

IN THE SHADOW OF LEVIATHAN: RIVER BASIN DEVELOPMENT IN ETHIOPIA'S LOWER OMO VALLEY¹

David Turton
African Studies Centre, University of Oxford, UK

In this paper I describe a case of river-basin development in southwestern Ethiopia, and attempt to shed light on the particular form it has taken, by setting it firmly within the context of Ethiopian state-building. It was not until after the Second World War that, as a result of various political and social reforms introduced by the Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia began to make serious progress towards nation-statehood. Amongst the first steps to be taken to create a homogeneous national space in the lower Omo Valley was the setting up of the Omo and Mago National Parks. These were conceived as 'wilderness' areas which needed to be protected from the 'consumptive use' of local people, who were neither consulted about their borders nor offered compensation for the restrictions the parks imposed on their access to subsistence resources. The final steps in the incorporation of the Omo lowlands into the Ethiopian state are likely to follow the completion, in the next two or three years, of the Gibe 3 hydroelectric dam in the middle-Omo basin. This will eliminate the annual flood, on which thousands of downstream people depend for both their agricultural and pastoral activities, and thereby make possible large scale commercial irrigation schemes for which leases are already being handed out, mainly to foreign 'investors'. As yet, no credible plans for compensation or benefit sharing have been made public, or discussed with the downstream population, many of whom are therefore likely to face a future living on food aid and/or as day-labourers on commercial plantations.

The sociologist Zigmunt Bauman, in an essay on the history of European unification, describes the merging of the idea of nation with that of the independent state as follows:

And so it happened that states and nations could not live without each other. Nations needed states to forge the "locals" into nationals..... Only the state, with its monopoly of coercion and canons of obligatory education, could preside over..[the]...blending of tribes into nations.....On the other hand, the state needed a nation - so that it could demand discipline in the name of sentiment, conscience and patriotic duty, prompt its subjects to act in the name of common tradition, and blackmail the lukewarm into compliance through invocation of the common fate. Indeed, a perfect marriage, one made in heaven (1998:4).

Amongst the most striking products of the marriage between nation and state have been large-scale state-sponsored schemes which forcibly displace people from their land and homes, and/or deny them access to property and resources, in the 'national interest'. Whatever else such schemes are - and they are, of course, almost always

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intended to improve the human condition - they are techniques of state-building. As James C. Scott has pointed out, a vital part of any state-building project is to make the bewildering diversity and complexity of the physical and social landscape 'legible' in accordance with the administrative and bureaucratic objectives of the state, objectives which have to do primarily with political control and revenue extraction (1998: 2). But although state-building can be talked about in these broad terms, as though it were a single process, it shows much variation from state to state, across both space and time. If schemes by which states forcibly displace their own citizens and/or deny them access to vital resources are examples of state-building, therefore, it follows that their implications for social justice and the way resistance to them is organised, will vary according to the historical, geographical and cultural characteristics of the state in question.

I begin with a brief account of the history of state-building in Ethiopia's southwestern periphery, a history which turns out to be greatly illuminated by the thesis of Scott's latest book, *The art of not being governed* (2009), on state-making in the hill country of mainland Southeast Asia. I then describe the setting up of national parks in the lower Omo as a means by which the state was able to extend its political control into a hitherto barely administered part of its territory, for no apparent political motive. In the third section, I summarise what we know about the Gibe III hydroelectric project, about government plans for the subsequent development of the lower Omo, and about the likely impact of all this on the downstream population. Finally, I describe how resistance to government sponsored development in the lower Omo has been articulated, in the absence of any functioning civil society in Ethiopia, and the dilemmas this raises for the academic observer, international NGOs and local people. At several points in the paper I shall refer, for ethnographic illustration, to one particular downstream people, the agro-pastoral Mursi, amongst whom I have been carrying out anthropological research over the past forty years. (*Fig. 1: Peoples of the lower Omo Valley*)

Abyssinian expansion into the southwest

The lower Omo formally became part of the Ethiopian state in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the small highland kingdom of Abyssinia extended its reach southwards to establish the current international borders of Ethiopia with Kenya, Somalia and the Sudan. The physical, climatic and cultural conditions of the Abyssinian centre, with its mountain ranges, heavy rainfall, Christian tradition and plough cultivating peasantry, contrast markedly with those of its hot, dry, lowland periphery, inhabited mainly by pastoralists. This contrast has dominated the process of Ethiopian state building to this day. The Abyssinian soldier-settlers who accompanied the armies of the Emperor Menelik II into the Omo Lowlands saw themselves faced with a wild and unforgiving landscape where no recognizable imprint of civilisation had been left by its inhabitants. They saw it above all as dangerous and threatening – a chaotic, disease-ridden and unproductive tract of land, inhabited by anarchic and violence-prone nomads. In the highlands on either side of the valley they had found settled agricultural populations with familiar social structures which they could readily incorporate into their own system of expropriation and control. The lowlands were another matter and they made no attempt to settle in

this 'desert', or to use it for anything other than hunting and raiding the local population for slaves and livestock.

