecurities hindered economic and social activities. Farmers discontinued cultivation, schools were closed, and business was interrupted. Social movement between Gojjam and Wallagga (Bure-Nekemte), between Shambu and Amuru, movement within, and crossing the valley in any direction were blocked. This entails that the region is susceptible to further social, economic, and political crises. These demanding problems urged me to question the root problem of the crisis. The article looks into the effects of the settlements, the politicization of land use, and the role of changing political systems in reshaping inter-ethnic relations in the region. The theme of this article is that when people have moved from one environment to another with differing ways of production, there have been consequences for both themselves and the new environment they have settled in. Among others, they introduced a mode of production that was quite contrary to the existing systems and overlooked resource conservation and local economies. The case of the valley provides a good model for the ways in which people have understood the environment, the effects of failure to consider local economies, and dynamics in resource relations.

This study has benefited from oral evidence, archives, and secondary literature. The data were collected through various methods. Empirical data has been collected on development projects, land use, and land acquisition systems since the early 1970s. Oral evidence on land use systems and relations between farmers and environmental resources was collected from farmers as well as local elders. To obtain information, elderly informants were purposely selected. In addition, younger informants were interviewed to know their feelings and perceptions about their land use and level of engagement in a resource conflict.

Likewise, archives of various periods on agriculture in various government sections and in the hands of individuals were significant sources of insights on the topic. Putting these sources together gives a full picture of settlement history, the dynamics of land use, and inter-farmer relations in the period. To examine agriculture as an economic and social process, this study linked inter-farmers' relations to the wider context of the social, economic, or environmental factors of Ethiopia in general and western Ethiopia in particular.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sponsored settlements and social relations (1969-91)

Local governors, development agencies, and the state sponsored the settlements of farmers in the valley in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In 1969, *Dajazmach* the then governor-general of the province of Gojjam, *Fitawrari* Aberra Wirtu, the governor of Abe-Dongoro District, and *Ato* Walda Gabarel Tegene

initiated a settlement scheme in Abe-Dongoro. Their objectives were to attract labor to develop their holdings in the valley and, through that, to ease the shortage of labor and provide land for landless farmers (Mekonnen, 2013). They were aware that since the end of the 1950s, landholders in Abe-Dongoro had faced tenant labor shortages on their holdings. It was at this point that the local governors initiated the settlement of 300 Walloye households at Yanto, Homota, and Tullu-Gana in the form of tenancy (Pankhurst, 1992). Three-fourths of the tenant Walloye was made to settle on *Fitawurari* Abarra's *rist* and one fourth on *Ato* Walda Gabrel's *rist* land as leaseholders in Yanto and Homota, respectively (Tefera, 2009).

This marked the first contact between the local Oromo and the settlers in the valley. The local people-built hamlets for the settlers and provided them with provisions. *Fitawurari* Abarra Wirtu and Wald Gabreal provided them with draft animals and seeds. Besides, *Fitawurari* Abarra provided them with a veterinarian to take care of their cattle. The support from these landowners in terms of agricultural input and medicine helped the Walloye produce more as leaseholders (Interview). Local *balabbats* gave more privileges to the Walloye tenants than the local tenants to attract more labor on their estate. The 1969 settlement areas became a radiating space to the west for the late-coming farmers with similar intentions. The subsequent years witnessed spontaneous migrations of the Walloye to the south of the Abbay. The number of farmers coming from the northern parts of the country steadily increased because of the diffusion of information on the availability of sufficient

land by the early settlers and the famine in the region in subsequent decades. In a few years' time, the settled area was pushed further west in Abe-Dongoro along the Angar River to the south of Dichu Mountain towards the Gumuz territory. The Walloye benefited from the situation by further expanding to the west to occupy the "no man's land" (Interview). Ato Walde Gabriel arranged land possession for late-coming Walloye from what was referred to as state land by paying six *birr* as a verification fee for a *gasha*. This helped every newcomer take up land in the lowlands of the Abe-Dongoro District. Inevitably, many Walloye deserted landowners and went further west to search for their own land.

