

A Final Research Report

Pastoral Adaptation to Market Opportunities and Changing Gender Roles among
the Afar in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This report is an investigation into the major changes observed in the pastoral system of the Afar of Northeastern Ethiopia, their shift towards the market and the application of money and technology, and the subsequent changes in gender relations. A combination of ethnographic methods including semi-structured and key informant interviews, focus discussions, and life histories were used to collect data from 89 respondents in five towns. Complementary data were also collected from additional informants through informal conversations with state officials, civic and clan leaders, sages and academics. It was found that pastoralism is gradually dying, and, consequently, women engaging in the market are increasing both in number and significance. However, their success is hugely constrained by various structural forces, notably state policies, failing laws and processes, lack of formal financing, price fluctuation, and absence of appropriate technology. In the face of these challenges, the Afar women continue to effectively commoditize their pastoral produces and participate in wage employment. This shift has further enhanced cash income and mobility. In the absence of formal financial agencies, the traditional sources of capital and money transferring arrangements remain important to the livelihood systems of the Afar people.

Keywords: Pastoralism, Market, Money, Technology, Afar women, Mobility, Ethiopia

The Setting and the Changing Pastoral Context of the Afar

The pastoral population makes up roughly 16% of Ethiopia's population and inhabits almost the entire lowlands of the country, which accounts for 61% of its landmass. The Afar people inhabit the Northeastern parts of Ethiopia, living in 5 administrative zones, 32 districts, and 331 kebeles (the lowest administrative category in Ethiopia). The Afar Region has 28 small towns with a population of 1,493,409 where 91.8% of the Afar still live in rural areas (CSA, 2005). The level of urbanization is very low, and extended units are the norm for household size, which averages 9. As of 2000, the largest administrative territory is zone five with 343,541 residents, while the smallest is zone three with 129,464 residents (Piguet, 2002).

Their economy has been and still is subsistence based. In bygone decades, there were stories of rich families who raised more than five hundred camels and thousands of cattle, goats, and sheep. At that time, the maximization of herds and diversification of their types had been a traditional method of insurance against climatic crises. And, for centuries, pastoralism has also been the citadel of social integrity, morality, pride, honour, and identity among the Afar People. It is therefore important to note that the Afar engage in a system of production and exchange within the framework of traditions and values which set the boundaries of choice that make some kind of selfish economic consideration socially unacceptable. This does not mean that they are irrational. Indeed, they are planners and economizers who produce not only for subsistence, but also for varieties of social reasons such as gifts, bride price and dowry, sacrifices in the name of the dead, and other festivities. They also produce for market exchange so as to get the best combination of goods, prestige and resources. Despite all these complexities, state officials and policymakers have reproduced unsubstantiated views that the Afar's mode of production and living arrangements are

the major causes of their poverty. They still believe that the Afar have made terrible choices about their way of life.

When the Afar were brought under Ethiopian control, laws and regulations were introduced that have transferred all lands from customary owners, users, and managers to the state (Getachew, 1997). Those laws have imposed the sanctity of state ownership on all land without creating alternative opportunities in the market or relevant public services. Thus, the 1950s was the turning point for pastoralist systems of production in Ethiopia, the Afar region included. Besides land tenure, the state introduced taxation and new commercial projects that considerably expanded in Afar lands, which ended up in permanent pastoral alienation and the eviction of the pastoralist population from their historic productive territories along the Awash basin. The number of commercial farms as well as the quantity of capital employed grew at strident rates in districts such as Tibila, Nura Era, Abadir, Metehara, Melka Sedi, Amibera, Awara Melka, Kessem-Kebena, Logiya, Dubti, Dit Bahiri, and Berga (AVA, 1971), and nowadays have expanded to Kesem, Kabana, Assaita, and many other districts. These farms were specialized in commercial crops, such as sugar cane, cotton, and vegetables, for both domestic and foreign markets, and some of them were owned by state enterprises. Concessions were also given to foreign companies, expatriate entrepreneurs, and relatives of local chiefs. For centuries, the rivers along which these farms had been established were the bases for pastoral production and insurance against terrible times. Along with large concessions, there was a considerable number of small, individually operated farms, most of whose owners were migrant peasants (Dessalegn, 2009).

The land of the Afar had suddenly transformed into capitalist market economy, and, as a result, new forces of competition, uneven technological changes, new ways of doing things, and privatization of the existing communal resources, including land, have produced income and

wealth disparities that were previously unknown to the Afar. These changes eventually led to the disintegration of the pastoralist communities that had occupied the territories along the Awash River for centuries, and the emergence of three distinct classes: migrant wage labourers, evicted and landless pastoralists, and labour-hiring capitalist farmers. Furthermore, more fertile land and forests around other rivers have been transformed into national parks and military camps (Piguet, 2002).

This tragedy becomes even more complicated when we consider the migratory labour force. Along these commercial farms, the present urban centres and industrial establishments have been established where the majority of their population are not the Afar pastoralists, but rather the migrant highlanders. The majority of the labour force is comprised of permanent and temporary migrant labourers from the highland areas, particularly from the Wallo, Tigray, and Shawa areas of Ethiopia. Though the Afar people were evicted and removed from their lands, the most serious threat to their mode of life has been due to the interference in the regular flow of rivers, which continues still as part of the Tendaho sugar plantation projects. Consequently, conflict and violence among pastoralist groups such as the Afar, the Karrayu, the Argoba, and the Isa Somalis over limited natural resources has become part of their daily life (Ayalew, 2001). These conflicts have also been one of the major setbacks for adaptation to market activities among the Afar pastoralists in Ethiopia.

Gradually but significantly, the Afar were forced away not only from their habitats, but also from their way of life. They are still alienated from their precious property, land, and livestock. They view land as a collective asset owned by clan corporates. Besides, the division of labour among the Afar contradicts the existing literature in that it tends to be both complex and flexible. For example, it depends upon not only on the size and structure of labour force, but also on the

numbers and types of livestock, transcending their material relationship to people in becoming symbolic features of social relations and schemes of reciprocity. To sustain such a tradition, the Afar have developed strict rules about the exchange of livestock, especially the sale of female ones. The females are considered valued assets/wealth to be inherited or paid on various social occasions, e.g. as bride price. For the Afar, bride price could be taken as a mechanism to transfer pastoralist assets/wealth between families while retaining them within the clan's domain. Marriage, mediated through such customary practices, always aims at keeping livestock within the clan or, sometimes, corporations of clans. Thus, by tradition, Afar women are entitled both to actual and nominal rights to own, access, and manage household resources, which has been further expanded by their participation in the market. Indeed, the Afar women are said to be “the invisible hands” of the household economy, but nevertheless they remain unrecognized in the policies, laws, and practices of state institutions. They represent the main keepers of livestock both in towns and rural villages. For example, they were found to engage in the backyard rearing of goats as they are easier to care for. Backyard goats are often the primary source of income for urban households. While helped by children, women are responsible for the overall work involved in feeding and milking goats.

Pastoral women are key actors in household livelihood production, and capable of finding ways to ensure the basic needs of their household. Though their valuable roles are typically unrecognized, they work tirelessly to achieve better lives for themselves and their households by effectively utilizing all available means and opportunities in the market. While many men have a nostalgic dream of returning to the old pastoral way of life, women are the frontline actors in adapting to market realities and changing existing circumstances while retaining traditional norms, social relations, and support networks. They have also an absolute power over the income that they

generate; as tradition chides husbands who approach their wives for money, the Afar women always choose to invest to meet the basic needs of their households, including education and health.

Adaptations to market opportunities are further molding and influencing the traditional institutions of labour, status, and social mobility. By transforming the traditional occupational evaluation, the market is gradually creating new opportunities for women and youths among the Afar people living in towns. Thus, this study aimed at investigating the pastoralist livelihoods of the Afar people, which have been frequently undermined by ill-disposed state policies, laws, and malfunctioning institutional practices. Understanding these dynamics and the importance of pastoralism is an essential element of efforts to alleviate the multifaceted challenges facing Ethiopia's frontier community.

Problem Statement and Objectives of the Study

Anthropologists have explored the impacts of state policies and terms like pastoralism and pastoralists from outside by recycling issues related to customary land tenure, conflicts, and violence over natural resources and their resolution mechanisms (Ayalew, 2001; Getachew, 1997). Ethiopian state officials also claim to make pastoralism a major national agenda through their reports and rhetoric. For example, by announcing a national pastoralist's day, and boosting support for implementing a five-year development and poverty reduction plan, the state has already been criticized by stakeholders as pretentious in its assumptions and approaches. As it is, current development works are based on conceited rationale (Dessalegn, 2009), and initiatives are not supported by evidence-based diagnoses of local needs and preferences. Rather, the national level assumptions have been adopted into the regional plan (AIDPC, 2009). Thus, the existing

knowledge base and policies that view pastoralists as isolated and static have failed to look into the local dynamics of the pastoralist Afar community.

Contrasted with such popular view, the Afar women are steadily becoming progressive so as to adapt to the regional dynamics of the urban-market economy. As they have been caught between the national and the local for so long, they are now moving slowly and gradually to adapt to the modern market, including the use of money and technology. The Afar women are adapting various culturally relevant strategies to further bridge the gap between national policies and local realities. While ensuring the continuity of functional local ideals, values, and institutions of past generations, women are in the process of gradually adapting to market opportunities. As primary agents of change in the region, they have effectively won the hearts and minds of religious and clan elders to disseminate new ideals, values, and expectations appropriate to gender equality that run parallel to market preferences and needs.

For multiple reasons, the participation of the Afar women in the modern economy, especially in the employment sectors, was found to be a recent phenomenon which creates strained relations in the household. Just a decade ago, their participation in modern public spaces outside advocating against the tradition of female genital mutilation and other women's rights issues was responded to negatively, and some informants reported accounts of insults, harassment, and threats from male groups. As perceptions on various issues of gender vary widely both between and within cultures, through continuous lobbying of clan leaders and religious leaders (*qadis*) the Afar women have been successful in redefining the traditionally expected behaviours, tasks, rights, and responsibilities of men, women, boys, and girls. These alterations produce a change in the roles of women and men that are appropriate for an urban way of life. Gender issues and questions related

to what they do, what resources they should own, and their gender specific needs and priorities are gradually renegotiated and respected.

Through the expansion of modern schools, especially mobile ones in many areas, schooling has become available for girls, which further expands women's roles in public spaces. Girls' education is now highly cherished by many pastoral households. Many women are proud of the achievements that they have gained through coopting the religious leaders and clan leaders to their side and opening up new opportunities for their children. Therefore, for a more complete understanding of their circumstances, the Afar should not be separated from their constant struggles and survival strategies for daily life, as they are making real choices, solving old problems, and creating new options for the future. Therefore, this study partly intends to look into these dynamics.