The result was that, even after the formal demarcation of Ethiopia's international borders at the turn of the nineteenth century, the *de facto* southern boundary of the state reached no further than the edge of the highland periphery. Beyond this line was a wide border zone, only nominally incorporated into the Ethiopian state, a zone of sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent interaction between small groups of mobile herders, as well as between them and highland agriculturalists. This is an area of great linguistic and cultural diversity, partly no doubt because of the ecological richness of the lower Omo environment, with a large permanent river, fringed by riverine forest, flowing through semi-arid and arid savanna and ending in a large permanent lake. From north to south we can count at least eight different groups, speaking languages which belong to two of Africa's four major language families, Nilo-Saharan (Bodi, Mursi, Kwegu, Suri and Nyangatom) and Afro-Asiatic (Daasanach, Hamar and Kara). All but the two smallest of these groups, the Kwegu and Kara who live all the year round along the banks of the Omo, are agro-pastoralists. The Kwegu and Kara are, by tradition, hunters and pastoralists respectively, but they now depend on agriculture, while also keeping some small stock.

Interaction, both warlike and peaceful, between these groups and the sedentary cultivators of the surrounding highlands had, of course, long pre-dated the drawing of Ethiopia's southern boundary, but once this had occurred, the frontier zone also became a zone of interaction and struggle between society and the state. For the agro-pastoralists of the lower Omo this struggle did not take the form of direct confrontation, since the state has always been too powerful for them to contemplate this. Rather, it took the form of avoidance, both active, by literally getting out of the way of the state when necessary, and passive, by emphasizing and promoting patterns of behaviour that made the exercise of state control more difficult, such as mobility and an egalitarian political ethos. But avoidance only works when the state is relatively weak or (which is to say the same thing) when there are still spaces within its boundaries where its control does not reach. For much of the last century, this was the situation in the Lower Omo. It has only been over the last 40 years or so that the Ethiopian state has begun to establish the kind of control over the lower Omo region which allows us to speak realistically of state incorporation. Apart from the setting up of the Omo and Mago National Parks, in 1966 and 1979 respectively, other notable steps towards this goal were the creation of an irrigated state cotton plantation just north of Lake Turkana in the 1980s and the resettlement of Konso agriculturalists from the highlands to the Omo lowlands in the 1990s.

This picture of 'internal colonialism' in Ethiopia's southern periphery is mirrored in remarkable detail by Scott's account of 'state-making' in the huge upland border area of mainland Southeast Asia, stretching from Vietnam to northern India (2009). Here, the direction of state expansion was from the lowlands to the highlands, from valley states based on fixed-field wet-rice cultivation to non-state 'zones of refuge' in the hills, occupied by shifting cultivators and foragers. Contrary to the 'civilizational discourse' of the valleys, these upland societies are best seen, according to Scott, not as the remnants of a primitive way of life that had been left behind by civilization, but as examples of 'deliberate and reactive statelessness' (op. cit.: x), designed to keep the

state – principally the Han Chinese state - and all its works at arms length. From the point of view of the state, the problem was how to appropriate these peripheral and relatively inaccessible areas, with their diverse, fluid and mobile populations, and ‘illegible’ subsistence economies, into the ‘fiscally legible economy of wage labour and sedentary agriculture’ (op. cit.: 10). An early solution to this problem was forcibly to relocate hill people, by various forms of bondage, from stateless zones to areas of state control. But as ‘distance demolishing technologies’ reduced the ‘friction of terrain’ (op. cit.: 12), other solutions became possible, such as the resettlement of land-hungry people from the plains to the hills, where they could replicate the settlement patterns and agriculture of the lowlands, and the establishment of development projects that would ‘project government administration and lowland cultural styles into the hills’ (op. cit.: 20). As the nation-states of the Southeast Asian mainland extended their monopoly of coercive force into their upland peripheries, during the last half century, so it became clear that ‘these neglected and seemingly useless territories’ were in fact of great potential value to ‘the economies of mature capitalism’ (op. cit.: 11).

Even from this brief summary, the parallels with the history of state expansion in the Ethiopian southwest are striking. The value of Scott’s account for my purpose is two-fold. First, it helps us to appreciate that the peoples of the lower Omo, who have spent most of the last century attempting to keep the state at bay, were not simply hiding from its political control. Rather, they were, and still are, culturally committed to a way of life and system of values which is fundamentally incompatible with the sedentarising principle of the nation-state. If then, their history is to become the history of the state (as indeed it must, given the ‘hegemony...of the nation-state as the standard.....unit of sovereignty’ (op. cit.: 10) in the modern world) they cannot survive as non-state enclaves. They must, in other words, be drawn in to the ‘fiscally legible economy’ of the state, a process which will entail profound changes of lifestyle, culture and identity. The problem then becomes, not how this transition can be frustrated, but how it can be managed with the minimum of pain and the maximum of benefit for the affected population.

Second, Scott’s analysis reminds us that the extension of state control over the nonstate periphery is not simply dictated by the expansionary logic of nation-statehood. In the ‘civilizational discourse’ of state expansion, it also brings great benefits to the population of the periphery, by drawing them in to the ‘civilized’ life of wage labour and sedentary agriculture. On this logic, it would be a short step to argue that, even if the people of the lower Omo have to survive on food aid in resettlement villages, they and their children will be better off than before, because they will have been rescued by the state from the barbarism of their former lives. I have never heard this thinking put into words by state officials, but I have often wondered whether it might help to explain one of the most striking gaps in the documentation that has so far been made public on the Gibe III dam. This is the total absence of detailed plans for compensation, benefit sharing and investment to assist those who will pay the main costs of this final phase of state incorporation in the lower Omo, in the loss of their land, livelihoods and cultural identities.