A year later, in 1970, the Dutch brothers established more scientifically supported settlement agriculture known as Angar-Guttin Agricultural Development or '*Solidarité et Développement*' near Tullu-Injiro (Tefera, 2009). The settlement farm initially targeted resettling the landless, poor farmers, and volunteers from nearby regions such as Leqa, Gidda, Dongoro, and others. The agricultural center also attracted a few people from the northern and southern areas of the country. At the beginning, the Dutch established seven settlement camps, each consisting of thirty households. Each household was given two hectares of land for cultivation. The center provided farmers with material and technical assistance, such as agricultural inputs and agronomic support. It provided each family with a pair of oxen and selected seeds. The project established seven sites categorized into two big villages (Interview).

In 1972, the project took a larger area of land for settlement and cultivation, partly because of the success of the experimental

trials and the arrival of more people for work. Extensive areas selected for this purpose were the present-day Guttin Town, Laga-Warabo, and the western part of the Angar River, such as Tullu-Gana, Tullu-Lenca, Dalasa Mekanisa, and Hofata. The Dutch encouraged the people of the settlement farms to protect their property without causing a threat to wild animals (Interview). The project was effective until 1977, when the *Darg* government canceled their contract and transferred it to the Settlement Authority, which utilized the center to resettle people from famine-affected areas of northern Ethiopia in the late 1970s and 1980s (Bulcha, 1988).

The settlement project and cooperative farming in the late 1970s and 1980s transformed the valley into an agricultural center. The state's justification for launching resettlement was the "civilizing mission," often generally referred to as an act of *limat* (development) through the environmental control and intensification of agriculture (Tefera, 2009). As a result, the military government resettled unemployed "lumpens," landless farmers, and famine victims on the under cultivated lands in the Angar Valley (RRC, 1988). In 1979, the Settlement Authority resettled the former employees of the Dutch and the Walloye settlers in the two villages (no. 1 and 2) formerly established by the Dutch (Tefera, 2009). Soon, the RRC established three more villages to resettle newcomers from drought-affected areas of Tigray and Wallo. While the Walloye were added to the two old villages, three separate villages (*Mender* 3, 4, and 5) were established for 1,800 Tigrayan households. In Angar-Guttin alone, about

2,304 households, or over 8,506 populations, were reorganized into the five villages (Ibid.). A quite extensive campaign for the resettlement of massive populations and cultivation in the valley was made in 1984–5 following the devastating drought-induced famine in northern parts of the country (RRC, 1988). The logic behind the allocation of a large number of settlers to Wallagga was to utilize unused land. The state planned to resettle thousands of people and cultivate 300,000 hectares of land, mainly in these provinces in Wallagga (Rahmato, 2009). Based on the RRC report of 1986, Wallagga Province accommodated the highest proportion of the total re-settlers. In the first phase, about 10,238 households (36,780 people) were resettled in Angar-Guttin (Settlement Authority, 1986). In addition, three villages were established at Arqumbe, 22 kilometers west of the Guttin resettlement site, on 3000 hectares. By 1988, the number of villages in the lower parts of the valley was 30, and the population rose to 37,448 because of immigration from Wallo (Henze, 2007). In addition, several villages were established in the upper parts of the valley through *sigsega* (integrated resettlement) programs. Large settlement centers were established at Aro, Bajat, Habo, Gomman, Shulluk, Botoro, and Garchi in Kiramu, Amuru, Jardag-Jarte, Horo, and Dongoro Districts (Tolera, 1995).

The state accomplished such settlement programs with the cooperation of local society. Although the local people understood that the settlement projects were usurping their resources, they supported the settlement process through a series of campaigns organized by the state for habitation and cultivation. Youth, students, and farmers of

varying ages participated in clearing land, building houses, and other activities requiring labor to realize settlement farms. The local Oromo from all areas of Wollega also provided provisions, house furniture, draft animals, and seeds for the new settlers. They also cultivated, saw, and collected the harvests until the settlers were able to adapt to the new ecology and living system. Above all, regardless of the language and religious differences, the social interaction between the local Oromo and Walloye was so smooth and friendly. The local elites aired information that the Walloye were of Oromo descent and sought the support of their brothers and sisters. The settler-Walloye, on their turn, considered the Oromo their friends in bad times (interview). As a result, the settlers referred to the local Oromo as friendly and polite and in general as "yechigire gize derash", and this particular region as a breathing space in hard times, serving as a center of relief during recurrent drought and famine (Interview). In particular, in the *sigsega* (integrated) resettlement areas, stronger socio-economic bonds were established between the local people and the settlers. Living close to one another in a village and at kebele level contributed to working and living together. Except for the religious barriers in Muslim-settled areas, the two parties were able to establish social ties based on religion and marriage relations. The case in point was the marriage between the Wallo and the Oromo and social intermixing. Of all social bonds, marriage strongly connected the Walloye to the local Oromo. Resettlement centers became market centers, creating opportunities for further economic and social interaction. According to

my informants, such social interactions were strong in the integrated resettlement area, which from the start was designed to integrate drought victims with the local population by settling them in the same villages (Interview).

