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Conservation and indigenous peoples' struggles for livelihoods: Suba Park (Ethiopia)

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Summary

Contested from the early period of Menelik territorial expansion into the hinterlands of Addis Ababa, areas in the vicinity of Suba Park continue to be a bone of political contention in the context of the struggle of Oromo people against the expansion of the central state. A flashpoint is the Oromo protests (2014–2018) against federal state territorial expansion into the Oromo ethnic territory through a new Addis Ababa Master Plan that led to the deposition of Haile Mariam Desalegn and the installation of Abiy Amhed. I investigate how the state environmental policy maintained for extraction and conservation in the Suba forest between the late 1890s and 2018 affected the Tulama modes of land use related to their worldviews and their use of material, social, spiritual and symbolic values of land in the struggle for land and resource rights. I used ethnographic methods that included in-depth and semi-structured interviews, participant observations and document analysis to investigate long-standing and complex land-based conflicts in and around Suba Park. I show how simplifying state narratives of environmental policy entrenched in centralized state administration and exclusionist resource management schemes have reinforced a wider concern about indigenous land and resource rights and decentralized environmental governance.

Introduction

In the late 1890s, Menelik II, emperor of Ethiopia, created one of Africa's first protected areas in the Suba forest outside of his new capital city, Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian experience of environmental conflict related to conservation is distinctive within Africa in that it was not through European colonial projects that conservation was imposed. Conservation followed a process of internal colonization, whereby one indigenous group imposed its power on neighbouring groups (Donham & James 1986, Holcomb & Ibssa 1990, Jalata 1993). In the course of a series of conquests following the successful defeat of the Italian colonial forces at the battle of Adawa in 1896, Menelik, then Emperor of Ethiopia (1889–1913), incorporated a host of other polities, tripling the size of his empire (Gudina 2004: p. 7). Many formerly autonomous peoples were then subjugated to a class of Abyssinian landlords. The vernacular term for these landlords – *neftegna* (riflemen) in Amharic, but used by extension for Abyssinian settlers in general – highlights the element of force and intimidation upon which the imperial order rested.

The Suba area in central Ethiopia has been a theatre of environmental conflict over the entire period since the creation of the Ethiopian empire state (Bekele 2003, Abate 2006, Duguma et al. 2009, Merion 2019). The Menelik quest for territorial expansion in the early phase was more focused on accessing resources in the hinterlands of the capital (Wolde-Mariam 1995). Endowed with fertile black-cotton soil, the Bacho plain attached to the Suba area has long served as a breadbasket for the Ethiopian staple crop, *teff*, as well as other foodstuffs such as wheat, barley, pulses, fruit and vegetables. Well situated in terms of access to urban and rural markets, control over land in this region was and remains vital for the functioning of the capital city and therefore for the broader political economy of Ethiopia. The creation of the protected area of Suba in the late 1890s by Menelik therefore made sense from the point of view of an imperial prerogative. The imperial ban on the use of forest resources by people who had a long association with the area was consequential because the forest was a major source of firewood and building materials, as well as a hunting ground and a place for gathering wild foods and praying for the *qaalluu* site of Hadha Abbayyii at the top of Mount Wachacha. In short, the forest has been a material and spiritual resource for the Tulama Oromo, a farming society in the central highlands of Ethiopia. The ban was resented all the more because, while others were prevented from doing so, Menelik harvested timber from Menagesha-Suba forest (present-day Suba Park) for building new churches on Mount Entoto and for the construction of a new palace in the capital (Pankhurst 1968: p. 245).

By drawing on insights from long-term ethnographic research, I explain how practices that individuals/groups perceive as 'survival strategies' and that state and forest agencies label as 'sabotage' acts can be understood as everyday resistance and may well eventually move to open collective protests. The unwritten and vernacular forms of law of the Tulama Oromo that once

governed resources and their usage were not erased by these laws, and they continued to be relevant despite the efforts of successive administrations to erase them. The persistence of these customs may be partly explained by indigenous social institutions common to the Tulama Oromo. The Tulama Oromo living in or around the Suba forest not only share mutual beliefs, domains and communal rights, but also subscribe to the *gadaa* system, a democratic governance system that evolved independently of formal bureaucratic traditions of governance (Legesse 2000, Levine 2007). *Seera* (customary law) and *aadaa* custom define Oromo practices regarding the use of land and access to water and associated ritual practices. This governance system and the conceptual frameworks associated with it informed and enabled a loosely coordinated campaign of resistance that included cutting timber illegally and, during a period of upheaval, attacking forest management infrastructure.