Conservation as state building

At the end of his study of state-making in mainland Southeast Asia, Scott identifies four ‘eras’ in the long-run trend towards a world in which all space is ‘administered space’. The first and longest era is one of statelessness. The second is an era of small-scale states surrounded by stateless peripheries. Next comes an era in which ‘such peripheries are shrunken and beleaguered by the expansion of state power’ until, finally, a fourth era is reached in which the periphery is ‘not much more than a folkloric remnant’ (op. cit.: 324). The second of these eras represents pretty well the situation of the peoples of the lower Omo during the first half of the last century: living in the shadow of state power but relatively unaffected by it, apart from occasional violent incursions which could be more or less successfully resisted by strategies of avoidance. The third era, which marks a qualitatively new phase in the process of state expansion, began for the lower Omo during the 1960s and 1970s. This was a key period in the history of the Ethiopian nation-state because it saw the fall of the Emperor Haile Selassie, in 1974, and the coming to power of the first Ethiopian government to be firmly committed to nation-statism (Clapham, 2002: 14) – the socialist military government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, known as the Derg. But the first major event of Scott’s third era in the lower Omo predated the fall of Haile Selassie. This was the establishment of the Omo National Park in 1966.

Conservationists, like nationalists, need the state for its coercive power - in the case of conservationists, for its ability to demarcate protected areas and enforce restrictions on their use. For the state, this ‘territorialisation of conservation space’ (Robbins, 2004: 152) provides a convenient way of extending its political control to hitherto relatively unadministered parts of its territory, with no apparent political motive. Those who established Ethiopia’s first national parks shared with most of their wildlife conservationist colleagues in Africa an institutional culture which excluded local people from conservation plans and policies conceptually, intellectually and often physically. They were excluded conceptually because ‘true’ nature was considered to be ‘wild’ nature; they were excluded intellectually because local knowledge was considered to be worthless, or at least no match for ecological science; and they were excluded physically (wherever possible) because the presence of local people within a national park was considered to be detrimental both to the ‘natural’ balance of nature and to the feeling of remoteness which was deemed to be so important to tourists. This institutional culture, which came to be known as ‘fortress conservation’, fits perfectly with the ‘hegemonic planning mentality’ of ‘high-modernist state-craft’, a mentality that ‘excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how’ (Scott, 1998: 6). Some have suggested that this convergence of interest between conservation and the state, rather than a newly recognised urgency to protect disappearing species, accounts for the ‘post-war conservation boom’ in colonial East Africa, of which Ethiopia’s first national parks were partly a product (Neumann, 2002).

Fortress conservation was brought to Ethiopia by a small groups of ex-patriot advisers, most of whom had already played leading roles in this East African ‘conservation boom’. Leslie Brown and Ian Grimwood, formerly Director of Agriculture and Chief Game Warden of Kenya respectively, submitted a report to the Ethiopian government in 1965 recommending the establishment of a national park in the lower Omo, an area which Brown later described as possessing ‘a special quality of remoteness’ which would attract many visitors (Brown, 1969: 333). In 1978 two other consultants, John Stephenson, who had been chief Game Warden of Tanzania’s

first national park, Serengeti, and Akinori Mizuno, described the lower Omo as one of Africa's last 'unspoilt wildernesses'. They recommended the creation of a single Omo/Mago National Park, from which the resident population should be evicted 'as soon as possible', after which the 'integrity' of their borders should be vigorously maintained (Stephenson and Mizuno, 1978). To appreciate the attractiveness of this vision of national park development in the lower Omo for the Ethiopian state, we need only consider that aspect of society in its lowland periphery which had always proved most difficult for it to accommodate: mobility.

Regular seasonal movements are not just a practical necessity for the agro-pastoralists of the lower Omo, but the very *idea* of movement is a defining feature of what it means to be Bodi, Mursi, Nyangatom, Daasanach etc. – and even of what it means to be human. The Mursi, for example, see themselves as a people who are always 'looking for a cool place' (Turton, 1998), a place with well watered grassland for cattle herding and riverside forest for cultivation. Their 'land of milk and honey' is always ahead of them: it is a place they will never reach. In a sense, they *are* movement. To be on a journey towards a destination which is in principle unreachable implies an open-ended, expansive way of imagining space. It implies that one is looking out towards the horizon from wherever one happens to be on the earth's surface, rather than looking down, from an unchanging vantage point, on a bounded, mapable territory. When the politico-ritual leader of the northern Mursi, Komorakora, complained in a public meeting in 1996 that 'Our land has shrunk' (Turton, 2003: 15), he did not mean that the actual terrain they occupied had become smaller but that paths for future movement had been blocked by state encroachment. This is a way of imagining space which cannot be accommodated by the sedentarising principle upon which the nation state is built.