Accordingly, the Afar women are trying to face their livelihood realities through pastoral commercialization. The process of commercializing livestock and its products is part of a wider economic process in which they are turning pastoral assets and products into commodities. Both as planners and economizers, they are adapting to market forces—the rules of supply and demand—but with less emphasis on profit, savings, and further reinvestment. Gradually, most Afar women are becoming business entrepreneurs by producing for the market, and in turn purchase food and non-food consumption items from the market. The success which begins with financial and material gains has already begun expanding into social services, such as education for their children, modern health care, and technologies. The education of children of both sexes is being significantly accepted as a means of escaping from many challenges that they have faced for decades now.

Though nostalgic about the past, the Afar are now imagining a new future for their children. Despite many structural constraints, more girls have access to modern schooling and can better prepare themselves for employment prospects in the formal labour sector. They are also producing traditional handicrafts for market purposes. However, the commoditization of pastoral products creates unintended tension between pastoral productivity and household consumption needs, as for example, 56% of the regional population lives below the absolute poverty line and only 1.3% of the total average household annual income is being saved (Dessaegn, 2009), the lowest rate of household savings in Ethiopia. There are a few commercial banks, but no formal micro-credit agencies in the Afar region, possibly the only region in Ethiopia without any sort of microfinance. The Afar business women do not use bank loans for a variety of reasons, such as the bank's demand for tangible collateral, Islam's prohibition of interest, and the fact that existing banks are located only in a few towns such as Assaita, Dubti, Samara, Loggia, Gewane, and Awash. Above all, local officials could not understand why the terms and rules of modern market transactions should align with the real interests of the Afar women in commerce; for them, the state rules and regulations are the only necessary condition for accessing the means of production, the market, and social mobility. These and many other circumstances undermine the women's ability to plan, innovate, and mass produce for commercial purposes. Instead of outright rejection, therefore, the Afar women are now exercising commerce with their limited capabilities outside the irresponsible institutional framework, policies, rules, and practices. Their strengths are evolving slowly over time and filling the mismatch between national state policies and local realities.

Making the decision to participate in market activities is often gender specific. Thus, food security at the micro-household level depends on the wife's ownership of livestock and other resources that nowadays she has to trade in the market. Thus, the women engaged in commercial

activities have a double aim of making a small profit and producing subsistence. With increasing urbanization, these market opportunities are increasing, and occupational evaluation is also changing, including the commoditization of labour, which was nonexistent a few decades ago. As an elderly man told me in 2012, “[a few decades ago] *the Afar were well-established and prosperous pastoralists, with a proper pride that no one had to leave his home and work as a wage labourer. Working for cash payment was known to be degrading.*” Many Afar men still consider wage labour, especially manual jobs, as undeserved and degrading. In the past, as their economy had been labour-intensive and efficient, the Afar did not allow their youngsters to leave their places of birth. In recent times, the social order of the Afar has undergone dramatic renovations in the area of labour, and women are taking the status and prestige that male elders had in the previous generation. Thus, this study was particularly focused on how the process of structural changes has affected the lives of Afar women by achieving the following objectives: (1) exploring the enabling or constraining aspects of state policies and institutional changes in market activities; (2) exploring the efforts of the Afar women and the challenges that they encountered in market activities; (3) investigating the contribution of Afar women to household food security and sustainable market development; (4) investigating the changes to occupational evaluation and social mobility; and finally (5) making policy recommendations.

The Study Design, Sources and Methods of Data Collection

This research project was prepared to explore and understand the dimensions, trends, and prospects of pastoral adaptation to urban-market opportunities, including access, use, and management of money and technology in actual production, transportation, and communication and their impact on socio-economic differentiation and patterns of stratification (mobility in status, prestige, power)

among the Afar women in Ethiopia. It was also designed to investigate the downside of state policies and market outcomes such as inequality, lack of access to capital, lack of skills to manipulate new technologies, and bureaucratic shackles so as to identify options for future sustainable pastoral development. The study was designed in light of the Afar's traditions, patterns of status structures, conventions, institutions, and processes prior to and after the 1950s, as they are helpful for exploring and analyzing the historical, sociological conditions of the Afar people. Therefore, the study combined document reviews, semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, life histories, and informal conversations.

The study was conducted in Logia, Afambo, Assaita, Dubti, and Gewane (the nearby Assa Gita town was also included) in the Afar Regional State of Northeastern Ethiopia. The sources of data were primary and secondary. Secondary data were collected by review of a number of documents, such as reports, correspondences, books, articles, and photo documents. A few existing surveys, reports, and consultancy reports on pastoral markets and changing women's roles among the Afar were also consulted, but they were found to be less reliable and unsupported by local circumstances. Thus, the study relied mainly on primary data to identify the actual strains, trends, and statuses of the Afar women's achievements through their access, use, and management of money and technology. Furthermore, informal focus discussions were conducted only with small groups to explore their opinions, views, and perceptions about the issues under consideration. One moderator and two note-takers were involved in the management of each focus group discussion. In addition to the words, the moderator observed and recorded the structure of social interactions and non-verbal expressions of the participants. To complement data obtained through interviews, life history interviews with five successful women living in two towns, Logia and Gewane, were also conducted so as to make sense of everyday experiences and capture their stories in the market.

During each session, the interviewees, especially the oldest, were encouraged to describe how their situations have changed and developed over time, particularly changes to their own conceptions of self, identity, status, and personal power relations at points before and after they started commercial activities. They were also asked to support their stories by whatever assets were about their trading experiences and achievements. And finally, relevant government officials, civic and religious leaders, clan chiefs, venerated sages, and academics from Samara University were interviewed to generate complementary data.

This study was conducted with both sexes, all purposively selected, from three generations. While in general the interviewing process was straightforward, they were a number of challenges. In the beginning, the informants were often reluctant to agree to interview schedules, and during interview sessions, overemphasis on issues of politics and state policies, especially among the younger informants, were the main challenges that we faced. Many of the challenges were successfully resolved by using contact persons related to them, namely my students at Adama Science and Technology University to whom I am very grateful. The languages of communication were Afar-af (for those who couldn't speak Amharic) and Amharic (with those who were fluent enough to express their experiences, voices, and perspectives). During each interview, further clarification and elaboration were pursued about the answers provided by respondents through probe questions. In most cases, thanks to their culture of self-assertiveness and expressive qualities, the interview process was dialogical. The Afar, especially the women, never shy away from listening to their hearts and speaking their minds. They have exceptional skills of communication. The fieldwork was conducted in three stages: The first stage was done from July 15 to 19, 2014; the second and main stage was conducted from July 28 to August 17, 2014; and

the final stage from September 08 to 11, 2014. The third trip was made so as to interview four informants who had been suggested by many, but were away during the second stage.

Data Quality, Processing and Analysis

The overall implementation of the project was demanding, so some modifications were done to the original proposal after conducting preliminary observation necessary to reformulate the interview guide. Accordingly, the power of the state was found to be too strong, and needed modification to focus more on the impact of state policies. By focusing on policy matters, it was believed, we could achieve more depth of understanding into the issues that could provide important insights and perspectives. Thus, the research design, the target group, and the unit of analysis were modified; instead of the women's associations, it targeted those women who were and are still involved in commercial enterprises and actively participating in various women's groups. So as to ensure the quality of the data collected, relevant documents were critically reviewed before developing data collection instruments. Multiple conversations were also held with women's group leaders and officials to elicit information helpful for developing an appropriate and relevant interview guide. The interview guide was semi-structured and open-ended. Hence, the data obtained through interviews, focus discussions, and life histories were written into memos by professional transcribers and translators (from Afar-af into Amharic, and then into English). After repeatedly rereading all of the data collected, trends, patterns, regularities, and contradictory explanations were identified to generate coherent meanings, themes, and issues at different levels of inference.

Procedurally, the study was implemented after obtaining the agreement of relevant officials at various levels. However, the common people were uncomfortable to hear the names of officials

mentioned. That could be evidence of lost legitimacy, so instead personal contacts were used to establish trust with potential informants. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and only people who agreed to participate in the actual data collection were interviewed. To strictly respect the privacy of the respondents and confidentiality of their information, the respondents' authentic names are not included in this report. During the interview hours, the use of a tape recorder and camera as the tools of data collection were dropped with some participants who were unwilling to. Finally, almost all of the pictures included in this report were taken by the principal investigator during the major data collection period, and the heat wave affected their qualities.

Profiles and Results

Based on an interpretive approach, the study started by exploring the meanings of gender and gender realities from the personal experiences and perspectives of the informants themselves. As thoroughly discussed above, this study employed semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, small discussion groups, life history analysis, and informal conversations. The interview guide covered a wide range of issues focusing on core questions such as: What does it mean to be a man or a woman in the Afar tradition? How have the lives of women and men been shaped by wider social and economic contexts, especially since the 1950s, and how have these affected commercial activities? What are the sources of start-up capital, and how are profits utilized? How do wealth/asset production and accumulation differ over generation? How do they evaluate the access, use, and management of money and technology? Questions related to their future priorities and recommendations for the future of pastoral adaptation to the urban-market opportunities were also included. And at the end of each interview, the interviewer engaged in an

informal discussion with the informants on present aspects, trends, and sustainability of marketing activities. Regarding the sample size, the original aim was to select 103 informants from five towns. However, given the modification of the study design and the main target of the research, the final sample was revised into 89 informants. The actual interviews lasted for an average time of 90 to 120 minutes. Informal interviews and discussions on various issues related to the project objectives were also held with 11 additional informants, all of whom were men, who were knowledgeable and practically active in the day to day life of the Afar people. Of the 89 informants, 61 women and 28 men were interviewed.

The methodology employed in this study was based on in-depth analyses of the lives of three chronological generations systematically categorized into the oldest, the middle, and the youngest ones. We did this because each generation has its own unique experiences and perceptions about pastoralism and various issues facing the region. Accordingly, informants in the oldest generation were aged from their early sixties to their late eighties. Most had been born and lived most of their lives in villages where they and their families depended on pastoralism. Almost all of them reported that they had hundreds of livestock, and frequently boasted about their large numbers of camels during the interview hours. They all were nostalgic for the past glories of pastoralism, and never tired of narrating the success stories of their forefathers. They are still full-time pastoralists and part-time wage labourers or traders. The majority (37) was between 63 and 87 years old, and all of them were married. The most prevalent household types were extended ones. Although the largest household was comprised of 14 members, most had six to nine family members.

The middle generation was mainly in their early forties and late fifties, and many of them had been born and raised in rural villages. They have had some formal education, unlike their forebears. Many had moved to urban centres in their early adulthood. As pastoralism had colored many of their childhoods, they were still disinterested in striving to adapt to urban opportunities suitable for wealth accumulation in money and money related assets. Many were engaged in a mix of pastoralism, including backyard goat rearing and shared pastoral production with persons living in rural villages, and other urban-market activities. For example, 17 of them were half-time pastoralists and worked in government offices or ran their own businesses, and 21 of them above the age of 40 had received no formal education.