Relations began to shift when the settlers sought to be served after two harvest years in the late 1980s. The local people were obliged to provide plow animals and cultivate for the settlers at the expense of their chores. The settlers considered such services as obligations of the hosts, while the locals took the services as an encroachment on their rights. Taking advantage, the settlers also occupied vast land and established settlement villages by inviting new arrivals from home base. Such distasteful acts by the settlers created resentment among the host population (Interview).

On the other hand, it is inevitable that the local Oromo felt that they were dispossessed of resources because of the valley settlement and cultivation under the pretext of development. Because the language of the administration favored them, in the *sigsega* settlement areas, the *kebele* leaders were the Walloye. This helped them to occupy extra land and resettle people from their land of origin in later years. The cultivation of vast and fertile land helped the settlers produce surplus, engage in trade, and gain economic advantages over the local people. On top of this, the poor undertaking of the resettlement and cultivation was the major factor in narrowing the space and beginning rivalry over resources. The main causes of rivalry were the lack of proper allocation and use of valley land, which led to the loss of historic forest land such as Gararo, Gorocan, Tullu-Gana, Botoro, Sidan, and Garchi and the wildlife they once sheltered (Interview).

Self-Organized Settlements and “Oromo-Amhara” Relations since 1991

The major event that caused extensive settlement, land occupation, and shifting inter-ethnic relations in the region was the self-organized settlement since 1991. As opposed to the 1980s, the settlement post-1990 was self-organized, massive, and unregulated (Interview). The most persistent move to acquire land by self-initiated farmers came from regions north of the Abay River. The rate of influx of people from these regions, primarily to the valley and former *Sigsega* settlement areas, has steadily increased across the years since 1991 (interview). The news about the decline of disease and the extensive move to occupy land by smallholder and investor-farmers promising better agricultural income from the abundant land attracted many farmers to the areas (Interview). In addition, the weak control of spontaneous migrations for settlement opened opportunities for extensive land grabbing in the valley.

On the other hand, among the self-initiated farmers who illegally occupied land in other parts of the valley were farmers who had been resettled in the neighboring highlands in the 1980s and ex-*Darg* soldiers. The 2003–4 resettlement program that the Oromiya National Regional Government initiated to resettle drought-affected Oromo from Hararghe reinforced the immigration of self-organized settlers from the regions north of the Abay, starting in the early 2000s (Tefera, 2009). The regional government resettled thousands of Oromo farmers from Hararghe, mainly on former state farm cultivated areas

and on integrated settlement areas. The need to rationalize land use on the formerly state-cultivated land and the conviction that uncultivated land was plentiful were the major drives behind the initiative to resettle a large population in the valley. In the resettlement program of 2003–2004, the Oromia Regional State established about 19 resettlement centers in the valley to resettle 21,126 households, or 52,888 families. The opening of a new east-west population movement in the region reinforced the already established north-south trend of population movement by creating competition for land occupation.

This also paralleled the demographics and the increase in interest in cultivating in the valley by the local Oromo. The news of the decline of both human and animal diseases in the valley attracted herders and land seekers. It is predictable that news about abundant cultivable land in the region and assurance of access to such land for voluntary settlers also attracted farmers from Gojjam, which was suffering from narrowed space for cultivation. Farmers from Gojjam and Gondor migrated into the area and occupied land through several mechanisms. Some arrived as laborers, sharecroppers, or self-organized and gradually secured sufficient holding. The opening of the valley for large-scale farmers since 1998 was another factor that attracted a massive farming population (Interview). Farmers indicated that employment on the commercial farms gave them the opportunity to have time to look for opportunities to acquire land in the valley. Those who came as daily laborers were able to occupy land in uncultivated areas without any restrictions. The expansion of commercial farming in the valley favored Gojjame laborers. Several investor-farmers hired the

Gojjame for labor work, claiming that they are harder workers in clearing land, weeding, harvesting, and crop protection than the local Oromo and Gumuz. This created opportunities for thousands of Gojjame land seekers to get a base and occupy land. This was particularly true in the lower parts of the valley. Some joined the old settlers, and several others organized and established new villages in the upper and lower parts of the valley.