In this context, the establishment of national parks in Ethiopia's lowland periphery in the 1960s and 1970s was an effective means of state building, for three main reasons. First, it involved the drawing of boundaries around areas to which local people would be denied access and, conversely, other areas within which they would be confined. In view of the minimal number of game guards employed to police these boundaries, this was to some extent a paper exercise. But it nevertheless enabled a simplified, legible and mapable 'grid' to be laid over the complex landscapes and patterns of human occupation and land use of the lower Omo, creating thereby a 'virtual space' that was more in accordance with the administrative and bureaucratic aims and objectives of the state. A good example of this is provided by the official map of the Mago National Park. This shows 'Mursi Land' as a narrow wedge of territory, squeezed between the Omo and the western boundary of the park whereas, in reality, the park encloses about half the most valuable agricultural and grazing land of the Mursi. (*Fig. 2. The Omo and Mago National Parks showing the extent of Mursi occupation; Fig. 3: Official map of the Mago National Park*) Second, conservation, linked to state control and coercion, was seen to offer opportunities for the centre to extract revenue from local resources that could go directly into the state's coffers, through the development of tourism. And third, all these activities, including any potential forced resettlement of populations living in the parks, could be justified by the overriding imperative of helping to save the world's biological heritage (Peluso, op. cit.).

The institutional wisdom of fortress conservation has remained highly influential amongst Ethiopian wildlife staff and their foreign advisers, and goes a long way, I believe, to explaining the troubled history of national park development in the lower Omo over the past fifty years. Two attempts have been made since the 1990s to implement the founding vision of the Omo and Mago parks with the aid of external funding, both of them dismal failures. These were conventional fortress conservation projects, ‘retrofitted’ (Adams and Hulme, 2001) with largely symbolic benefit sharing schemes for local people, intended both to silence potential criticism from human rights activists and to persuade local people to support a model of conservation which saw no place for them in nature. The ‘National Parks Rehabilitation in Southern Ethiopia Project’, funded by the then European Development Fund, got under way in 1995 and came to a premature end in 1998, having achieved none of its main objectives in the Omo and Mago Parks (MGM Environmental Solutions Ltd., 1999; Turton, 2002). In 2006 the Omo National Park was taken over, on a 25 year lease, by a Netherlands-based not-for-profit multinational company, African Parks Foundation, in a public-private partnership agreement with the Ethiopian government. It too was a conventional fortress conservation project, clothed in the rhetoric of community conservation, but inspired by a new dogma: that Africa’s failing national parks will only be saved if they are run according to sound business principles. Two years later it announced it was giving up its management of the Omo park because of lack of government support, a shortage of external funding, the difficulty of managing community relations and the unjustified criticisms being leveled at it by human rights organizations.

The forced resettlement recommended by Stephenson and Mizuno in 1978 was not implemented, probably because of the political turmoil that was engulfing Ethiopia at the time, following the overthrow of the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. The desirability of resettling people from the Omo and Mago parks was again raised in the 1990s, by the National Parks Rehabilitation Project, but in the end it was judged to be unfeasible (MGM Environmental Solutions, *op. cit.*: 51). By then, of course, the fashion for ‘community based conservation’ in international conservation circles had made evictions in the name of conservation increasingly problematic, while the fact that those who lived in the parks were well armed with automatic weapons may not have been irrelevant. The resettlement of the agro-pastoralists of the lower Omo could well still happen, but if it does, it will be more to achieve the government’s long term political objective of bringing about the ‘phased voluntary sedentarization’ of all Ethiopian pastoralists ‘along the banks of the major rivers’ (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002) than to fulfil the conservationist’s dream of an ‘unspoilt wilderness’.

The creation of national parks has undoubtedly been one of the most effective strategies – perhaps *the* most effective strategy - by which the Ethiopian state has extended its control over the lower Omo during the past fifty years. But if the marriage between the state and the nation was made in heaven, that between the state and conservation is one of convenience. Today, and to use Scott’s terminology, ‘distance-demolishing technologies’ have so reduced the ‘friction of terrain’ in the Ethiopian southwest that new and more attractive ways are emerging for the state to advance its project of control and revenue extraction, ways which are not, however, compatible with the conservationists’ project of wilderness protection. Most immediately these include the construction of the Gibe III hydro-electric dam which

will not only create an exportable surplus of electricity but which will also, by regulating the flow of the Omo, make possible large-scale commercial irrigation schemes in its lower basin. For the state, commercial agriculture will at last make the 'wasteland' of the lower Omo productive in a way the parks have signally failed to do, providing both revenue for the state's coffers and employment for local people. For conservationists, commercial plantations, even if they do not eat into the parks themselves, will threaten their effectiveness as protectors of wildlife, by reducing the extent of the surrounding buffer zones through which animals are free to move.

Dams and plantations

The hydropower potential of the Omo, which is known as Gibe in its upper basin, is second only, amongst Ethiopian rivers, to that of the Blue Nile (Kloos and Worku, 2010: 78). As yet, however, only one dam has been completed along its course. Known as Gibe 1, this began operating in 2004 and is currently Ethiopia's single largest supplier of electricity. In January 2010 a power plant, known as Gibe 2, was opened further downstream. This does not have its own dam but draws water through a 26 km. tunnel from the Gibe 1 reservoir.² In 2006, Salini Construttori of Italy, which had also built Gibe 1 and 2, began construction of Gibe 3. At 240 meters high, this will be the tallest dam in Africa and will double Ethiopia's electricity generating capacity.³ This will far exceed the predicted domestic demand and it is planned to export up to 50 per cent of the electricity generated to neighbouring countries. The completion date of the dam has been put back several times and latest estimates are 2013 or 2014. Two more dams are planned further downstream, the second of which will be located where the entrenched valley of the Omo opens out into its lower basin. (*Fig. 4: The Omo-Gibe basin hydropower cascade.*)