For the Tulama Oromo, land is not only an economic resource but also a significant component of collective identity, connoting spiritual and emotional attachment to their ancestral domain. They maintain that their flourishing engagement with nature is the basis of their survival (Abate 2006, 2019, 2020). The Tulama Oromo share this conception of land with many other peoples within and outside Ethiopia. Within Ethiopia, the territory is understood by the Anuak of the western Ethiopian lowlands not merely as a unit of production, but they also value it for its historical, political and spiritual implications (The Oakland Institute 2011: p. 42). In a global context, social and environmental accounts of environmental resources and services have explained concepts of land that are characterized not only by economic values but also by spiritual and other values that constitute a distinct inventory of discourse that is incommensurable with conventional economic valuation (Martinez-Alier 2002, 2021, Cernea 2008, Vanclay 2008).

Although the questions of resource access and identity were prominent in the discourses of public protests, the contestation of state forests and environmental conservation efforts in Ethiopia remains little recognized. The scant studies of the Suba state forest in the central highlands have attempted to grasp institutional constraints in forest property rights regimes, tourism and conflict between local people and park administration (Bekele 2003, Duguma et al. 2009, Merion et al. 2018, Merion 2019). However, there has been no documentation of the environmental narratives of the Ethiopian state in relation to indigenous peoples' livelihoods attached to the land and their derivation of material, divine, emotional and symbolic values from resources in the struggle for land and resource rights. This paper investigates the contestations between the state environmental narratives and the Tulama Oromo's derivation of material, social, spiritual and symbolic values from the land in the struggle for land and resource rights in Suba Park.

I argue that the Ethiopian state environmental policy entrenched in centralized state administration and exclusionist resource management schemes maintained for extraction and conservation in the Suba forest since the late nineteenth century have reinforced a wider concern about regimes of environmental governance and indigenous land and resource rights. I build on the emerging literature on the social impacts of nature conservation in which indigenous land and resource rights and decentralization have been undermined by simplifying state narratives of environmental policy entrenched in centralized state administration and exclusionist resource management schemes. This research therefore contributes to wider critical literatures on the social effects of conservation and indigenous peoples' struggles for land and resource rights. I first explain the Tulama modes of land use related to their worldviews and their derivation of material, social, spiritual and symbolic values from the land in the struggle for land and resource rights. I then present the state narratives of environmental conservation. Finally, I examine local people's resistance to exclusion in reacting to the loss of land, as well as to their exclusion from deriving symbolic value, spiritual attachment and ritual value from land resources.

Methods

I used qualitative and multi-method ethnographic methods that included in-depth and semi-structured interviews, structured and unstructured observations and document analysis to investigate complex land-based conflicts in and around Suba Park. I have had connections to the region since 2005 when I conducted anthropological fieldwork between June and August. I have also resided in the town of Holeta since 2008, c. 15 km from Suba Park. The current fieldwork was conducted between July and August 2018. Maximum variation sampling with multistage selection within the clusters (Bernard 2006) was utilized to maximize the heterogeneity and hence representativeness of the sample and to obtain views on dynamics of land tenure, property relations, state narratives of conservation and local people's resistance. Twenty-six individual interviews were conducted with peasant households, park managers and forest guards, evicted peasants (eight men and two women), park managers (four men and one woman), forest guards (six men) and *qaalluu* leaders (four men and one woman) in and around the park. I collected the interview data through purposive selection of research subjects.

Twenty-eight group interviews were conducted with different groups of peasants. Customary landowners (five men and one woman), landless peasants (three men and two women), women (two youths and three elder women), heads of peasant associations (PAs; four men), community leaders (three men and one woman) and elders (four men) were purposely selected from Wachacha, Nannoo Suba, Barfata, Garassu, Kao, Meti, Kirkira and Qoche-Wagiddo for the interviews. I carried out in-depth key informant interviews of two individuals in Holeta. The first informant was a former technical worker of Addis Baha (later Finfinnee) Forest Enterprise and a former worker for the Finfinnee Forest Enterprise from the Naannoo Suba locality. The second key informant was a former president of the court of Walmara district from 2004 to 2007. The interviews conducted with informants have been anonymised so as to protect the informants (Parkinson & Wood 2015: p. 23, Cramer et al. 2016). I used descriptive coding for the systematic recording of data. The interview texts were organized according to their codes. These codes covered key themes, concepts, ideas or questions, such as 'what is your relation to the park?', 'how has the demarcation/expansion of the park affected your life?', 'how have people reacted to denial of access to forest resources?' and 'how might the relations between the park and local community be improved?'. Finally, I systematically analysed these descriptive codes organized around relevant ideas, concepts, questions and themes. Archival data on collective peasant resistance against the state forest policy during the Derg regime were collected from the Walmara district agriculture and natural resource office. Documents of court cases, proclamations, environmental policy and social science literatures on environmental politics, land tenure, property relations and contested narratives of conservation were also employed.