Self-organized settlers occupied vast acres of land in formerly uncultivated parts of the valley. Land occupation in this process was preceded by the establishment of orthodox churches in the forest and was followed by a large number of settlements near the churches. Some of the newly established villages in lower parts of the valley include Mukarma, Same Goda, Shakisa, Hora-Wakale, Walmara, Tullu-Micire, Dagala Lenca, Angar-Dalee, and Mucuco, with the original names of the places changed (Interview). Despite religious differences in some areas, the sponsored Walloye settlers cooperated with the self-organized Gojjame settlers in their land occupation (Tolera,1995). Informants also indicated that local authorities facilitated the settlement of newcomers. They became agents of land grabs within their own communities. Land seekers often win the support of local authorities from district to *kebele* level through bribery (Interview). In many areas, self-organized settlers were armed (farmer-soldiers), acquired land, and defended their farms by force. The conditions often made it difficult for local authorities to stop immigration and land grabs. This and related factors shifted Oromo-Amhara relations toward hostility. In particular, the strong move to obtain land by the Amhara (which now

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includes Walloye and Gojjame farmers), ill land uses, and polarized ethnic politics were the major causes of hostile Oromo-Amhara relations. The complex reinforcing factors contributed to the escalation of hostility and frequent conflict between the two ethnic groups in the last few decades. Some of the major underlying and aggravating causes of the conflicts are summarized as follow

Large-scale immigration and land grabbing

The historical competition for resources between the two ethnic groups is the underlying cause of the conflict. Beginning in the early 1990s, persistent immigration and land grabbing in the valley and its surrounding highlands instigated rivalries and inter-ethnic conflicts. The Amhara farmers who arrived as agricultural laborers and as self-organized settlers were able to establish strong bonds with the earlier sponsored settlers other than the local Oromo. The Amhara began to claim all the country as *rist* (ownership), or at least they had the right to occupy the 'vacant land' in the area. On the contrary, the local Oromo claim ownership of the land and seek freedom from external pressure. For the local Oromo, such acts are a move to control territories and to dispossess the Oromo, like the period of imperial rule, which established a lord-vassal relationship between the Amhara and the local Oromo. As a result, determined to revert the Oromo claims, the Amhara settlers, supported by other local and regional actors, armed and occupied extensive areas, including the former settlement areas, namely Aro, Baja, Gomman, Habo, Botoro, Garchi, and others, serving as core areas of land occupation and dissemination of farmers to seize land (Interview). The settlers were also able to

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utilize settlement centers and churches as core areas, realizing their economic, religious, and political interests in the region. In 2004, the old and new settlers were engaged in attacking the local Oromo, whom they believed had the potential to move against their interests. There was no sufficient reaction from the Oromia National Regional Government. Again, in 2007–2008, violent clashes erupted between the Oromo and Amhara settlers in both the upper and lower parts of the valley. The immediate cause of the clash was the occupation of forest land and wider renaming of areas by the settlers, as well as settlers clandestine training in different centers. Consequently, Oromia Regional Police intervened by pushing new and armed settlers back to Gojjam. After 2008, although the local government attempted to restrict illegal land acquisitions, several self-organized settlers continued to occupy land en masse and by force. Such moves again became the causes of aggressive Oromo-Amhara conflict in 2011, 2015, and frequent clashes since March 2018.

Cultural differences in land use

The source of friction between settler and local society was also differing environmental perspectives on valley land, access, and resource use. The valley area was 'unoccupied, or ownerless,' according to the settlers. The settlers' land usage system was likewise disruptive. The serious issue in this instance was forest devastation, wildlife extinction, and soil degradation (Interview). The occupation of land by a large number of Amhara farmers resulted in two fundamental changes in land use. First, the enormous Amhara arrival led in the conversion of woodland land, riverbank

and slope areas, and sloping areas into dwellings and farmland. All of this rush to the valley resulted in the colonization of every inch of land. Second, the process alienated the local society from using natural resources. The

bulk of Amhara used land purely for food production, which meant they rarely kept cattle or beehives. Amhara elders said that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his legitimate purposes (interview).