Gibe 3 represents a huge financial and engineering undertaking which is expected to bring great economic benefits to Ethiopia and which, like many such projects, is of huge symbolic importance to the country's political leadership. But by eliminating the annual Omo flood, it will also have potentially devastating consequences for the peoples of the lower Omo. All of the groups mentioned earlier depend heavily on cultivation (mainly of sorghum but also maize, beans and chick-peas) and for those living along the Omo itself (Bodi, Mursi, Kara, Kwegu, Nyangatom and Daasanach) land liable to be inundated by the annual flood is the most valuable agricultural resource they possess. This is for two main reasons. First, flood-retreat cultivation depends on the heavy rain that falls over the highland catchments area of the Omo, rather than on the erratic floodplain rainfall. Second, and equally important, the annual deposition of fertile flood silts makes the same areas cultivable year after year, without the use of fertilizers. Since flooded areas are more extensive on the inner bends of meanders, the amount of land available for planting is determined by the sinuosity of the river, which increases from north to south. The particular contribution made by the Omo flood to the economy of a group depends, therefore, on where that group is located along the Omo.

² Two weeks after the opening ceremony part of the tunnel collapsed, putting the power plant out of action. It was estimated in March that repairs would take a further five or six months to complete. (<http://www.tunneltalk.com/Ethiopia-Mar10-Recovery-and-lining-performance.php>)

³ A few more facts about Gibe 3: location 300 km. southwest of Addis Ababa; cost 1.7 billion USD; reservoir storage capacity 11.75 billion m³; electricity generating capacity 1,870 mw.

For those who live in the northern part of the lower basin, a relatively limited amount of land is inundated by the flood and flood-retreat cultivation must therefore be combined, not only with pastoralism, but also with the less reliable shifting cultivation. This does not mean that the contribution of flood cultivation to the economies of these groups is any less important than the contribution of either shifting cultivation or pastoralism. Each would be insufficient on its own, or even in combination with one of the other two, but taken together they form the basis of the long term viability of the household economy. Further downstream, not only are the meanders more pronounced, but the flood also submerges larger areas away from the immediate banks of the river, including oxbow lakes. This enables the Kara and Daasanach to produce virtually all the grain they need by flood-retreat cultivation. The Daasanach, who occupy the Omo delta and the northern shores of Lake Turkana, are even able to produce large surpluses which, in good years, is exported as far afield as Arba Minch and Moyale. The flood is also vital for the pastoral activities of the Daasanach. During the driest months of the year, between November and March, the recently flooded 'flats', which are more extensive than can be cultivated by the available labour, provide excellent grazing when no alternative pasture is available (Almagor, 1978; Carr, 1977).

Given the reliance of all these groups on the Omo flood, it is clear that the most immediate and direct impact of the dam on the peoples of the lower Omo will come from a reduction in river flow. We cannot say with any certainty, based on the available evidence, what the results of this reduction will be, in terms of lost crops and pasturage. But we can say that, if the flood were eliminated or greatly reduced, this would have a devastating impact on up to 200,000 people living in the lower Omo. It is extraordinary, therefore, not only that the environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the dam was not completed until 2006, the year construction began, but also that it totally ignored the impact the dam was likely to have on the people and environment of the flood plain. What is perhaps even more striking is that this appears to have been the result not of a deliberate oversight or lack of diligence on the part of the planners and environmental consultants, but of a simple failure to 'see'. The Gibe 3 dam is an extreme example of what Scott calls 'seeing like a state': a way of seeing that also characterised early modern European statecraft and was 'devoted to rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format'. These 'state simplifications' were like maps which, 'when allied with state power, would enable much of the reality they depicted to be re-made', both for better and worse (1998: 3).

Even the international NGO's who were the first to campaign against the dam, International Rivers and the Rome-based Campaign for the Reform of the World Bank (CRBM), seemed unaware, as they started their campaign, of the impact the dam would have on the peoples of the lower Omo. They focused their early attention on the regulatory, legal and financial failings of the project and on the inadequacy of resettlement plans for the relatively small number of people who would be forced to move from the site of the reservoir (Hathaway, 2008; CRBM, 2008). Once the full implications of the loss of the flood for downstream peoples was taken up by the campaigners, the Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation (EEPCO), no doubt spurred on by the need to satisfy the loan conditions of multilateral development banks, issued a revised and expanded version of the EIA, now entitled *Environmental and*

Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) (CESI & Mid-Day, 2008). This included summaries of relevant passages from a third report, subtitled *Additional Study of Downstream Impacts*, dealing specifically with the lower Omo (Agriconsulting & Mid-Day, 2009). The main measure proposed in this report to mitigate the impact of reduced flood levels is the annual release of a ‘controlled flood’, over a ten day period in late August or September. It is claimed that this will ‘compensate all adverse effects’ of reduced river flow (CESI & Mid-Day, 2008, p. 223), and bring more benefits besides.