The youngest generation, between twenty-five and late thirties, had access to multiple opportunities largely unknown to their predecessors, such as a university education, material comfort (using modern technologies such as air conditioners, ventilators, refrigerators, computers, mobile phones, and others), privileges, leisure activities, and greater choices of career corridors. While almost all informants below age 39 had formal education, only 14 informants had higher education qualifications. Accordingly, 15 of the informants had a full-time jobs, with a further 10 people working part-time in livestock rearing and commerce. Regarding their household structure, 10 of the informants from the middle and the youngest generations were living in a female-headed household. Regarding their physical mobility, 15 of the informants had moved into either Djibouti or other regions inside Ethiopia, and only two of them had traveled to European and Arab countries.

Given the differences of experiences and perceptions, each generation tended to focus on different issues while all of them voiced concerns over the dying pastoralism, a broad range of

intrusive state policies, economic inflation, weakening tribal spirit and family values, and, consequently, khat addiction. Khat is an evergreen leaf native to eastern African countries, including Yemen in the Middle East, but its origin is believed to be inside Ethiopia. The men claimed that they chewed khat to induce feelings of euphoria and excitement from the psychoactive elements that it contains, while women frequently cited khat's substantial health and social consequences for their husbands and youths. Despite these concerns, they also agreed that the youngest generation, born and raised in towns, were offered more opportunities in education, mobility, and basic capabilities to adapt to the urban-market economy. Above all, it was in the area of gender roles and relations that the majority, mostly men, felt that significant changes for the better had occurred, a view that cut across generations. However, they reported that recently the youngest generation has been pushed into a defensive position by state policies and saw it as their duty to uphold the traditions and achievements of previous generations to sustain pastoralism as a way of life. The research team also observed the tribal sentiments that tend to overshadow the tangible difficulties, such as uneasiness talking about patriarchy, memories of the traditional gendered division of labour, and impacts on the wellbeing and rights of women. To them, the newly instituted formal structures and practices are more appealing than customs and usages of their forefathers. During interviews, nostalgic about pastoralism in the past, almost all of the respondents related every gender related issue to their present circumstances and the heavier impacts of the policies of the last three Ethiopian governments.

Furthermore, as the actual data collection period occurred during the hottest time of the year and during the Ramadan fasting month, most people declined to schedule interviews during the day. Therefore, it was difficult to organize formal focus group discussions, as planned in the original proposal. Thus, by modifying the original intention, we decided to conduct informal focus

group discussions with thirteen small groups (ranging from 3-6 persons). As the living arrangement of the Afar is overlapping (grandparents, parents, children, cousins, and daughter-in-laws live together), and due to strong sentimentality and uniformity of narratives, we took precautions and tried to interview only one informant (one generation) from a household. Most interviews and discussions were conducted in the informants' homes or on verandas while some of them were conducted in weekly market centres (on market days), retail shops, fast food restaurants, and offices. In all but one town (Logia), the research team worked in three groups, which was an important part of the data collection experiences. It was done mostly in the early morning and late afternoon to early evening due to the harsh heat wave. The harsh heat (43 degrees centigrade [109.4 degrees Fahrenheit] on average), distance, inconvenient schedules, and long discussions with potential informants to get their informed consent for interviews were among the common pressures for the research team. In retrospect, however, these pressures were eclipsed by the emotional and intellectual gains that we all achieved. Indeed, we were profoundly grateful to all of our informants for their generosity, sharing needed and relevant experiences. Once rapport was achieved through tedious negotiations, many of the informants used to treat us as their guests

and happily provided us with food, tea, and coffee after the interview sessions, presenting us with extra opportunities to probe up issues left unexplained through informal conversations.

The range of issues, narratives, and experiences obtained during interviews were discussed with other knowledgeable individuals and officials, providing important insights and perspectives



Visting Hanfre Mohamed's date farm, the cousin of the late Sultan Ali Mirah, in Afambo just after conducting very informative interviews. A palm farm, cherished for generations, is now invaded by prosipus trees.

on various issues. Above all, at the end of each day, the team convened to recount informants' narratives and stories so as to incorporate their comments and opinions. During each meeting, the team expressed the enriching insights about the lives and secrets of the past of the remotely situated frontier communities in Ethiopia.

The Afar, Pastoralism, and State Policies

The Afar are located in the hottest part of the world and in a hotspot of global competition along the Red Sea, and have been facing multiple military expeditions from Egypt, Britain, Italy, and France since the last quarter of the 19th century. Consequently, they have found themselves spanning international borders. The Afar inhabit the lowlands of Northeastern Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Republic of Djibouti. The Afar's land has been able to support a population of transhumant pastoralists thanks to the permanent water-courses of the Awash River, which traverse the desert and semi-desert landscape for a distance of nearly a thousand kilometers (Rettberg, 2010). There are many tributaries to the Awash that evaporate in the series of salty lakes on the border with the Republic of Djibouti. The Awash has been the life-giving river for the majority of pastoralists and contains the most fertile soils in Ethiopia, while rain-fed pastures exist in the Northeastern escarpments of the Ethiopian Highlands.



Hundred-year-old date palm trees in the Afambo areas, fiercely protected by their historic owners from deforestation. Inherited through multiple generations, these trees are now major sources of consumption and cash, where each tree produces roughly 60,000 Ethiopian birr per year.

Since the middle of the 20th century, the pastoralist communities in Ethiopia have been faced with an increasing number of critical challenges (Markakis, 1993). In the 1940s, for example, the Afar has been brought under the Ethiopian state, which introduced laws transferring all lands to the state and exposed them to further alienation. Two decades later, their way of life was threatened by massive investments of foreign capital funded by USAID and the World Bank. The Awash Valley Authority (AVA) was created in 1962 to plan and coordinate for capital-intensive and profit-oriented agricultural projects. As farming in the Awash Valley was highly profitable, Ethiopian nationals and foreign companies rushed to get concessions. The capital and expertise came from countries such as Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Israel, and the United States of America (Dessalegn, 2009), and eventually the state succeeded in establishing its long-awaited political control.

Following the full political control, successive governments introduced multiple intervention plans in the region. For example, the two five-year development plans (1957-1973) of the Imperial government were designed with the primary objective of integrating the rural population into the emerging industrialization in a few urban centres, and raising the national and political consciousness of rural people. And the third (1963-1967) and fourth plans (1968-1973) were specifically designed to respond to the problems of production and appropriation of profits around issues of labour, natural resources, and allocation of human and financial resources, and to respond to the problems of urbanization and urban services respectively. After the 1974 socialist revolution, the military government designed its own version—“Measures for Rural Transformation”—in 1978, which started the process of nationalizing the land and other private enterprises with stated objectives of ensuring sufficient production for the growing population, producing exportable crops and import substitution by provision of better agricultural inputs,

politicization of the peasantry, and collectivization of production. And, finally, after the socialist government was toppled in 1991, the new Federal Democratic Republic introduced the Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization (ADLI) initiative, promising to promote development in rural areas and at the national level, and to create the conditions for national food self-sufficiency. Critical scrutiny on these policy documents reveals that their justifications began and ended with theoretical assumptions, while differing in ideological predisposition, and that they all were supported by national aspirations and political interests of power. Generally, the policies, regulation, institutions, and practices of successive governments were designed without thorough analyses and understanding of the diverse pastoralist livelihood strategies adopted by the Afar people. More specifically, the economic and social values of livestock within the Afar tradition can only be fully comprehensible by analyzing the pastoral contexts (shocks, seasonality) institutions, processes and structures (formal institutions, money, technology, market, tradition), and outcomes (income, livelihood security, wellbeing, sustainability).

The structural changes destabilized traditional pastoral livelihood strategies and undermined the internalized collective patterns of interpretation within rapidly changing circumstances. Pastoralists were challenged to adapt their livelihood pathways in order to maintain their adaptive capacities and resilience to shocks and stresses (Rettberg, 2010:249). Little attention has ever been paid to the needs of the Afar, as an informant, age 71, reported that:

“The state, including the incumbent, never considered the effects on our way of life. Rather, they encouraged intertribal violence by giving weapons to the Issa. The only difference is that most of concession farms were surround by barbed wire during the previous governments, but nowadays those barbed wires have been replaced by federal police armed with machine-guns against encroaching livestock.”

The Afar leaders at the time had tried to contend by farming the land by themselves. For example, through a joint venture with Sudanese companies, Sultan Ali Mirah had developed cotton farms and encouraged many tribal leaders to adopt an agricultural lifestyle. Many of the informants reported that during the 1972 drought that induced famine, herds of millions of cattle moved into the Aysaita and Afaambo areas; the only grazing territories spared from the commercial farms and later the cotton farms themselves were overrun by the starving cattle. Ali Mirah's cotton farm was invaded at last. Jemal Abdulkadir cited this historic event to support his argument about the latent conflict of interest between the Afar pastoralists and the Afar commercial farm owners at that particular time. The use of capital and expertise to develop capital-intensive agriculture can easily result in noticeable losses to the hosts, and the fertile basins remained wasted and no longer exist for the Afar. Though the Afar leaders had succeeded to a limited degree, the commoners were behaving differently. They established many armed resistance groups to destroy farms and guard posts, and to burn machinery.

The other significant impact of the commercial farms was the taming of the Awash River so that less water reaches the inland delta, which is correctly stated by Francois Piguet:

“For years, the Awash River has generated two major course changes around Afambo and around Gewane with long term consequences in areas where irrigated farms currently operate. Actually, former state farms in the areas were forced to stop their activities. Since then, Afambo area has been severely affected by water shortage. In Gewane crop fields have progressively been infested by *Prosopis juliflora*, non-suitable plant species, a toxic vegetal for both human and animals. In a few years, large areas in the marsh land became a sort of “green desert.” It has chased away all valuable vegetation and endangers biodiversity” (2002:2).

Besides being a basin to produce fruit, maize and, above all, palm dates, the Awash had been the location of thick forests, innumerable water wells, and places for rituals and festivities. The forests are now being destroyed, except for those in the Afambo area. As a result, the vegetation balances have been disturbed by the encroaching desert. Following the commercial farms, the explosion of urban centres along the basins have cropped up and further destroyed the existing plantations for building and cooking purposes. During the dry season, for example, the pastoralists used to cut the top branches of trees to provide leaves for their animals, and used to engage in traditional social rituals such as secondary funeral rites, religious festivities, and marriage-making practices. They all had been carried out in the dry season when population density was high. The effects of the taming of the Awash have already proved disastrous for the pastoral way of life.