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Results

The Tulama mode of land use related to their worldviews and rights

The Tulama Oromo customary tenure system consists of land tenure governance structures that manage and regulate land relations, particularly the transfer of land rights within the group and to those outside the group. As Abate (2020: p. 104) explains: 'Among the Tulama Oromo, entitlement to corporate estate is determined by local *gadaa* descent. Born and adopted sons/clans require the approval of customary law enacted by the *gadaa* council to hold status. In the case of adoption of non-Oromo, the adopted individual/clan needs recognition from local *gadaa* descent groups to hold status for landholding rights.'

In these complex Oromo tenurial rights, the collective identities of born and adopted sons/clans are well defined in terms of land and genealogical relations. The religious ideal of the Oromo, which has a vital role in conservation, is categorized into two hierarchies. At the top of each, the Oromo believe in *Waaqaa* or God of the Oromo, the Supreme Being (Bartels 1983: p. 14). He is the source of life and the creator of everything; his creative act has well ordered everything in heaven and on earth (Bartels 1983). For every natural phenomenon, every plant, every animal and every social entity, Waaqaa has allotted a place in his cosmic order. At the next level is the spirit guardian of each individual or family, known as *ayyaana* (Knutson 1967). *Ayyaana* are intermediaries between Waaqaa and individual prayers. Spirits are believed to be differently manifested through either *qaalluu* (men) or *qaallittii* (women). Waaqaa creates everything in the universe through *ayyaana* (Megerssa 2005). The guardian spirits 'may be personalised, feared and, at times, invoked, but, in spite of this appearance of multiplicity, each one is also seen ultimately as a manifestation of the one divinity'; prayers link the material aspect of the cosmological order with the divine (Bartels 1983). Prayers largely appeal for Waaqaa's interference in the cosmos. For instance, 'prayers for rain highlight this cosmic order, for it is Waaqaa who controls rainfall, and sends it from His abode in the heavens' (Bartels 1983). Similarly, the Tulama observances that I attended at Hora Arsadii were started by an *Abba gadaa*, Bayyana Sanbto, then continued by the elected leader of the Tulama *gadaa* council, who appealed for Waaqaa's intervention to maintain social and natural order (Table 1).

Table 1. Example of a Tulama Oromo prayer that I translated from Afaan Oromo into English (participant observation, Hora Arsadii, Bishoftu, 21 September 2016).

Afaan Oromo prayer	Translation
Haayee Ya waaq	O . . . God
Waaqaa salgan Booranaa	God of nine Borana
Waaqaa torban Barentumaa	God of seven Barentu
Waaqaa sadeen Tulama	God of three Tulama
Waaqaa odaa Nabee	The God of Oda Nabe
Waaqaa odaa Bisil	The God of Oda Bisil
Waaqaa torban Macca	God of seven Matcha
Waaqaa uumaa, waaqaa uumamaa	Creator God, the God of creation
Guracha garaa garbaa	Black belly of ocean
Rooba, Leemoo taalila	Sends rain from his abode
Kan roobdee nu biqilchita	Let you give rain and grow plants
Nagaan nu olchiite nagaan nu bulchi	Let you give peace day and night
Biyya nagaa nu godhi	Let you make peace for the nation
Kan dhalatee guddisi	Let you allow those that have been born to grow
Namaa fi sa'an fayyaa nu kenni	Let you offer health for humans and cattle
Kan ani jedhe eeba eebi nu haqabatu	Let what I have said be a blessing
Kan ani habisee waaqi itti yaa guutuu	Let Waaqaa fill what I left over

The Tulama Oromo prayers to *Waaqaa* address material concerns (matters of survival and continuity of the Oromo genealogical ancestors), evoke sacred land/tree/*gadaa* assemblies and appeal for a harmonious relationship between the earth and Waaqaa's creatures, peace for the nation, rain, fertility and the health of animal and humans (Table 1). Among the Tulama Oromo, prayers are often engaged in to recast the harmony of the people metaphorically and to connect them to divinity and the fecundity of nature. The Oromo worldview entangles nature with culture and divinity in multiple ways (Kelbesa 2001).