The size and duration of the controlled flood appears to have been worked out from mathematical models, coupled with the need to minimize water loss from the reservoir. There is no evidence that these calculations were informed by a detailed understanding of the environmental knowledge and agricultural and pastoral practice of local people. Nor is it clear how local people - meaning not local administrators but those actually dependent on the controlled flood for their livelihoods - will be able to influence how it is managed and how its effectiveness is monitored. One is left wondering how an artificial flood, taking place over ten days and with its nutrient-rich sediment load having been trapped behind the dam wall, could compensate for the productive potential of the current flood regime. This lasts from March/April, when the river begins to rise, until September when it begins to fall, having reached its peak level in August. An *Independent Review* of the ESIA, commissioned by the European Investment Bank, notes that ‘98 per cent of the sediment entering the reservoir will be trapped’ (SOGREAH, 2010:89). It also notes, as if in mitigation of this fact, that ‘the river runs 200 km before the first village and recession agriculture’ (op. cit.: 74), but fails to mention the plan to build two more dams below Gibe 3, for one of which (Gibe 4) a memorandum of agreement has already been signed with a Chinese construction company. Nevertheless, the authors of the *Independent Review* are clearly not happy with the controlled flood, the adequacy of which, ‘in its present form’, they find ‘questionable’ (op. cit.: 73).⁴

Managed releases from dams are a relatively new and untried method of sustaining floodplain ecosystems and they involve a high degree of technical and social complexity (Acreman, 2000). One would have expected, therefore that the proposed managed releases from Gibe 3 would have merited rather more discussion than the brief and superficial treatment given to them in the *Additional study* (pp. 165-168). Although some examples of managed releases from dams elsewhere are mentioned, and although there is a list of ‘critical steps’ required for the successful implementation of a controlled flood, there is no consideration given to the specific lessons that could be learnt by the Gibe 3 project from experience elsewhere. One very important lesson would have been that controlled floods must be designed and implemented on the basis of a detailed understanding of local knowledge and practice, which requires that those whose livelihoods will be most affected by the reduced flow should be informed and consulted from the very start of the planning process. There is also no mention in the *Additional study* of the sustainability of the controlled flood, particularly in the light of its cost, in terms of lost energy production. The SOGREAH report estimates that this will amount to between 7.8 and 10.8 m. US\$ per annum and comments that, in the conflict of interest between electricity production (much of which is intended for export) and the subsistence economies of

⁴ So questionable, in fact, that they suggest instead the building of a ‘flap gate barrage’ or ‘gated weir’ (costing up to 40m US\$) across the Omo just north of the delta to raise the river level for irrigation.

the local population, 'it is probable that priority will not be given to recession agriculture'.

The lack of detailed consideration given to the controlled flood in the ESIA becomes explicable in the light of what appears to be an off-the-cuff comment in a press release issued in March 2010 by the construction company, Salini Costruttori (2010). This came in response to criticisms of the dam, based on its likely downstream impacts, made by Survival International, which had by now launched a 'Stop the Dam' campaign on its website. In its press release, the company commented that the controlled flood 'will enable the local people to have a transitory period of a suitable duration when it is deemed opportune to switch from flood-retreat agriculture to more modern forms of agriculture'. Whoever wrote this clearly considered that the controlled flood, the main 'mitigating measure' proposed in the ESIA for the loss of the annual flood, was in fact a stop-gap measure, intended to last only until it was 'deemed opportune' for local people to take up 'more modern forms of agriculture'. It is not specified what these are, but irrigation must surely be what is meant. And yet, since there was no suggestion in the ESIA that the controlled flood would be phased out, there was also no discussion - nor has there been to my knowledge in any subsequent project documents - of how irrigated agriculture would be phased in as the mainstay of the agricultural production of the peoples of the lower Omo. On the contrary, the claim that the controlled flood would 'compensate all adverse effects' of reduced river flow enabled the authors of the ESIA to ignore altogether the difficult issue of how to compensate local people for the loss of their most valuable agricultural resource.

The fact that the regulation of the river flow will encourage investment in irrigation by 'farmers and companies' is mentioned only in passing by the authors of the *Additional study* (p. 136). They do note, however, elsewhere in the report, that the site of what had been, in the 1980s, an irrigated state cotton farm, in Daasanach territory on the east bank of the Omo, 'has recently been acquired by some investors and is apparently being developed to grow oil palm' (p. 96). In fact, these 'investors', from Fri el Green Power of Italy, which describes itself as an 'alternative energy company', had acquired a concession amounting to 30,000 ha., three times the size of the original farm (Addis Fortune, 2007). The plan is to grow oil palm, and possibly also *Jatropha*, as feedstock for the production of biofuel. Other 'investors' are reported to have acquired, or to be in the process of acquiring, concessions of at least equal size for commercial plantations bordering the Omo in the Kara and Nyangatom areas. Further north, in the Bodi area, another Italian company, known as Ethio-Renewable Energy LTC (OBM), is reported to have acquired 40,000 hectares of savanna grassland for the production of sunflower seed and *Jatropha*, for export to Italy. These developments must be seen in the context of the current 'land grab' phenomenon that is affecting Africa, and in which Ethiopia has become a leading player.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, once the Gibe 3 dam is fully operational, there will be a significant expansion of large scale commercial agriculture in the lower Omo basin. One of the few pieces of hard evidence we have for this is a study made by the southern regional government for the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. This identifies over 160,000 ha. of grassland and savanna bordering the Omo in the Kara, Nyangatom and Daasanach areas which are

considered suitable for the irrigated cultivation of such crops as cotton, sesame, soya bean, palm oil, sugar cane and ground nut. The picture that emerges of the future Omo Valley landscape then, is one in which former pastoralists will live in permanent settlements and subsist on a combination of food aid, wage labour and perhaps some small-scale irrigated agriculture, while the bulk of their former grazing areas are given over to large-scale commercial plantations. In Scott's terms, we can see this as the imposition of a 'legible, agrarian landscape' on the messy illegibility of Ethiopia's lowland periphery, a strategy which is, according to Scott, 'hard-wired to state-making' (2009: 76). Writing of the 'vast campaigns of forced resettlement and sedentarization' targeted at shifting cultivators in the border areas of Vietnam, he attributes this policy to 'the state's need to use such land for permanent settlement, to realise for itself the revenue from the extraction of natural resources, and to bring such nonstate peoples finally to heel' (2009: 78).