The Afar are homogeneous and identify themselves as *Asahiamera* (the Red House) and the *Adohiemera* (the White House), but both are similar in customs and tradition. Though the *Asahiamera* have developed a nearly similar political organization to the highland feudal state, they share material and ritual culture elements with the Issa and the Kerreyu. In the political sphere, they were divided into five Sultanates—Awssa, Rahayto, Griffu, Tajurah, and Goba'ad—until the first quarter of the 20th century. Awssa, Rahayto and Goba'ad Sultanates are now in Ethiopia while the other two are in Eritrea and Djibouti. Once wealthy and most feared, the Awssa Sultanate was based in the area between Assaita and Afambo, which established historic connections with the Arabs, the Turks, the Indians, Europeans, and the Ethiopian State.



This is a statue built so to celebrate the Ethiopian millennium, just 9 years ago, in the ex-capital of the Afar, Aysaita town. Its shape is triangular, representing the Afar nation in three countries, namely Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, commonly known as the Afar triangle. Symbolizing the hope for unity, on top of the clock (representing Ethiopia), there are two antenna projections, one pointing in the direction of Eritrea and the other to Djibouti.

Within the Afar political tradition, the Sultan has no direct relation to his subjects. Instead his power is mediated through tribal leaders, then village headmen and age-sets. Age-sets are the most effective social control agents among the Afar. Inter-clan marriage alliances are also the hallmark of the Afar people. There are also many lineage groups affiliated with the Turks, the Arabs, the Greeks, the Oromo, and the Amhara of highland Ethiopia, with their distinct physical

complexion and social functions. For example, clan members from Turkish and Arab origins function as political and administrative councilors and retainers to the Sultan, who entirely controls the authority of religious and judicial institutions.

The clan, a corporation of extended families, is the most important political and social unit in the Afar region. It is an association with administrative functions among kin groups. Varying in size, the clan is known to be an effective force in times of drought, violence, cattle raiding, and other events affecting clan members. Violence and cattle raiding are common among bordering ethnic communities, and are tolerated by the state. The informants argued that instead of resolving conflicts and violence along border areas and the Addis-Djibouti highway, the state used to confiscate their weapons. Such frequent state interventions resulted in additional risks to their pastoral livelihoods, as the Afar had been using their weapons to protect their livestock against raiding. As the foundation of the tribal territorial organization has been landed property, the tribal leaders are still acting as a safety valve against an externally imposed situation. Traditionally, so as to sustain the unity and integrity of the clan organization, the Afar have developed strict rules about the exchange of livestock, especially with respect to the female ones. For example, the female animals are considered to be valued assets/wealth to be inherited or paid as bride price and dowry conducted within the clan context. For example, bride price could be taken as a mechanism to transfer pastoralist properties between families while remaining within the clan domain. Such livestock provisions during marriage are means of expressing respect to new relatives, but they are also regarded as important psychological means of helping the bride settle into the new household and overcome feelings of homesickness. Marriage, mediated through such customary practices, always aims at keeping livestock within the clan or, sometimes, a corporation of clans. Thus,

overall the Afar should be viewed as a trans-tribal nation with unifying associational life based on an economy of affection, equality, and justice.

The oldest generation especially perceived themselves as having been wealthy in the past, and they still perceive pastoralism as the most rewarding livelihood strategy. In line with this, the respondents frequently cited the times of high consumption and low poverty incidence, but as of 2002 the region had a poverty rate of 56 percent (FDRE, 2002). To them, pastoralism is a way of life entailing both lasting social attachment to one's own clan and separation from outsiders. Ahmed, aged 69, nostalgically stated that:

“In the old days, the richest Afar lived like the poorest of his clan. They both ate the same meals and dressed in the same clothes. The richest partook in luxury only upon the arrival of a stranger, and during rituals and religious festivities. When a stranger arrived in the locality, for example, the host's hands extended to all residents of his village by slaughtering tens of male cattle and goats to feast together. Slaughtering female ones was almost a taboo, done only on exceptional occasions. They all dressed in new clothes. Nowadays, they are almost all gone.”

They argued that they have time-tested mechanisms of resolving such competing imperatives,



The interface between pastoralism and urbanity: a vacant government office in the ex-capital of the Afar, Asayita town.

ranging from the Afar as a nation, through the clan, to the interpersonal levels of social life. For example, for material and symbolic expressions, the clan is centered on its leader, camels, and land. Among the Afar, camels are exceptional valuable clan property. They are valued for their unique breed, milk, and unreplaceable role in transportation. Camels stand at the centre of the pastoral production system of the Afar people. As their breeds are rarely found in other pastoralist communities in Ethiopia, the Afar always boast about the unique breeds of their camels. Camels are managed by men only because they are considered the sacred property of a clan, and women are not even allowed to milk or fetch a lost camel. Managed and milked by men alone, the preparation and marketing of camel milk is the responsibility of women. A household with large number of camels, and indirectly the household's clan, commands high status and prestige among the Afar people. Camels are effective insurance against droughts and famine. The resilience of the clan also reportedly depends on the number of camels under its command. As the men prefer to have many wives in different localities of their clan, Afar girls

are known to be passionate about marrying into families with large numbers of she-camels as a primary insurance against future livelihood shocks and crises.

Thus, analyzed from a historical perspective, the Afar have been forced to pass through the process of “de-pastoralization” in which pastoral activities are being substituted by cash farms without any re-socialization into the market. Traditional activities like cattle keeping, maize cultivation, and production of pastoral products have been gradually declining in the last five decades. Thus, the main triggers of “de-pastoralization,” as mentioned by many informants, are the following: 1) the young migrating into towns; 2) increasing labour shortages in the countryside; 3) few alternative productive activities; and 4) market disadvantages. The seasons of migrations and patterns of settlement have already been altered. Having lost many of their livestock, many of the Afar men have found it pointless to make the traditional journey in search of pasture and water. Some informants also reported that the feminization of pastoralism was happening in many rural villages, as men migrate to towns while women are becoming the main actors of achieving food security at the household level. Despite such significant roles, their contribution has remained widely ignored in national policies and regional financial allocations, which still remain male-oriented. Rural boys are staying in towns and participating in the market economy, especially if they are actively pursuing modern education. For the youngest generation, wage employment in government offices was found to be the ideal alternative, as it requires the minimal education necessary. The middle generation, with no education, are also engaging in small businesses with little capital and small profit. Few respondents have reported rapid return on their business. Consequently, in many areas, they are abandoning typically pastoral livelihoods in favor of wage-labour, trading, and other non-pastoral activities that give them better chances of securing their survival. Cattle keeping is becoming a secondary element

in their overall urban livelihood strategy. The rearing of a mix of a few cattle and goats is still considered to be a worthier and more decent way of supplementing household needs.

Generally, by close scrutiny, it is possible to identify three distinct groups of pastoralists among the Afar. The first are those who raise backyard goats as part of a diversified household livelihood scheme in urban and peri-urban areas where women are the sole agents. The second group is made up of part-time pastoralists living in towns who subcontract their livestock with brothers or cousins for shared rearing. They are exempted from feeding and management activities, but reserve their original number plus parts of their produce depending on the contract. The third class are full-time pastoralists who derive their main income from keeping and breeding herds of livestock and continuously travel hundreds of miles in search of grazing and water resources. In the case of the full-time pastoralists, livestock raising and other decisions within the household tend to be joint affairs in which every adult has a say and a role to play. However, state policies and programs, both at national and regional levels, were unresponsive to these grassroots realities. Failure to recognize these wider circumstances has proven to be the same as prescribing the wrong medicine for an illness.

Commercial Farms, Urbanization and Ethnicity

The Afar have their own customs of accessing, using, and managing land and its resources. In the past, for example, land and camels were considered to exist outside of commercial transactions; they are considered clan wealth (*Gadda*) and properties. The pride, honour, and, above all, power of a clan depend upon the breed and number of camels. However, every member of the clan has the right to access and use their products.



Cattle traveling hundreds of kilometers along the highway to reach the other side of the Awash, near Galafaghe Mount.

The Afar saying goes, “*Gaala inki num assisaah han inkih kak nakaana,*” which means, “Only one man possesses a camel, but everyone is entitled to drink her milk.” Private property is recognized only for livestock, tents, and personal equipment.

The land, however, was appropriated by foreign capital, tribal chiefs, and newly settled urban elites while the forms of wealth, labour organization, and social structure remained tribal and further caused the dislocation of the pastoral economy. The Afar people have been exposed to external pressures of commercial farms, urbanization, and the administrative power of the state. In

addition to these, the pervasive prejudices that view pastoralism as an irrational, outdated, and inferior form of livelihood, have paved the way for the displacement of pastoralist groups from areas designated for irrigated development (Ayalew, 2001; Getachew, 2001). The question is, how have the state interventions on land tenure impacted the condition of trade? The Afar were neither able to get the better of their encounters with towns nor protect their own lands and villages.



They had been facing eviction, and later villagization, by the military government, which was renamed as “sedentarization” by the incumbent government. In this study, very few former pastoralists who have settled or have had some experiences in settlement villages were interviewed about the promises of these programs, decisions to settle, and subsequent changes in living standards of the settlers. Despite the government’s narrative of success in the provision of accessible modern education, portable water, pastures, and crop production, all of the interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with, if not rejection of, the program.

Development projects, dating back to Imperial times, have evicted and excluded pastoralists from crucial resources, notably dry season grazing areas along the Awash River and its tributaries. Settlement programs established in the 1960s and expanded through the Derg era to this date have had the same impact, as they have failed to introduce them into the modern labour market. Instead, commercial farms have attracted the settlement of migrant labourers from the highlands, who compete with the interests of pastoralists (Piguet, 2002). Given such circumstances, many respondents used to describe the state as having always been an anti-communal, anti-pastoral, and anti-market entity, and the same narrative was rightly described as follows:

“[The] responsibility for the current livelihood crisis and increasing pastoral vulnerability is mainly directed at the state. Pastoralists construct an image of governments that misuse their power, ignore pastoral rights, disturb pastoral livelihoods, and lack any form of legitimacy. ‘The government is killing us’ was a typical comment made by Afar pastoralists. This refers to recurrent violent clashes over political control and power between the governmental forces and pastoralists, as well as to the everyday experience of governmental violence that has shaped the collective memory of the Afar from *Baadu* [*Baqadu*] during the 20th century” (Rettberg, 2010:259).

The Afar’s responses to these changes were multiple, ranging from contract farming to violent resistance. Those people who were engaging in contract farming mediated change and maintained cultural roles and values associated with the ever expanding urbanization and market economy. They also faced multiple factors affecting their ability to do so, such as aridity, low distribution of the pastoral population, and inflexible competition by the state-backed commercial farms.