The Tulama descent groups, including the Suba, have *ayyaana*. They also have *qaalluu* religious leaders who assume hereditary power (interview, *qaalluu* leader, Qoche-Wagiddo, 7 July 2018; interview, *qaalluu* leaders, Wachacha, 22 August 2018). For example, Hadha Abbayyii is the mother guardian spirit responsible for conservation of the forests in and around the Suba forest. The top of Mount Wachacha, which has been part of the sacred site of Hadha Abbayyii, was included in the original boundaries of the Suba forest under Menelik (interview, *qaalluu* leaders, Wachacha, 22 August 2018). The Tulama Oromo of Bacho ancestral groups such as Suba, Meta, Garasu and Wajitu used to travel there from as far as 100 km away to join blessings, anointments and prayers for ceremonies on a regular basis. Some followers of radical Christianity, radical fundamentalist Islam and dogmatic Abyssinian priests in Ethiopia despise people who believe in a guardian sprit by misrepresenting their conviction as witchcraft. Furthermore, the close attachment of the Oromo to key environmental features and the roles of these features in Oromo culture and religion are sometimes simplified as the Oromo believing in the power of rivers, mountains, lakes and trees (Habermann 2014: p. 79). Oromo leaders of the guardian spirit can be either men or women as well as either youths and adults. The Oromo worldview maintains an intimacy between humans, divinity and key environmental landscapes. Trees, places, springs and water points are key symbols of the Oromo religion as they serve as meeting places for political and religious gatherings. For example, the top of the crater lake of Dhamocha (on the peak of Mount Wachacha) in the Suba forest was a place to pray for Waaqaa for the Suba descent group before their access to the sacred *qaalluu* site of Hadha Abbayyii was banned by Menelik in the late 1890s (interview, *qaalluu* leaders, Wachacha, 22 August 2018; interview, elder, Garassu, 18 July 2018). Furthermore, the Tulama Oromo, including the Suba lineage, often evoke Oda Nabee, which is a meeting place for Tulama *gadaa* assemblies held under the shade of the Oda tree, and Hora Arsadii, which is a key pan-Tulama religious site.

The Tulama Oromo use their social, cultural and spiritual attachment to land and resources to defy state narratives of conservation. For example: 'The forest authorities often tell us we have overstepped the boundary of the park. They say we do this to expand agricultural land into the park. Violating *safuu* [the Oromo ethical code of conduct for obeying the rules of *uumaa* (creations of Waaqaa and earth) and the social rules of genealogical ancestors], the park administration appropriated our woodlands during the Derg regime. Thus park people do not have *safuu*. We have *safuu* not to cut young seedlings, trees in sacred places and around head waters/springs. We have not to cut big trees but branches, and dead

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vegetation. We have *safuu* not to kill pregnant wildlife and young wildlife while hunting. We have *safuu* not to eat wild animals such as lion, tiger, wild ass, birds, antelope and so many other wild animals and reptiles' (interview, evicted peasant, Meti, 23 August 2018).

These notions mean that, according to *safuu* principles and rules regarding land use and rights associated with the beliefs of the Oromo, the land will act against people who wrongly use it or overstep the boundaries of others. This is because such actions are counter to the rules of Waaqaa and the earth.

The Oromo ecological knowledge of the principles and rules regarding land use, plants and trees are therefore entrenched within the complex socio-cultural organization and worldviews of the Oromo. In summary, the Tulama Oromo conception of land use and rights arises out of their own cultural values and from very material concerns for access to land, water and forest. It also demonstrates the way the Oromo use their material and cosmological resources to defend against the state's simplifying narratives of environmental conservation that exclude indigenous people.

The state's narratives of environmental conservation

Emperor Haile Selassie I (1928–1974) reinforced the administration of the forest by improving infrastructure, tourism and game hunting (Merion 2019). Italian forces re-organized the Suba forest conservation regime during their annexation of Ethiopia (1936–1941). They reinforced the economic extraction of the forest resources by offering concessions to companies (Bekele 2003). Furthermore, they c. 20 km of roads and 24 km of narrow-gauge railway tracks to improve infrastructure for the extraction of forest resources (Merion et al. 2018). The socialist revolution removed the imperial regime in 1974, introducing land reform in 1975, which abolished feudal serfdom and allocated usufruct rights to individual farmers. However, the subsequent policy of the regime such as the forest law and villagization scheme (social engineering of rural settlements into new clustered villages) reinforced the coercive power of the state.

The military-Marxist Derg regime (1974–1991) enlarged the holdings of the Suba state forest from 3500 ha in the late 1970s to 9557 ha in the early 1980s through forest mapping and demarcation schemes that claimed the traditional pasturelands, agricultural lands and community forests of the adjacent peasantries. This was followed by a more rigorous reforestation scheme that displaced hundreds of peasant households living in and around the forest without any compensation (Bekele 2003, Abate 2006, Duguma et al. 2009). This situation added a new dimension to the existing conflicts. In broader terms, the roots of conflict between the administrators of the Suba protected forest and local communities were entrenched in 'mapping' of protected state forest in the late 1890s and expansion in the late 1970s and early 1980s subject to state forest policy discourse: namely, the highland reclamation narrative. One of the first recorded causes of conflict between the administrators of the Suba protected forest and PAs during the early Derg period stemmed from forest agencies' violation of the 1975 land reforms of the regime that entitled PAs to woodlands, plantations and forest ownership within their respective jurisdiction of 800 ha. In this regard, the Suba forest agencies claimed that the land reforms of 1975 entitled them to frame 'a buffer zone' between the forest and the surrounding communities for legitimate expansion of the forest.