Like Ethiopia's first foray into river basin development in the Awash Valley in the 1960s (Kloos, 1982), the parks, dams and plantations of the Omo Valley have been, and are being, planned exclusively according to the priorities of central government and in the interests of a state-making project which has not yet fully incorporated the peoples of its lowland periphery. Just as the Omo National Park was taken, as the Mursi put it, by 'people who kept their mouths shut', so there was no attempt even to inform downstream people of the Gibe 3 dam project until construction was well under way, let alone to include them meaningfully in the planning process. The 'public consultations' described in the 'Additional study' (pp. 159-163 and Appendix 9) have been understandably criticized on the grounds that they fell far short of what a meaningful consultation process should be (Hathaway, 2009). But their main shortcoming, from the point of view of social justice and human rights, was not their limited scope and partial coverage, nor even their use of questionnaires that had to be completed by administrators because they could not be read by a largely illiterate population; it was that they took place two years after construction of the dam had begun. It is of course an often noted weakness of such 'consultations' and impact assessments that they are undertaken principally to support and help forward an existing project, rather than to provide a neutral assessment of the environmental and social costs of one that is still being considered (Acreman, 2000, p.55-56). It is difficult to imagine a more extreme case in point than the Gibe 3 dam.

Dilemmas of resistance

There is no doubt that the leaders of the Ethiopian state are sincere believers in the 'civilizational discourse' of state expansion: they genuinely believe that their plans for river basin development in the lower Omo will improve the human condition of its residents. It therefore becomes relevant to ask, as Scott does in *Seeing like a state*, why 'so many well-intended schemes to improve the human condition have gone so tragically awry' (1998: 4). His answer is that 'the most tragic episodes of state-initiated social engineering' have resulted from a combination of four elements, two of which are present in all modern nation-states: the 'administrative ordering of nature and society' and a belief that the growing satisfaction of human needs can be achieved through scientific and technological progress (loc. cit). The two crucial additional elements are, first 'an authoritarian state that is willing and *able* [emphasis added] to use the full weight of its coercive power' and, second, 'a prostrate civil society'. It is

not difficult to recognize the presence of both these elements in the history of Ethiopian state-building in the southwest, from the first incursions of Abyssinian armies at the end of the nineteenth century, to the present government's efforts to curb the activity of civil society organizations in the areas of social justice and human rights.

Unlike most nation-states in Africa today, Ethiopia owes its existence not to European colonialism but to 'dominant-group nation-building' (Kymlica, 2006: 49) by the Shewan Amhara. This is a kind of state-building, of course, which also accounts for the emergence of many Western nations, including the United Kingdom. Although the ruling elites in Ethiopia have changed, and have not necessarily been defined, at least officially, in ethno-national terms, the projection of state power and of the state-building project has continued to come from the highland centre, using the strategies and policies of internal colonialism described by Scott. As the 'friction of terrain' has been reduced, so these strategies have progressed from the forced removal of lowland people to areas where their labour could be more easily appropriated by the elite, to large-scale resettlement campaigns (under both the Derg and the present government), which moved land-hungry highland agriculturalists to the lowlands, and to the sedentarization of lowland pastoralists. Whatever benefits these strategies may, or may not bring to those affected, the net result is, and has been, to re-allocate resources in the periphery in ways that benefit the ruling elite and increase the effectiveness of state control and revenue extraction.

Both the present and previous Ethiopian governments came to power in conditions of great political, economic and social turmoil, conditions which, as Scott points out, 'often radically weaken civil society as well as make the populace more receptive to a new dispensation' (1998: 5). The present government, run by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has incapacitated civil society by promoting a climate of fear which makes individuals and groups unwilling to voice open criticism of government policies and by specific legislation which hampers the ability of civil society organizations to criticize government or to act independently of it. The most notorious example of such legislation is a bill, passed in January 2009, for the 'Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies' (Proclamation No. 621/2009). The law contains detailed rules governing membership, fund-raising and governance and establishes a Charities and Societies Agency to oversee the conduct of civil society organizations in Ethiopia. Its most controversial provisions concern work in the areas of human and democratic rights, equality, children's rights, conflict resolution and criminal justice. The bill makes it illegal for international NGOs to work in these areas and applies the same ban to Ethiopian NGOs which receive more than 10 per cent of their funding from foreign sources. It also states that violations of its provisions will be 'punishable in accordance with the provisions of the criminal code'.