The aridity has also meant that river banks and oases are the only places where the Afar have been able to produce surpluses for markets, which have now been overtaken by the state-supported enterprises. They have been forced to give up their resources for surplus production. The low population density of the Afar has also contributed to preventing the emergence of an Afar trading community in urban centres. Consequently, the division of labour in the market centres indicates the ethnic dimensions that are observable in the volume and composition of merchandised commodities. The reasons are found in the unfavorable laws and policies of successive governments towards the Afar people. State laws and policies have not only dislocated pastoral activities, but also have excluded them from certain urban-based occupations. For many years, the

Afar people were effectively barred from living in urban centres on the false claims of their armed lifestyles, and, until two decades ago, they were prevented from entering the centre of towns. The introduction of cash farms and the influx of foreign capital attracted tens of thousands of migrant labourers. As a result, most of the urban economy was established by and controlled by the first generation of migrants. For many decades now, migration of business has been the norm.



In urban areas, the Afar people compete with highlanders for income opportunities, mainly trading and petty trade. In many locations the Afar people constitute about half of the population, but control only a few activities. Even the petty trade in pastoral products is controlled by non-Afar women (Getachew, 2001). Trade in manufactured goods and modern services is characterized by a significant absence of the Afar population. They are under the domain of traders known to the Afar as *Degegna* (the highlanders) while traditional crafts and other pastoral products exclusively belong to the Afar. The weekly market bazaars are also places where one encounters the most significant ethnic distinctions between the various cultural groups, where non-Afar people control

all branches of trade. Thus, the highlanders trade both in wholesale and retail commodities including cereals, liquors, spices, vegetables, clothes, and other consumables. They own almost all of the shops and hotels in towns. And even the marketing of pastoral products such as cattle, goats, and hides are no longer exclusively controlled by the Afar themselves as they were half a century ago. Rather, they have become commodities to be collected by wholesalers for internal and export purposes. Recently, they have realized that they are caught in a win-lose situation where the pastoralist Afar people are politically condemned to lose almost every marketable commodity. As a strategy to reduce the impact of such circumstances, the Afar women are keen to engage in market activities and own a few shops, small restaurants, guest houses, and other services.

The other factor hindering the Afar from commercial activities is their alienation from towns and their services. For example, the first modern schools in the region were opened in Aysaita and Dubti in the 1960s, but most of the Afar people have failed to send their children to school and avoid business interests in towns. In those years, only the children of the tribal leaders and rich pastoralists had achieved the necessary schooling for an urban way of life. The great majority remained cattle keepers. At present, the number the Afar living in towns is very few but growing, and it consists mostly of government employees and rich pastoralists. The majority are living in the countryside, but still have permanent social interactions with family and clan members living in towns. Thus, the distribution of the pastoralist Afar population is also found to affect their business capabilities in three ways: 1) they become hosts to close relatives and clan members coming from rural areas who usually end up staying for days; 2) they lack the needed mass consumer base for their pastoral products; 3) the inseparability of economy and ethical considerations; and 4) selling on credit. Many of their business transactions, especially for the Afar living in the peri-urban areas, were exchanges with customers with lasting relationships, which

affects the way that business is seen. They are personally related either by blood or marital ties to the clan that they belong to. Within the Afar tradition, each person is expected to make his/her own way, but ultimately, he should help his kin as much as he can afford. Stressing equality and membership within the clan to an extent that makes it difficult for businessmen to improve their commercial position, by tradition, any success should not be thought of as coming at the expense of others. They are expected to share whatever they have with their fellow clan members, and this effectively prevents anyone from rising above others. However, many of the informants drew exceptions to those assigned to political offices, accusing them of living selfishly and luxuriously and calling them by a derogatory label the “*Samara Afar*.” Therefore, the shop owners are supposed to be socially careful, prove their commitment to the welfare of clan members, and guard against possible disappointment from the people who they are related to. As saving for the purpose of profit maximization can only be achieved through isolation from the community, it might produce quarrels and disrespect, both in towns and in the village of birth, as it is considered as anti-social. This was found to be the dilemma for those women who aspire to expand their commercial enterprises. As their early socialization has taught them to share their good fortune with relatives and kin groups, they adhere to sentimental considerations. Thus, mutually supportive relations, kindness, prestige, and even prejudice are still inseparably linked to the economic activities of the Afar people.

When asked about issues such as contracts, exchange, and money in the modern market economy, many of the informants frequently resorted to disapproval of the divorce between economic life from social ethics and norms. They disapproved of the formal structure of power relations in the state as devoid of the ethical considerations practiced by their forebears. Politicians are used to engaging in an unregulated pursuit of selfish considerations and luxuries, which are

conventionally considered unjust. The Afar tradition has its own views of justice in which every member of a clan, regardless of status, receives his due reward from common assets and resources. Justice is all about the clan, and no member should be left behind. In times of need, for example, support services were supposed to be provided by the clan and managed by village heads. Thus, within the Afar tradition, subjects of economic activities such as production, consumption, distribution, and exchange were once considered within the scope of ethical regulation of social life organized around the clan. That is, the proper place of property rights is primarily justified by the will and ability of the owner to benefit his/her clan members, including strangers in the village. Such ethical considerations of the Afar traditions are another hindrance to business success stories among the Afar women in the market.



For purposes of testing on how clan affiliation affects business, we have dissected our informants into two quasi-groups: those who are native to the towns and have clan members living in the vicinity, and those who came from faraway places and who are free from constant clan-based social obligation. Those from the latter group, over the course of time, have found more success in business, securing more stable positions in commerce than the first. Thus, the spatial separation has created a social distance necessary for doing business. For example, they are free from the burden of hosting a large number of mouths. As most of the urbanized Afar are living on the outskirts of towns, their shops are located where cattle keepers with their livestock used to move in search of pasture and water. Most of the time, cattle keepers buy goods on credit by promising to pay when they return. They mostly fail to come back again and repay the credit taken, and so shop owners are destined to lose their small capital for further reinvestment.

Pastoral Production, Markets, and Technology

Among the Afar, like any other pastoral community, livelihood is dominated by livestock. They are assets owned by the majority of households that trade both in live animals and their byproducts. Though most households own livestock of various kinds, goats, especially the female ones valued for their milk, which tradition discourages the selling of, are favored in urban settlements. Though essential for important contributions to the nutritional security of a household and providing high-value nutrients, livestock are a means of buffering under conditions of seasonality and market uncertainty. The roles of livestock for the Afar are crucial and complex, and go far beyond just providing marketable products. Small-scale livestock keepers in towns pursue a diverse range of livelihood activities such as petty trading and wage employment supplemented by money raised through backyard goat keeping. Urban households were found to

have varying access to assets and sources of livelihoods in the region and were sustainable only if supported by accessible and responsive institutions, policies, rules, and practices both at national and regional levels of government.

Livestock are the Afar's major source of savings. That is, when production is high and household income exceeds consumption, the women save money for the purpose of investing in rearing backyard goats for milk and market purposes. Most of the informants buy goats when prices are low and then fatten them to sell when price are high. As insurance against droughts and other crisis situations, livestock represent a store of assets that are reserved for school fees, healthcare costs, and other social services.



Not only is livestock ownership considerably gendered, with men owning cattle and women owning mainly goats, but also the market system of the Afar is much more complicated, ranging from impersonal transactions to a network of personal and clan-based relationships. There are large numbers of middlemen (locally known as *Dallala*) who require payments for their services. They facilitate livestock sales and usually respond to the demands of abattoirs and live animal exporters based in Addis Ababa and other towns outside of the region. The livestock traders and middlemen set the prices because the Afar, many of whom come from remote rural villages, lack Amharic, the main trading language for highlanders and urban traders. Furthermore, pastoralists are generally not aware of prices and marketing conditions elsewhere, and, consequently, highland traders and middlemen exploit them (Piguet, 2002).

Things are improving these days as the Afar are adapting to mobile technology and using it to solicit market information in various localities. By using mobile technology, together with a market facilitator of same clan, the Afar women are gradually reducing the lack of market and trading information. Most respondents reported that the main determinants of cash income are livestock prices, which vary between markets, age, sex, weight, preferred breeds, and time of the year, including religious festivals and national holy days.



***Dallala*, facilitating cattle sales outside of the cattle market centre refuse paying customs in protest of policies and actions of the state (a few kilometers outside of Asayita).**

The occurrences of inflation and exchange rate fluctuations are also cited as major factors for livestock pricing, which are locally known as *Limo*. In some areas, for example in Assa-gita, a small town near Gewane, the Afar employ a relatively invariable and predictable pricing scheme, traditionally known to them *Garsi*, which adds an extra 50 percent of the cash value to commodities, e.g. if the actual market price of a certain product is 100 Ethiopian birr, the value in *Garsi* is 150 birr. *Garsi* is used in the buying and selling products among themselves, excluding non-Afar, where the first is known as *Aada Mengist* (the custom of the government) and the latter as *Aada Afar* (the custom of the Afar).

Livestock, especially goats and cattle, are the main commodities traded by the middlemen for export purposes and bordering markets within Ethiopia. In addition to goats and cattle, the Afar supply perishable food items such as milk, butter, ghee, palm dates, and maize to urban dwellers. Nearly all sellers are women, while some are accompanied by husbands or sons. Women have always been actively engaged in trading and their numbers are rising. Some of them are still flexible in searching for alternative trade routes and profitable marketing centres within the region. Wandering women traders have acquired the ability to travel, trekking distances to accept tiny

profit margins. In almost all market centres, most of the goats and sheep traded are bought and sold by women, while the men accompany them if the marketable cattle are many and must be led by a loaded camel. The men also traded khat, harvested, bought, and transported from the highlands of eastern Hararghe. Most of the Afar men are consumers of khat while few of them are traders. The Afar women avoided trade in khat and alcohol for their anti-social consequences. They frequently cited that khat consumption as the common source of financial and social stress within the household. Most of the respondents agreed that khat consumption is further relegating their men to live in the past, and constrains them from adapting to the rapidly changing urban circumstances.

Livestock marketing generates considerable income and provides employment for a large number of people. The income margins of trade in livestock are variable across markets, and depend on climate, resource entitlement, and state interventions. They also import contraband garments, perfumes, and other consumable commodities from the Republic of Djibouti. However, the government has vigorously worked to stop informal cross-border trade with the Republic of Djibouti, and, to make things worse for the Afar, the traditional cross-border trading within Ethiopia was severely curtailed by political events and conflicts with neighboring communities. The shifting of the regional capital from Aysaita to Samara at end of the 1990s and the unpredictability of government policies have also been cited as factors negatively affecting trading capabilities and the assets that they own. Aysaita had been the historical capital of the Awssa Sultanate, historically known for its strong nationalistic attitudes towards Ethiopia, symbolized in the millennium statue built in Aysaita, and politically strong enough to manipulate policy issues at the national level. Those capabilities are gone nowadays.