The United Nations Development Programme, UN Food and Agriculture Organization, UN Environment Programme and World Bank considered that the fundamental cause of famine and drought in Ethiopia was environmental degradation because of highland degradation, reduction in land productivity, human population increase and food insecurity (FAO 1986). Out of such an environmental crisis narrative, a wider highland reclamation scheme under the Food-for-Work programme was strengthened, with the twin aims of offering food aid to peasant households in return for labour as an instrument for rehabilitating degraded lands, funded by the UN World Food Programme (Admassie 2009). Between 1985 and 1989, farmers built c. 1 million km of soil and stone bunds on agricultural land, constructed nearly 0.5 million km of hillside terraces, closed c. 80 000 ha of hillside for regenerating indigenous trees and reforested 300 000 ha of plants, 'much of it in community woodlots' (Hoben 1995: p. 1007). The environmental policies, backed by the USA, the UN World Food Programme and the then European Economic Community after the 1984–1985 famine, were entrenched in the global politics of conservation related to neo-Malthusian environmental narratives (Hoben 1995: p. 1013). The narrative of environmental degradation and famine is also deeply entrenched in Ethiopian bureaucracy and policymaking practices (Keeley & Scoones 2000).

In the policymaking arena, Proclamation No. 192/1980 of state forest policy (GoE1980) highlights the need to involve local community and peasant associations in the demarcation, afforestation, conservation and administration of forest resources. However, this policy conferred a hegemonic role upon the Forest and Wildlife Conservation Development Authority. This centralized forest and wildlife authority was empowered to unilaterally designate and demarcate all national forest priority areas. Discourse regarding the fuel wood crisis stemming from global environmental crisis narratives and coercive demarcation of agricultural land for the afforestation of plantations around Addis Ababa for urban consumption gained a foothold in Ethiopia in 1975–1976. However, highland reclamation schemes funded by the USA, the UN World Food Programme and the European Economic Community under the Food-for-Work programme were most strongly enforced following the 1984–1985 famine. Subsequently, the forest policy practices entangled in neo-Malthusian environmental reclamation narratives curtailed the voices of the local community in natural resource management. As a result of the implementations of the coercive state forest legislation of the 1980s, the Derg regime annexed thousands of hectares of woodlots, farmlands and grazing areas in the possession of communities and individual households into the Suba State Forest (Bekele 2003, Abate 2006).

In this setting, the state forest regime imagined it could impose discipline on the highlands by restructuring the landscape into a new form of forest and by socially engineering the local settlements into new clustered villages. An evicted peasant in Kirkira stated (17 July 2018): 'During the Derg regime, we lost vast tracts of pasturelands, agricultural lands and woodlots for the state forest. Many of our kin were displaced from their land in Kirkira and Meti to Guntutaa, Oborsaa, Kolobo and Roggee. We were in a continuing struggle to restore lands and resources we lost across generations. Ironically, the forest agency continue labelling our resistance to the prohibition from accessing the Suba forest as traditionalism, superstition, anti-revolution, anti-development or anti-nation.'

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Thus, the new forest expansion entrenched in environmental legislation and accompanied by villagization excluded and displaced local communities from traditional forest resources. Such antagonistic legislation and the simplifying narratives of the Derg regime excluded local people from accessing traditional forest.

In Ethiopia, the communist state narratives of conservation coupled with villagization were justified as effective methods of social re-engineering to improve the sustainability of the highland landscape, but they mainly proved to be futile for achieving the anticipated goal of integrating conservation into sustainable development. The imposition of such simplistic environmental narratives entrenched in the 1980 forest legislation accompanied by villagization excluded and displaced local communities in and around the Suba forest from their livelihoods. The environmental and social re-engineering became a point of conflict between local people and forest administrators, as the re-demarcation of the park conflicted with the complex socio-cultural and tenurial rights on the ground. Subsequently, Suba Park was reduced to approximately two-thirds of its former size during the period between the fall of the Derg regime (1991–1993) and the consolidation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime.