Table 1*Illegal settlement and villages in the Valley (1998-2010)*

Parts of the valley	District	Kebele	Year	Home base (Region)
Upper	Kiramu	Chafe gudina (Aro), Boka, Badessa, Ulamayi, and other twelve kebeles	2001	Amhara
		Amuru	1998	Amhara
		Jarte-Jardega	1998	Amhara
		Horro	1998	Amhara
Lower	Guto-Gidda	Loko	1998	Amhara
		Gadisa Oda	1998	"
		Fayisa	1998	"
		Arjo	1998	"
		Ukkee	1998	"
	Gudaya-Biilaa	Abayyi Dalle 1	1998-2001	"
		Abayyi Dalle 2	" "	Oromia
	Gidda-Ayyana	Andode-Diicho, Ali	1998	Amhara
		Saphera-Mexi, Tullu	2010	Amhara
	Limmu	Saqata qilxu Babo	2007-2010	Amhara & Oromia
		Malka Lomi	2007-2010	Amhara & Oromia
		Saphera, Arkumbe		2007-2010
			2007-2010	Amhara
Abe-Dongoro	Dirra-Guda, Sire-Doro, Dongoro-Gendo, Alaltuu, Lalisaa, Koneji, Jirma-Ejere, Botoro		2007-2010	Amhara
			2007-2010	Amhara
Baloo-Jegonfof	Angar (Shankora, Waajjaa, Meexxii)	2006-2008	Amhara	

Locals who looked after the valley land, on the other hand, said that the Amhara (especially the Gojjame) were destructors of woods and didn't care about grazing land, salt lick sites, or large trees. The local people claimed that the Gojjame were responsible for

the destruction of historical forest belts in the valley, including Dira-Guda, Sire-Doro, Dongoro-Gendo, Alaltu, Lalisa, Koneji, Jirma-Ejere, Dicho, Harbu, Tullu-Nafuro, Homi-Eerto, Saphira-Mexi, Bocoqsa-Dambaro, Gurra-Talino, Garaco, Chafe Maxi,

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etc. (Interview). Elders among the 1984–85 settlers offered a firsthand account of the environmental change.

When we arrived here in Angar-Guttin from Wollo, Guttin and its environs were covered with dense forest, and the sound of diverse wildlife was heard from here and there. Big trees such as buttujjii, weddessa, qararoo, etc. were typical features of the region, while undergrowth trees made passage difficult. Herds of animals moved, and crop protection was a more difficult job than cultivation itself. This region (north of the Angar River) was the abode of wildlife that escaped from areas of the valley claimed by the state farms. Now, after less than three decades of our arrival, nature is not as it was; every inch of land has been cultivated, habitats have been destroyed, and animals have either been killed or escaped (interview).

This reveals the general circumstances under which the agricultural expansion damaged forests and, by implication, wildlife. The effects of this uncontrolled population settlement in the valley had far-reaching consequences for the environment. By a wide range of burning, healthy forests and wild animals were threatened, and beehives on trees were damaged (Interview). Among others, the local people attributed the loss of much-valued hardwoods, the drying up of salt licks and wetlands, the decline in volume or drying up of rivers, and termite and rat infestations to the ill land use system and curse that came with the settlers. In Gidda district, which experienced an increase in smallholder cultivation, forest coverage

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decreased from 25% in 1975 to 5% in 2008. The trend was similar in other regions experiencing similar agricultural expansion.

The other factor of conflict related to the above was the widespread renaming of places after the names of churches established. Some examples of these changes were Mukarma into Kidane-Mihiret, Same Goda into Silasie-Filiklik, Shakisa and Hora-Wakale into Michael, Walmara into Medane Alem, Tullu-Micire into Micire-Bahata, Tullu-Lenca into Dabre-Anbessa, Dagala Lenca into Micire Abo, and Angar-Dale into Abay Dale (Interview). In fact, it was an old tradition to rename place names where Orthodox churches were constructed (Interview). What was new in the post-1991 period was the occupation of uninhabited land by constructing churches and renaming the areas. Amhara settlers occupied vast tracts of land in the name of the churches that also served as core centers for people searching for land. It is inevitable that the occupation of the valley land narrowed space and almost entirely blocked access to valley resources and ways of life. The local Oromo developed envy for the economic success of the settlers at the expense of their livelihood. In addition, the conflict had a social basis, as the local people consider the Gojjame "chauvinist and less integrative" than the Walloye and the Tigre (Interview).