The impacts of livelihood crisis within the household are also gendered, that is to say, men and women experience crises differently because of social networks and mobility differentials; most of the Afar men, especially from the oldest and the middle generations, have up to four wives, mostly living in different villages but within the same clan territories. Consequently, they employ multiple contacts and marital relations during crisis times that work in their favour. Thus, having more than one wife could be seen as insurance against crises such as drought, famine, and violence to the male population. For the Afar women, marrying into households with many she-camels has the same purpose. Though many businesswomen have exited the trade for various reasons, many of them have successfully devised informal mechanisms to address some of the risks associated with livestock trading.



For example, in Aysaita, trade operates with a complete lack of formal finance and credit, in the absence of legally enforceable contracts, and facilitated by the use of mobile technology for the

purpose of taking orders or ordering goods from wholesale dealers on credit. Trade routes are controlled by clans with their own territorial boundaries, and key middlemen tend to come from the same clan as the sellers, so they have a high degree of trust in transactions. Though it reduces returns to the producers, this division of labour serves as a mechanism to further share the profits of trade among many actors in the market.

Most of their pastoral produces are perishable, and they don't have access to modern packaging and storage technologies and facilities. They employ marginal labour and sell their products cheaper. By tradition, labour was required to meet subsistence requirements, but nowadays it has become a marketable commodity.



The lack of packaging and storage technologies, coupled with forced villagization, referred as sedentarization by state officials, further hinders their participation and success in the market economy. The locations of the villages are far from urban centres and the Addis-Djibouti highway. Five years ago, it was common to observe many women who established temporary market centres along the highway to deliver milk and its byproducts. They were active in selling to passersby and taking orders from clients in nearby towns. But they weren't sustainable for a number of reasons, especially sedentarization and proliferation of *Prosopis* trees. Though they are lacking in the structural capabilities to make technological choices and benefit from market opportunities, most informants were conscious enough about issues like when to enter into business, when to buy and sell, and when to terminate their businesses. But such aspirations are reactive, not proactive. They are the results of the regression of pastoralism and the absorption of their resources into the national market. This is affecting the social structural changes to their needs, and forcing them to look for different livelihood production strategies.

As the dependence of the Afar households on the market grows gradually, the nature of the gender division of labour is also changing by the same pace in urban areas. They market their produces at weekly market bazaars and supply craftworks to the towns' populations. Despite dwindling in both the number of people engaged and the size of production, craftworks are also fairly common in communities living in towns and nearby villages, particularly in Aysaita and Afambo towns, which were less touched by state intervention. However, some villages and clans have already exited the making and marketing of traditional handicrafts. By taking advantage of the Addis-Djibouti highway, women in Gewane are mass producing and supplying different crafts, mainly sleeping mats, to cities such as Adama, Debrezeit, Addis Ababa, Combolcha, and Dessie

outside of the region. The production and marketing of pastoral products, including charcoal, is also common along the Ethio-Djibouti highway, especially in Gewane and the nearby towns.

The production of charcoal for the market is a new phenomenon, as the Afar tradition prohibits the cutting of trees for environmental considerations (Getachew, 1997), but nowadays trees have become commodities. Many dealers are engaging in the charcoal business and have greatly enriched themselves from the unequal transactions.



Previously the making of traditional handicrafts to sell was mainly the activity of the poor who didn't have livestock. But nowadays, the making of handicrafts is day-to-day activity for many women active in the market. Both men and women make handicrafts. The making of various household utensils, bracelets, *Gile* (hunting knives), milking dishes, sandals, and spoons still remain within the male domain, and the prices of such products are higher on average, ranging from 50 birr for a bracelet to 600 for a *Gile*. Goats, especially the female ones, are highly valued among the Afar, and so are their hides and skins. Goat hides and skins have many uses, including carrying drinkable water both in the home and outside, carrying milk and, most importantly,

producing traditional shoes called *Qarum Kabella*. In the past, a pair of shoes was exchanged for a live goat. But the production of stone mills appears to be the domain of both sexes, as husbands are supposed to sit alongside their wives in the marketplace. However, the production and selling of baskets, brooms, goatskin storage bags, fans, milking vessels, and sleeping mats are in the



exclusive domain of women.

In Afambo and Gewane, women have organized themselves into small groups, which has enabled them to effectively collect raw materials and to produce and market traditional crafts. In some areas, for example, in the town of Aysaita, women buy a bundle of unprocessed palms leaves for 20 Ethiopian birr to produce sleeping mats, which are to be sold for 45 birr. Generally, varying

by space and time, the prices of crafts produced by women are relatively cheaper—ranging from 25 to 125 Ethiopian birr for a goatskin container—than those produced by the men. The production and marketing of handicrafts is highly valued because their prices are relatively stable and the raw materials such as hides, goat skin, grasses, palm leaves, wood, and rocks are found locally.

However, many of these materials are being affected greatly by state interventions and the ever expanding *Prosopis juliflora*. For example, the Tendaho and Kesem sugar projects established in 2009 (yet to begin production during the time of data collection) on over 96,000 hectares of land promised in their project document that they would hire thousands of Afar (accounting for 60 percent of its work force). But they have disastrously failed to fulfill their promises, and have effectively destroyed the vegetation composition along the river basins. Both projects were successful only in evicting the Afar from their grazing land along the Awash River and its tributaries and destroying the plantation structures. And some strongly believe that the projects were established with malicious intentions.

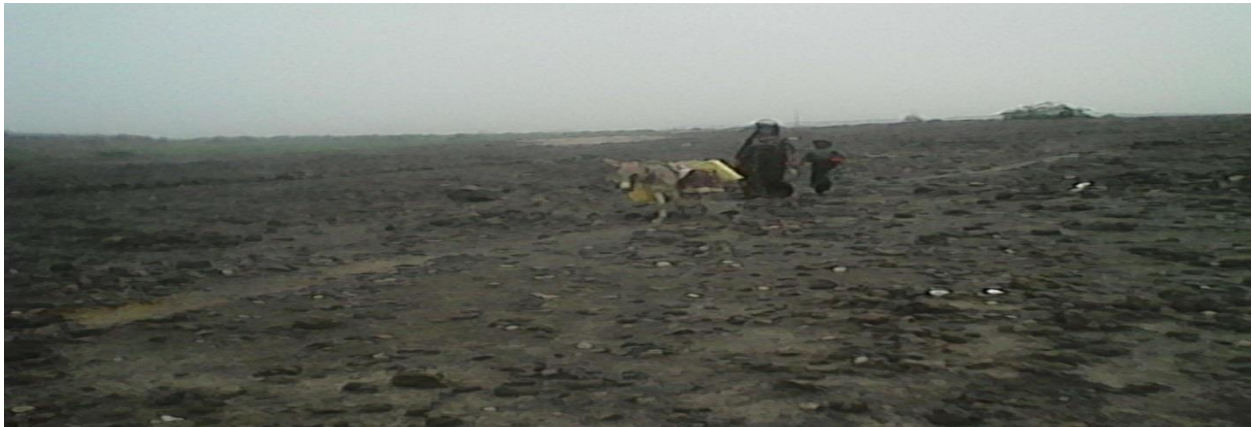


In addition to these projects, *Prosopis* trees, which are locally known as *Ditta* (meaning black) in reference to their dark evergreen appearance with flowers, grapes, and dried seeds, have had an ill effect on the Afar's land. As a figurative representation of the degrees of destruction caused by the current government, it is also known as *Woyane*, which refers to the Tigray People Liberation front and the dominant party in the current government. Multiple stories are also told about the very existence of *Prosopis juliflora* among the Afar people. But all agreed that it was first introduced by a foreigner working in the Malka-Warar Agricultural research centre (Getachew, 2001). The informants in this study disputed his nationality as an Ethiopian. Cattle dung, wind, and floods are responsible for the species to spread.

Many of pastoral commodities are light and durable, and transported easily on camel back when they travel. The Afar camel, known to the Afar as the lorry of desert lands, can carry four quintals. With very low maintenance costs, camels are integrated into the cash economy as a means of subsistence and transport even in circumstances where there is modern transport (Gedamu, 1989). Not only the ownership and management of camels, but also the loading and unloading of freight is conducted only by men. Once the pastoral products are unloaded in the weekly markets, it is the duty of women to conduct the actual marketing while being assisted by their husbands or grownup sons. The Afar men contribute to the commercial activities of their women in this respect.



Traditional items are culturally important in the homes of urban dwellers. They are always facing solid competition from mass-produced and cheaper goods, which lead to the replacement of traditional items, for example, water and milk carrying containers by plastic bags and jerry cans.



Generally, a close examination to the techniques, materials, tools and purposes of handicrafts and their marketing mechanisms entails communication and technology. The skills are easy to learn, and production technologies are rudimentary. The Afar traditionally avoid the spirit of competition with their peers in production and marketing of handicrafts. Traditionally, the Afar have two ways of eliciting information called *Daguu* (daily interactions between two individuals) and *Mablo* (a system of verification and interpretation of information obtained through *Daguu* by clan leaders and members) to make decisions about the hard realities of daily life, and at present mobile technology is overcoming the physical barriers to market information.



During market activities, the Afar people are known for engaging in intensive discussions and consultations in and outside of market bazaars, including using mobile technology. They buy and sell through intensive bargaining, and sometimes prefer to risk no sale rather than compete with each other. Through such traditional mechanisms of communication, the information that is obtained is verified and used to confront hard realities of the market, including pricing and safety of trade routes through the use of the traditions of *Daguu* and *Mablo*. *Daguu* is interpersonal while *Mablo* has a cross-cultural dimension. Communication based on technologies such as telephones, fax machines, and computers are accessible to most urban dwellers, but not for those living in most rural areas.



However, the majority of the Afar are users of mobile technology compared to other areas in Ethiopia. For anyone engaging in a historical scrutiny on the adoption and use of money and technology across Ethiopia, he/she can find that pastoralist and cash crop producing communities are more receptive than sedentary agriculturalists. The establishment of the first commercial bank branches could also be taken as proof. Their everyday conversations are facilitated by mobile technology. As there is no banking system providing m-money, they have not yet used their

mobiles in actual market transactions, and the internet services needed for m-money are only limited to a few towns. Many respondents agreed that mobile technology has changed the way they interact and the way they generate information about markets and other events in faraway districts or regions. Most of the informants agreed that the use of mobile phones enhanced their marketing capability significantly. Thus, the extent of adoption and expansion of mobile technology was found to be sufficient to introduce m-money among the Afar people living in towns and their vicinities.