After the removal of the Derg regime in 1991 by the EPRDF that ruled Ethiopia until 2019, there was a shift of approaches to forest policy from centralized decision-making towards decentralized environmental governance (Abate 2018). Opposed to an exclusively top-down conservation approach entrenched in Ethiopian forest policy and bureaucracy (Keeley & Scoones 2000), a new conservation approach involving local people in power- and benefit-sharing arrangements in nature conservation unfolded through the introduction of Participatory Forest Management (PFM) regimes (Winberg 2011, Abate 2018). In 2007, the Suba forest was placed under the care of Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise (OFWE) as part of the decentralization of forest conservation from the federal to the regional state. OFWE was established to conserve and sustainably develop forest and wildlife resources through the involvement of the local community and relevant stakeholders such as district- and zonal-level government institutions, partner organizations working with local communities and international organizations working on environmental issues. However, OFWE was unwilling to decentralize ownership of the forest of which they had already secured ownership. OFWE, in partnership with the German Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), attempted to implement PFM during 2011 and 2012 in Suba Park. However, the PFM was aborted after 2 years of pilot testing as forest and wildlife authorities, namely OFWE, were unwilling to devolve ownership or managerial decision-making power to the local community (Merion 2019). As a result, peasants largely relying on forest products and by-products that were integral to their agriculture livelihoods were not only excluded from ownership or managerial decision-making but also from benefit-sharing schemes, including revenue sharing from forest products and tourism (Merion et al. 2018, Merion 2019, Tame 2019). Instead of sharing decision-making power, the narrative of PFM became an instrument for realigning the relationship between OFWE and the local population in Suba. An interview with an elder in Kirkira (23 August 2018) shows how the PFM regime shattered local community trust in the state forest: 'They told us, we have to manage the Suba forest together. But they refused even part of the forest to be under our custodianship. After that, we began to fear PFM from our experience of villagization of the Derg that uprooted our kin from Meti and Kirkira.'

Hitherto, the local community perceived PFM as a policy of the government to displace them from their land. They linked PFM practices to their worst experiences of displacement of their kin from Kirkira and Meti to other places during the Derg regime. The local community now saw the state forest agencies as evil, being eager to evict them from their livelihoods and ancestral domains. This shows how a long-term exclusionist conservation approach embedded in centralized state administration in the Suba forest has weakened the community's sense of forest ownership and trust in state forest regimes.

Local peoples' resistance to exclusion

By drawing on insights from long-term ethnographic research, I explain how practices that individuals/groups perceive as 'survival strategies' and that state and forest agencies label as 'sabotage' acts can be understood as everyday resistance and could well progress to open collective protests.

Among the covert forms of peasant protest common in the Suba protected state forest is illegal nocturnal felling of trees. An interview with Suba Park managers (13 July 2018) shows how they view local people's 'survival strategy' as a crime: 'We allow the local community to use dead branches of tree, brushwood and the gathering of thinly fencing woods. But the people living near the Park rush into the forest to cut indigenous trees for charcoal, timber and poles. These criminal gangs cut trees of high value at night. We often consult the local community to expose criminal individuals or groups who cut trees and kill wildlife illegally.'

An interview with Suba forest guards (13 July 2018) also endorses the views of state forest agencies: 'Criminal gangs often chop timber and shafts from the remote section of the park and transport it at night. We often detain culprits transporting wood and timber with donkeys to nearby towns. But arrested persons were often released without sufficient reason at court.'

Analysis of the perceptions of park managers and guards reveals that the nocturnal felling of trees is one of the 'sabotage acts' challenging forest management (interview with managers, Suba, 13 July 2018; interviews with guards, Suba, 13 July 2018). While the peasants criticize state environmental narratives as justifying expropriation of the land that is entrenched in their livelihoods and has religious and symbolic values, the Suba forest administrators perceive the action of illegal felling of trees as 'sabotage acts' challenging forest management. By failing to involve local people and ignoring their indigenous knowledge and institutions such as *gadaa* and *qaalluu* when setting a common agenda for resource conservation, the state and forest enterprise has resorted to counteracting community encroachment activities through the use of patronage, armed guards, checkpoints and punishment, with little success. As a result of the state narrative of conservation versus crime, accord between conservationists and the local community on proposed conservation strategies is far from being achieved. The non-cooperation of the local villages with the conservation authorities to halt illegal felling of trees appears to have been the result of solidarity amongst the traditional resource users. This was increased in reaction to the banning of traditional resource uses attached to local livelihoods and the symbolic values of resources such as the sacred *qaalluu* site of Hadha Abbayyii. Access to the sacred land of Hadha Abbayyii at the top of the crater lake of Mount Wachacha was denied under Menelik, being demarcated within Suba Park, whereas previously this guardian sprit had protected the 'enclave' of forest within the Mogle-Gogle-Qoche hilly community forest adjacent to Suba Park (Abate 2018:

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p. 131). Similarly, there was conflict among the state park agencies, the pastoral Afar and the Karrayu Oromo over the banning of access to Mount Fanatale, a significant water point and a ritual centre for pastoralists, demarcated within Awash Park in the late 1960s (Adargie 2020).