Political

The historical competition for power between the two ethnic groups and the recent polarization of ethnic politics between the Amhara and Oromo elites have become causes of conflict in the region. The reorganization of territories during the adoption of Ethnic-Federalism in 1994 became an issue because

of the social complexity and resource vitality of the region. Resentment became intense in 2000 when local people heard the widely rumored allegation about the migrants' covert movement to establish a special Amhara Zone, including Amhara settlers' areas of Guttin and parts of the highlands of Gidda, KIRAMU, and Abe-Dongoro. My informants acknowledge that there was a demand from the Amhara-speaking people of the area to be considered a special zone, dissatisfied with the exclusion of all non-Oromos from PA leadership after *Afaan Oromo* became the official language in 1991 (Interview; Hinew, 2018). In 2000, the establishment of "The Association of Guten Woreda Churches," coupled with the preparation of seals and stamps bearing "Guttin Woreda" that did not exist, was regarded as an act to help accomplish the above-stated intention (Interview).

Since the coming of PM Abiy to power, the settlers have utilized the opportunity to reorganize and crystallize their interest out of fear of Oromo dominance. On one hand, the Amhara elite fight to dismantle "tribal politics" (ethnic federalism), and on the other hand, they are earnestly fighting for the establishment of an Amhara special zone in the Amhara settled areas of Wallagga. The Oromo strongly claim that the Amhara in Wallagga are late comers and minorities who deserve a special administrative zone. Armed Amhara forces easily crossed to the region south of the Abay River and supplied modern weapons to the Amhara living in Wallagga. The Amhara are equipped with modern weapons under the pretext of defending themselves (Interview). The Oromo were not allowed to hold any weapon since their armament, in one way or another, would

empower the local Oromo and, by implication, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). The increasing involvement of elites and authorities will inevitably escalate inter-ethnic conflict as well as armed struggles. The process will potentially create a threat to the very existence of civilians in the region (Key Informant).

The Amhara claim that they have been victimized by the political system instituted after the 1990s. From 1991 to 2018, they could not get a room to establish their own-armed factional group in order to regain political control. The political reform since 2018 has created room for Amhara power claimants to organize armed factions in the name of Special Forces and Fano, Bandit, or Rebel (Key Informants). Since then, the armed Gojjame have been fighting to control the entire Angar valley and its environs by avoiding any Oromo claims to resources. The idea coincides with the claim that the Amhara has *rist* (inheritance) in Wallagga. The supporters of this idea at the local, regional, and national levels participated in financing, organizing, and equipping the settlers and youth (*Fano*) against the local Oromo, who were not allowed to hold any modern arms. The ever-increasing influx of migrants to the valley in search of land and refusal to surrender firearms, together with envy by the local population at the economic success of the migrant population, created tensions draining security from the environment, agricultural practices, and social life.

CONCLUSIONS

This case study on the Angar Valley reflected that the settlement of the valley in the last five

decades transformed it to a center of hostile Oromo-Amhara relations. This relationship has been energized by shifting power dynamics at the center and local competition for land resources. The quest for absolute resource control and political power complemented one another. The relations substantially changed to hostility since 1991 owing to the massive occupation of the valley by the Amhara settlers, and the increasing Oromo claims to access valley resources. Because of the increased vitality of agricultural land, ethnic Amhara were able to organize and control the land. Such persistent movements fueled hatred by erecting social barriers and rallying support against the local Oromo people. Since the early 1990s, Oromo-Amhara confrontations in the region have been driven by historical relations, aggressive Amhara moves to control territories and cultivable land in the valley and its environs, cultural differences, and divided ethnic relations. Large-scale land grabbing by the Amhara, and the resulting depletion of resources, as well as historical rivalry for power between the Amhara and Oromo, served as fundamental causes of the conflict, and political agitations provided ideological justification for the conflicts that occurred in the last three decades.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENTS

The data of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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