Not surprisingly, in these circumstances, it has been left to the international human rights and indigenous rights movements publicly to voice concerns about the social justice and human rights implications of river basin development in the Omo Valley. The catalyst for this was the arrival of African Parks Foundation in Ethiopia in 2004, when it began discussions with the Federal and Regional Governments about the takeover of Nech Sar National Park near Arba Minch. Its apparent complicity in attempts by the government to force Guji pastoralists to leave the park before it took

over management responsibility provoked criticism from Refugees International, which happened to have two consultants in the area conducting a survey of resettlement activities. The fact that it was based in the Netherlands made it open to the criticism that it was failing to observe the provisions of international instruments (such as ILO Convention 169 on the rights of ‘indigenous and tribal peoples’) which had been ratified by its own government. As APF turned its attention to the Omo, in 2005, other organizations began to voice concerns about its methods and intentions, including Cultural Survival, Survival International and the Center for International Environmental Law. An internet-based campaign ensued, which included an ‘Alert’ on the website of the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy. In February 2008, just as APF was preparing to leave Ethiopia, International Rivers and Campaign for the Reform of the World Bank (CRBM), each produced critical reports on Gibe 3. As noted above, their initial criticisms were focused on regulatory and procedural failures but the campaign soon widened to include the impact of the dam on the downstream population, which then became its main focus. Both organizations have since joined Survival International in a web-based campaign to ‘Stop Gibe 3’.

Access to the moral, financial and informational support of transnational civil society has become vital for small, disadvantaged minority groups facing overwhelming state power, all over the world (Oliver-Smith, 2006). The support of international organizations, social movements and transnational networks is especially vital when local civil society has been incapacitated, thereby giving the state a ‘leveled social terrain’ on which to carry out its projects of social engineering (Scott, 1998: 5). As Oliver-Smith has noted, this raises a dilemma from the point of view of the academic analysis of resistance movements. On the one hand such analysis can bring into sharp relief the ‘serious defects and shortcomings...that plague much of the development effort’. On the other hand, disclosure of the details of a specific movement could compromise its effectiveness (op. cit.: 143) and put individuals at risk. A similar conflict between global objectives and local interests is at the heart of another dilemma which faces the international organizations themselves. Organizations like International Rivers and Survival International have a global reach and global objectives,⁵ but they must pursue these objectives by campaigning on specific local issues. The dilemma this creates is well illustrated by the ‘Stop Gibe 3’ campaign which could be seen as a drawing up of battle lines between those who are pro-dam and those who are anti-dam. The danger with this strategy is that the ‘pro-people’ concerns which sparked the campaign in the first place – concerns for specific people living in a specific river valley - could be lost sight of in the heat of battle.

The difficulties experienced by the Gibe 3 project in securing loans from multilateral development banks over the past two years encouraged many to believe that construction of the dam could be stopped in its tracks. Even today, after a loan of 495m USD from the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China to cover the supply of the turbines was confirmed in July 2010, there still seems to be some reluctance

⁵ International Rivers exists to ‘protect rivers and defend the rights of communities that depend on them’ by working against the construction of ‘destructive dams’ (<http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/mission>) while Survival International works to defend the rights of tribal peoples through education, advocacy and campaigning (<http://www.survivalinternational.org/info>).

amongst campaigners to admit defeat and to switch their campaigning efforts to issues of compensation and benefit sharing. The logic of this position seems to boil down to the following two points. First, the ultimate goal of stopping the dam should be pursued for as long as there is the slightest chance of success. Second, arguing for a convincing plan to mitigate the social and environmental impacts of the dam, before such a point has been reached, could be seen as tantamount to an admission of defeat. This would not only reduce the chances of stopping Gibe 3, but also set back the ultimate long-term objective of ridding the world of all such dams in the future thereby, it is argued, benefiting millions, perhaps billions, of people around the world. The battle, in other words, may be local, but the war is global. The problem with this strategy from the point of view of those who will be most affected by Gibe 3 (assuming it is built, as seems most likely) is obvious: it looks not just risky, but suicidal.

I end with another dilemma which takes us back to the main theme of this paper: the state-building project of the Ethiopian centre in its southwestern periphery. This is a dilemma which arises for the peoples of the lower Omo from the realization that the state can no longer be kept at bay by a strategy of avoidance, or as Scott has it, ‘deliberate and reactive statelessness’ (Scott, 2009: x). This means, not that their struggle with the state is over, but that it now has to be conducted on the state’s own terms. And yet, once this is recognized, and acted upon, the state has, in a sense, already achieved its primary objective. Consider, for example, the struggle of indigenous groups to defend their traditional land rights against takeover by state or private interests. Many such groups have been assisted by NGOs to produce ‘indigenous maps’ of their territory, which have proved highly effective in making and defending claims to land and resources (Chapin 2005). But the very exercise of making such a map, with fixed territorial boundaries, may represent a fundamental rejection of traditional concepts of space and how it is imagined. This would certainly apply to a pastoral group like the Mursi, with their open-ended, expansive way of imaging space which I described earlier and which probably provided them with their single most important cultural resource in keeping the state at bay for so long. For them, an ‘indigenous map’, setting out the external boundaries and internal divisions of their territory, could be an essential tool in helping them defend their traditional land and resources, now that their struggle with the state must be conducted on the state’s own terms. But it would also represent a capitulation to one of the most fundamental assumption lying behind the ‘civilizational discourse’ of the nation-state: that for people *with* a history, life is lived, and history is written, from a sedentary point of view.

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