As the above shows, during the formative period of the imperial regime and the socialist government, the Oromo peasants near the Suba protected state forest often resorted to hidden everyday forms of peasant resistance against the repressive institutions established at all levels of the state apparatus (Scott 1986). However, the idea that peasant resistance is often confined to disorganized resistance and is often stifled by risk cannot be maintained in this case. For instance, the villages of two PAs in the vicinity of Suba protected state forest came out en masse and confiscated dozens of handsaws, axes and other tools and chased away labourers of the forest authorities to stop the expansion of the forest at the expense of their livelihoods (Forest and Wildlife Conservation Development Authority 1976, report no. 1:3). The forest authorities had also negotiated with the PAs. In the negotiations after the conflict, the authorities agreed to hand over 10 ha of eucalyptus plantations to the PAs (Forest and Wildlife Conservation Development Authority 1976, report no. 1:4). In a parallel development, the peasants agreed to the harvesting of the remaining sites by the authorities. This collective protest was the indirect effect of the land reforms of 1975. According to the 1975 land proclamation (Government of Ethiopia 1975), natural and plantation forests found within 800 ha of the boundaries of PAs must be under the jurisdiction of the local administrations so that their members could benefit from timber products.

The physical properties of resources in the Suba protected forest also play a key role in the transformation of 'hidden' individual resistance into collective resistance. The biggest trees in Suba Park exceed 50 m in height and are 2 m wide (Duguma et al. 2009). According to informants from Walmara and evidence from court cases, the illegal logging of the biggest trees of Suba is not as simple a case as it may seem. The surrounding peasants have participated in the 'illegal' logging of the forest not merely on an individual basis, but more often in collaboration or in small groups. The large trees of Suba could not be felled in a single day by one individual's labour; therefore, groups of peasants have cut the trees over the course of more than one day, hiding from guards at night (interview, key informant, Holeta, 15 August 2018). Then they would prepare the wood for different marketable items and move it using donkeys (their traditional means of transport) at night to the capital or other major towns for sale. In one night, groups of individuals could transport this wood using as many as 20 donkeys.

Evidence from a former president of the Walmara court shows the 'illegal' cutting of trees in the forest has come before the law court: 'Between 2004 and 2007 about 179 individuals and groups from different PAs of the Walmara district were accused of illegal cutting of the Suba forest. However, most of them were released free due to the lack of witness' (interview, key informant, former president of the Walmara Court, Holeta, 16 August 2018). The physical property of this resource, notably the trees' size, has shaped collective action, as groups of people worked together in pursuit of a shared set of political-economic and socio-cultural interests. The interface between state forest regimes and local people has been marked by the attempts of successive regimes to counteract resistance efforts through armed guards and check-points at the entrances of the major towns, with little success in stopping these activities (Abate 2018).

The disintegration of state authority and the breakdown of the former repressive state agencies in 1991 led peasants to attack what they believed to be a source of their oppression. Peasants concentrated their attacks on repressive rural institutions, governments and oppressive agencies. The collapse of the repressive power of the state was seen by peasants as a good opportunity 'to liberate their land from illegal occupations by the land and environmental policy of the state' (Abate 2006: p. 73). The repossession of land by surrounding PAs dramatically reduced the size of the Suba protected state forest from 9557 ha in 1984 to 3590 ha in 1998 (Bekele 2003, Abate 2006).

Discussion

The making of Suba Park created contestations between the state and local people over the use and benefits from resources (property rights) and territorial rights (political power in terms of jurisdictional entitlements over resources and persons) from the time of Emperor Menelik's foundation of Addis Ababa in the late nineteenth century through the imperial state of Haile Selassie, the Derg regime after 1974 and the EPRDF regime after 1991. The state used environmental conservation to justify expropriation of multi-dimensional socio-cultural and spatial landscapes of indigenous peoples' territories. The expansionism of the simplified state narrative enabled the government to make 'the terrain, its products, and its workforce more legible – and hence manipulable – from above and from the centre' (Scott 1998: p. 3). The Oromo have used their material and cosmological resources to defend against simplifying state narratives of environmental conservation that exclude them from their livelihoods.