They have already internalized the use of mobile technology as part of their cultural rules of communication, Daguu and Mablo. Generally, the cost, qualities, utility, and mobility of the technology are the main factors that determine the application of technology in the region. For example, the majority were seen carrying Techno mobiles because of the long life of their batteries. The Afar use mobile phones to elicit market information. Other practical difficulties are fear of external dependence on supplies and maintenance, and the unavailability of infrastructures, for example, electricity. The adoption of technology, they said, demands dependable purchasing power, maintenance services, energy, and spare parts, which are also only available in a few towns. As they lack the necessary technical knowledge and skills to fix a very small problem, maintenance services cost them recurrent cash expenses. Generally, the adoption of modern technology in the region, including mobile phones, is found to be capital-intensive and create external dependence in the region.

Commercial Ports, Money, and Livelihood Options

Taking advantage of maritime trade on the Red Sea, the Port of Tajurah, and Ethiopia's caravan trade routes, the Afar had been major trading actors within the commercial centres in the

Ethiopian hinterlands, employing multiple mediums of exchange. Informants from the oldest generation, for example, frequently mentioned their stories in commerce and provision of a variety of services, such as guiding and protecting trading caravans between the highlands of Ethiopia and the Red Sea ports. Some of them reported that looting of such caravans was another source of income in those days, and extortion was also reportedly common on the Asal salt plains in the *Dalol* depression. The coastal ports had also offered many opportunities, such as fishing, sailing, and establishing commercial networks. They had also been the source of Ethiopia's primitive salt (*Qasbo*) currency, locally known as *Amole*, for centuries. The Afar had been employing not only Salt (*Amole*) as currency, but also at different times the Maria Theresa, British Sterling, Lire, and Arab and Indian Coins to engage in international trade across the Red Sea prior to the 20th century. Joseph Harris, a British diplomat who visited the Imperial seat of Shawa in the 1840s, reported that the Emperor was commercially dependent on the Afar:

“The Terror and abhorrence in which the low country [the Afar lands] and its attendant dangers... have placed nearly the entire trade of Aliyu Amba [one of the major commercial centres in eastern escarpment of highland Ethiopia] in the Hands of the Danakil [the Afar] who are treated by the monarch with all deference and respect. The sovereign nevertheless took the precaution of keeping large stocks of the salt currency in case supplies were withheld.”

The Afar lands which had historically been the sources of Ethiopian currency, the *Amole*, are not now controlled by their historic owners, and consequently the Afar are forced to live outside the dynamics of the market economy due to historically determined social circumstances. In those days, the Afar people were engaged in production of commodities and were middlemen (*Wezir*) for caravan traders from highland Ethiopia and other parts of the world.



The bounded hill had been the barn of a wealthy pastoralist with thousands of goats and cattle before the introduction of the commercial farms. There are many similar structures on the *Ayelu* Mountain ranges in Gewane. According to an elder informant, these buildings on the mountainside were used to protect livestock from floods from the Awash River during the rainy season. Now they are abandoned.

Just after the end of Italian occupation, a salt mine concession was granted to the British and French companies on the Asal plains, and later these plains effectively remained within Djibouti. The opening of the Addis-Djibouti railway line was another factor for weakening and eventual sidelining the Afar from the dynamics of the market economy. Before the establishment of the railway line and the flow of European capital, the Afar were the main economic link and actors in the then-Ethiopian foreign trade. They had commercial ports such as Tajurah, Yobok, and Assab and were the major actors in salt caravans, as reported by Nesbitt:

“The salt caravans are organized by Somalis or Danakils [the Afar] living on the Coast of the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden. Caravans of cotton and other imported goods, on the other hand, are sent into the interior by Europeans, Arabs, and Indians, who do not accompany their goods,

but entrusted them to the natives [the Afar], on account of the danger of foreigners traveling in Danakil territory” (1934:236).

The Afar were also the main actors in commercial transactions at ports along the Indian Ocean, such as Merka and Barbara, now within in Somalia. Maintaining the trade routes under their control, the Afar were commercial and transit specialists who devised safe passages of individual caravans. They were playing the role of trade agents who were ensuring the safe transit of goods and peoples through Afar lands. They were called *Awlaytu* (plural, *Awlaytite*, caravan protectors), and various clans had their own agent who would supply camels and the labourers to load and unload the goods and lead the caravans across the desert. Whenever a merchant wanted to dispatch his goods, he had to make arrangements through his *Awlaytu*. Once the goods were loaded and passed to the agent, it would become his responsibility for their safe delivery to the place of destination. In those days, trade provided a livelihood for a great number of gatekeepers, agents (*Awlaytu*), and transporters, and continued until the 1980s with limited significance in which few people were involved. The transport of those goods was exclusively controlled by the Afar, where 2000 to 3000 camels were used to transport salt and other commodities from Yobok to the Ethiopian hinterlands (Pankhurst, 1962). Menelik II, the first enlightened Emperor who had been preoccupied by political stability, financial, and commercial issues had constructed the Addis-Djibouti railway. With the coming of the Addis-Djibouti Railway, the importance of the ports of Tajurah and Yobok became diminished, and foreign capital investments from Britain and France further alienated the Afar people from their traditional activities. For example, the French had become the major suppliers of the most demanded consumer commodities including firearms, once the business of the Afar, and, consequently, trading houses and commercial banks were established in major towns of Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1976). Becoming a French colony, trade in Djibouti at the

outset was international in character and dominated by French, Greek, Syrian, British, Dutch, Swiss, Germany, and American companies. One of my informants, originally from Tajurah, reported that during his childhood, Jones and Co. was the major American company supplying the Afar with American made cotton clothes, locally known as *Geberdin*, and buying back hides and coffee. The Afar were well supplied with exports, such as salt, cattle, hides, and other agricultural products collected from Ethiopian hinterlands, and imported goods, such as glass beads, textiles, and tobacco. Losing the trading routes and traditional distribution centres in the Ethiopian hinterlands further weakened their commercial position inside Ethiopia. The spread of motorcar transportation, together with complete government control, reduced the guidance and protection given to caravans and sharply depressed the prices of cattle and other pastoral products. In those times, trade was insurance against pastoral livelihood failure, as a woman, aged 61, said that:

“In good times, when the sky gave them rain (*Karma*), our forefathers became self-sufficient in livestock and its byproducts. They also used to produce grains along the basins of the Awash and its tributaries. In hard times, meaning no rainfall, they used to travel to make business. Though secondary trade, along bordering markets of the Amhara regions and Djibouti, they had



insurance against climate failures. But now we almost have neither the livestock nor the trade.

Some of us are engaging in commerce within limited territory.”

A few decades ago, the women had been actively engaging in multiple markets outside of the Afar regions in places such as Wara Himano, Harrar, Rahitta, Dawe, Aliyu Amba, Ain Amba, Ancharo, Warra Kallu, Woldeya, Bati and Yeju (Punkrust, 1976). These markets were weekly or monthly visited exclusively by women alone. Such monthly or weekly market bazaars are still alive in the memories of informants from the oldest generations, and such historic experiences of the Afar women in the late 19th century were summarized as follows:

“It is the women alone who bring their loaded camels and buy and sell in places of the men, who keep away altogether in order to avoid bloodshed, this country being the scene of constant feuds among the different tribes” (Punkrust, 1964).

They are now consigned outside of these historic roles by the actions of self-interested investors, misguided bureaucrats, and monopolizing merchants. Their historical accounts have been practically ignored and their commercial activities were confined within narrow bounds while the highlanders succeeded in securing multiple positions in other localities. Basic commodities such as food items (rice, pasta, cooking oil, biscuits, sugar, tea, soap, etc.) and consumer durables are traded exclusively by migrant urban dwellers originally from highland Ethiopia. The Afar are petty traders whose greatest concern is to secure their livelihoods without exerting any influence on the structure and functioning of the local economy. They seldom go beyond small businesses and are untouched by modern financial services. As a result, they are living outside of the parameters of national trade and financial services.

Trade Routes, Banking, and Money Transfer Arrangements

The Ethiopian paper money was first printed by Emperor Menelik. Until a few decades ago, however, both the peasants and pastoralists had never considered it as real and valid money for various reasons, including traditional, religious, political, and economic considerations. As was the case for most of the gold, silver, or bronze coins of the time, the Ethiopian paper money used to bear the imprint of the names and likenesses of the Emperors. Emperor Menelik II, together with his wife Empress Taitu, had been the first to imprint his image and name, which was later also done by Emperor Haile Selassie. In addition to questions about the utility of money and the prohibition of usury by their faith, the Afar were known to reject paper money bearing the imprints of crown with the cross on religious bases. Of course such rejection was not exceptional to the Afar. The introduction of paper money was not accepted by all peoples in all regions of Ethiopia, and was really only prevalent among peoples in the South and in cash crop producing regions. Generally, in the course of the 20th century a tremendous change occurred which in turn created the conditions that pushed the Afar to reconsider their traditional evaluations regarding the nature of wealth, money, and the market.

In the period before the 1950s, moreover, Ethiopia didn't have any state loans in the modern meaning of the term due to the low level of national savings and fluctuating capabilities of the state (Pankhurst, 1969). This was slightly changed in the 1960s with the opening of commercial banks in major towns including Aysaita, the then capital of the Afar. Financial reform was introduced by Emperor Haile Selassie, though many of the Afar viewed it as the financial accessory of the state in their historic territory. Consequently, banks did not achieve the necessary legitimacy among the Afar that they did in many other parts of Ethiopia.

The pastoral Afar continued to develop strategies to better sustain their livelihood systems without technical or financial support from either the national or regional governments. Appropriate technologies, including electricity, the main infrastructure for technology adoption, are in short supply in the region. Devaluation has become the primary source of revenue (EEA, 2011). And further, the regional finance and economic affairs office is assigned to administer revenues and nationally fixed expenditures. It doesn't have the authority to direct funds into relevant microfinance institutions that support small scale businesses. Rather, the region has been known for financial waste and embezzlement for which the Afar have been collectively blamed. As a result, according to many informants, the actual expenses for modern services are reportedly comprised of the smallest portion of the budget nationally allotted to the region yearly. As observed in many livestock bazaars and marketing centres, the commoners become outraged and refuse to pay livestock taxes levied by municipal authorities. Instead, they buy and sell cattle and goats outside of the perimeter of the government owned cattle market compounds, while municipal tax collectors were observed collecting cattle taxes from the urban buyers sitting a few meters away from the centre. Consequently, 56% of the Afar population are living below the absolute poverty line, and only 1.3% of the total average household annual income is being saved (Dessalegn, 2009), the lowest savings rate in Ethiopia.

The main trading centres, other than Aysaita and Dubti, lie along the main Ethio-Djibouti highway. A few decades ago, traveling into regional markets, which have fixed times of departure and return, was common and was secured by armed caravans. Those regional markets were held weekly, monthly, or twice a year. To avoid blood feuds, no male members of the Afar caravan used to enter into market bazaars along the bordering regions. They provided standby protection

for the women in the bazaar. Jemal Abdulkadir cited his experience in 1983, when he went to the weekly held Bati Market to resolve disputes:

“As the deputy governor of the Wallo province [by then the Afar region was included] I spoke both in Amharic and Afar-Af to all of the marketers. The Afar women recognized me and reacted fearfully towards me. I always remember the apprehension felt by them having seen me in the wrong place. They didn’t know my actual political power as their deputy governor.”