The close investigation of physical, ethnographical and historical evidence in this case attests to the transformation of individual resistance into community confrontation. Archival sources also help to refute the general argument that peasant resistance is often restricted to disorganized resistance and is often stifled by risk. The physical aspect of the resources in the Suba protected forest has also provided an opportunity for the transformation of individual resistance into collective resistance. I also show how peasant reactions to the collapse of the repressive power of the communist state in 1991 and the ensuing peasants' encroachment by fire-setting and repossession of land from forest authorities radically reduced the size of the Suba forest between successive administrations. These community confrontations were more visible in the period between regime changes.

The Suba case shows how indigenous peoples not only react to forced removal from their land and their exclusion from accessing subsistence resources, but also to their exclusion from resources of symbolic value, spiritual attachment and ritual value. For example, the defiance of the local villages against the conservation authorities seeking to halt illegal nocturnal felling of trees and the community's sense of PFM as a governmental policy to displace them from their land appear to have been the results of common solidarity amongst the local villages; this occurred as part of the reaction to the historical memories of the banning of access to traditional resources attached to local livelihoods and the religious and symbolic values of these resources, such as the sacred *qaalluu* site of Hadha Abbayyii.

The Tulama's covert and overt methods of resistance such as illegal felling of trees, direct confrontation with forest regimes, fire-setting and repossession of land from forest authorities, seen by the authorities as 'sabotage', are situational, ambivalent, dynamic and fluid, and they often have arisen in times of political turmoil,

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during the disintegration of repressive agencies and within transitional periods. Yet the state continues to be a coercive force extracting resources in the vicinity of Suba and the lowland peripheries, although the struggle to disentangle the oppressive wing of the state flourished elsewhere in Ethiopia recently. The long-term land alienation and marginalization coupled with the contemporary large-scale land acquisition for foreign and domestic enterprises has instigated violent conflict and opposition both in the state's lowland peripheries and in the vicinities of the capital city. There has been resistance amongst local peoples for land rights in the south-western peripheral region of Gambella in Ethiopia (Meckelburg 2014), as well as the Gumuz people's resistance to large-scale farms in Ethiopia's western peripheral region of Benishangul-Gumuz (Meckelburg 2014, Moreda 2015). There has also been peasant resistance to 'land grabs' in the floriculture sector near Suba (Abate 2020). In a broader context, the struggle to defend land rights among indigenous people elsewhere in Ethiopia reveals that land has been a central focus of people's grievances, which emphasizes the territorial implications of ethnicity (Meckelburg 2014). The indigenous peoples' resistance to 'land grabs' by state agents and private investors in the vicinity of Suba and the state's lowland peripheries is entrenched in their multi-dimensional socio-cultural and spatial formulation of land and territory (The Oakland Institute 2011, Meckelburg 2014, Abate 2020). A turning point has been the recent federal state territorial expansion into the Oromo ethnic territory through a new Addis Ababa Master Plan and the Oromo protests (2014–2018) against the expansion of the central state that led to Haile Mariam Desalegn being deposed and Abiy Amhed being installed in April 2018.

Conclusion

I have drawn on the insights from long-term ethnographic fieldwork and have framed the study in terms of acts of resistance (from everyday resistance to collective action) against state narratives of environmental protection used to justify expropriation. I have explored the contestations between the state environmental narratives and the Tulama Oromo derivation of material, social, spiritual and symbolic values from the land in the struggle for land and resource rights in Suba Park. I have argued that the Ethiopian state environmental policy entrenched in centralized state administration and exclusionist resource management schemes maintained for extraction and conservation in the Suba forest between the late 1890s and 2018 have reinforced a wider concern about environmental governance regimes and indigenous land and resource rights. This research builds on the growing literature on the social effects of conservation and indigenous peoples' struggles for land and resource rights.

I have shown that the Oromo peasants reacted not only to their forced removal from their land and their exclusion from accessing subsistence resources, but also to their exclusion from resources of symbolic value, spiritual attachment and ritual value. The empirical findings in this study indicate the prominence in resistance of continuing banned livelihood practices such as logging, hunting and the observance of ritual places associated with the guardian spirit of Hadha Abbayyii, as well as the particular symbolic values that these have regarding such conflict. They also demonstrate not only the social dynamics in these conflicts, but also the distinctive function of the physical aspects of such forest resources, notably trees' size, in shifting individual resistance into a collective form of resistance. The Tulama acts of resistance, such as illegal felling of trees, direct confrontation with forest regimes, fire-setting and repossession of land from forest authorities, have been political reactions to the imposition of conservation on indigenous communities. Peasants' forest encroachment during the historical transition (1991–1993) that cut the Suba forest to approximately two-thirds of its former size illustrates that such community confrontations became more visible during the between regimes. The long-term struggles of indigenous people against extraction and conservation are not isolated; rather, they are part of wider political and economic dynamics of indigenous peoples' struggles against the state narratives of conservation used to justify the expropriation of indigenous territories.

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