In those days, the Afar women used to sell their pastoral products and purchase cereals and other essentials produced in by the highland communities while their safety was ensured by armed male escorts. They had been not only active in trade, but also as travelling traders, as one informant, aged 71, told us:

“Travelling was the education of the old generations in which women were included. We used to travel in search of water, pasture, and lost cattle. For example, if the lost animal was a cow, it was the responsibility of the women, while the men had to fetch lost camels. The same is true for trade mostly done by women. Thus, to speak of the Afar pastoralists is to proclaim them as traveling traders.”

However, nowadays the geographic mobility of Afar women is bounded within a limited territory. Traveling caravans no longer exist due to the reorientation of the local economy and the predominance of the migrant traders in the region. With improved motorcar transportation there follows growth in the number of traders, brokers, and political patrons coming from other parts of Ethiopia. Thus, commercial farming and motorcar transportation increased the expansion of urbanization and adversely affected the capabilities of the traveling Afar women traders by shifting

trade in favor of highland settlers in the region. Such transformation eventually led to increasing inequality of wealth and weak social ties between the Afar and the migrant urban dwellers.

Moreover, commerce in the region was accompanied by two features of a cash economy: sharp fluctuations in the prices of commodities, and the arrival of an active class of merchants in the region. They agreed that for purchasing more tradable goods, there must be more money, and favorable orientation to *money as wealth*. And these in turn depend on the purchasing and exchange value of money, especially for urban households. With very limited investment options, instead of depositing their money in a bank, backyard goat rearing serves as a store of productive assets and an effective strategy to avoid the fast falling purchasing power of money. For the Afar, that is, livestock is a self-reproducing asset, and generates more value than money in the bank. In fact, conventionally, the value of wealth and assets is estimated by the size and diversity of livestock in rural villages, where maximization and diversification of livestock are the rules. Many informants asserted that they still do not consider money as wealth because of many factors, as an informant, aged 61, mentioned:

“The circumstances we have been living for so long were not favorable to have the initiative to consider money as our wealth and actively engage in commerce. It does not have any productive value. It never reproduces itself like our livestock do. We all prefer to own a cow or a goat instead of thousands of birr locked in the bank. The real value of money is controlled by the state, not by us. Do you think that bank deposits and large volume of trade are possible under a government which pays no respect to communal property?”

The Afar’s orientation to money and banking has remained inseparable from the politics and policies of the state. Many informants cited the fact that the first branch of the commercial bank

of Ethiopia was opened following the introduction of commercial farms in the area. After this, their livestock and natural resources had been destroyed and the very existence of their pastoral economy had been long forgotten by policymakers and politicians alike. Banking and commercial farms are inseparable in the minds of many of the informants. The social meaning of money, locally known as *Genzeb*, is more than a medium of exchange and wealth to be accumulated through the market, but rather is a symbol of the power of the state and its negative repercussions. Many informants echoed beliefs that money has been regarded, by national and regional governments, as a dependable means of buying political loyalties and national integration. Furthermore, as is true for many Muslim societies, the prohibition of usury has always occupied huge spaces among the Afar people. They view usury as establishing discord among clan members by dividing them into borrowers and lenders—as happens among politicians—and consequently destroying the bonds that have survived for generations.

Viewing money as a means to extend social relations at different levels of the social scale, the Afar tend to avoid the making of money for its own sake. Money is only a means to ensure the wellbeing of people within a household or a clan. Accordingly, the modern habit of buying cheap and selling high has little place among the Afar people. An informant characterized the market practices in the region as a “sterilized cow”; a cow is the most valuable kind of property because of its reproductive potential and its milk. From this characterisation, we can infer that the Afar do not reject money in itself, but because of its outcomes. So as to overcome the negative value of money, some exchanges are still being conducted without the use of money payments, and the amount of paper money in circulation is quite small compared to other regions of Ethiopia. Despite this, many Afar use money so as to produce their livelihood, especially those living in urban areas

and those engaged in formal and informal employment, who are almost completely dependent on money.



Over the years, there were many variations in the exchange value of money compared against US dollar. The exchange value of money varies at different times, and so it is very difficult for the Afar to conceive of paper money as wealth. For example, just a quarter of a century ago, a qualified teacher with a diploma used to start his monthly salary at a rate of 347 Ethiopian birr. This amount was equivalent to 174 US dollars. Currently, a person with the same profession and qualification begins with a salary of 1663 birr, equivalent to 73 US dollars. The amount could be

very insignificant if we calculate it on a daily basis, and much smaller if compared with the cost of basic commodities. For example, two decades ago, a loaf of bread that cost 0.10 birr is now 1.25 birr on average, and, according to informants, the size of the bread is also significantly reduced. These depreciations in the value of money and the rising cost of basic goods are the background for most women who reacted to the very question about money by saying, “Money has no value.”

The other inflationary factor is the debasing of the currency and large government expenditures. As a result, the currency depreciated sharply in terms of foreign exchange. Besides its fast fluctuation, paper money also creates problems of measurement and safety. Hummed, aged 54 said that, “The generation before us was using the Maria Theresa coins in the historic bordering markets, along the Ethiopian highlands, and in Djibouti, and the coins were valued for their invariable value and safety.” Afar is also the only state where microfinance institutions are absent. Formal microfinance is deliberately avoided by the state for security and geopolitical reasons. Though known for their ardent nationalistic orientation towards Ethiopia, the Afar people are still categorized as one of the country’s secessionist, peripheral communities. The government’s original excuse for the omission of microfinance institutions was reported to be the absence of an Afar with any banking expertise. But such a false excuse was proven to be merely political, as many Afar boys and girls have been graduating from business and finance fields for the last few years. And the few existing commercial banks in the region used to demand tangible collateral, which the Afar do not largely possess. A decade before, there were successful interest free credit and savings arrangements provided by nongovernmental agencies in many towns, but they are now gone despite their success stories. For example, according to an informant working in the commercial Bank of Assaita branch, a credit unit was opened for 25 women without costing the bank anything in the year 2000. It was funded by a local nongovernmental agency, but managed

by the bank's branch in Aysaita. The fund was provided to women, who used it to produce and market pastoral products. And the production and marketing activities were initiated, implemented, and managed by the women themselves. They were reportedly successful, and high repayment rates were reported. According to an informant, who was also an officer in the bank, such an experimental success with credit and credit repayment, therefore, could be taken as evidence of creditworthiness and the potential capabilities of the Afar women in the market economy. Similar stories were also identified for private credit schemes in towns like Logia and Gewane.

Again, the emphasis of tradition for human needs instead of profit, religion, and low density of population undermined the Afar's ability to apply money and technology to mass production of pastoral commodities. These are among the main hindrances to their business success stories. Despite this, many women have formed informal support networks such as savings groups, which mobilize money for capital and support in time of crises. Among the Afar people, saving groups among close friends are largely seen as insurance against livelihood crises, effective safety net mechanisms in the absence of formal finances. All of the respondents agreed that these institutions reinforced solidarity among extended family and clan members outside of formal institutions. As they are deeply embedded within tradition, social gifts and exchanges are also supported by religious and social norms of the community. Small businesses heavily rely on personal assets and kinship ties mobilized through the credit tradition called *Qdbadaa*, which is used to borrow pastoral products and other consumable commodities, and *Gahessa* credit with money (*Lakqo*). Almost all of the informants have also reported high degrees of repayment of credited money unless the borrower faced bankruptcy. In case of bankruptcy, the borrower is culturally expected to present plausible evidence so as to remove his/her liability. Moreover, money as well as

resources are being shared and exchanged within clans and between clans through livestock rearing contracts, compensation payments, feasts, and social ceremonies. These transactions are dependent on the size and mix of livestock as they are primarily measures of wealth, and large numbers are necessary for various transactions, including buying and selling, social gifting, and inheritance. For example, in the past, when a rich pastoralist died, many of his animals were sacrificed—some informants estimated between 100 and 250—while the remaining livestock were inherited by his sons, his brothers, and his nephews to keep them within the clan line. The same tradition of sacrifice was also applicable to the death of their powerful and sacred spiritual leader (locally named *Hangadaallaa*), but these customary ritual feasts have declined. However, there are exceptions for livestock owned by female-headed households or cattle reproduced from original assets obtained through bride price. Being outside of the clan's property, they are inheritable only by her children.



Livestock are also essential aspects of showing generosity and making gifts to poor members of the clan and thereby obtaining status and social recognition. Life cycle events are marked by gifts. For example, livestock are valued to fulfil social obligations such as bride price (in Afar-af, *Saddi*) and dowry (in Afar-af, *Kul'ie*). However, unique to the Afar, dowry is conventionally payable when the wife demands a divorce, and it is paid only upon divorce. Both bride price and dowry used to be paid in female cattle, she-camels (for wealthy pastoralists), and other valuable property, but nowadays they are paid in cash. These traditions as a background to exchange, including trade, have remained a way of maintaining existing social relationships, or a means of creating new ones, and of invoking mutual responsibilities and commitments within the extended kin system. That is, the Afar women could be viewed as the pillars of pastoralist continuity and change.

Therefore, customarily, the Afar people have complex rules and processes of exchange. Pastoral property is passed down through intergenerational as well as intragenerational relations. Property exchanges are a calculus of many factors, such as the sex of both the owner and the animal (and the type of animal, also), and the status and prestige of the clan under consideration. These arrangements further enhance social cohesion, maintain the tribal social order, and provide a level of social protection to people in need at the village level. If the borrower fails to repay or present convincing bankruptcy evidence, the case will be taken to the council of a clan leader and village heads. Accordingly, the *Qdbadaa* and *Gahessa* traditions, which are enforced by leaders of the clan and village heads, also act as redistributive and safety net mechanisms. They, for example, are at the forefront of support for female-headed households. There are circles of responsibility ranging from extended family members, through village heads, to tribal leaders and the main informal money transfers through *Zakat* and *Sadaqa*. Many of the informants reported that money

obtained, through various informal sources, is being used either as working capital in good times and as social insurance in hard times. In general, almost all support networks are made possible by using money, and the provision of informal support is often articulated as being male dominated in rural areas but involving both women and men in urban areas, another indication of the changing context of gender relations in the region.

Women, Household Security, and Mobility

Despite the negative customs such as female genital mutilation (*Salota*), polygyny, and early marriage, which are now gradually weakening, the Afar women have far more independent status than women in other parts of Ethiopia. The Afar women never feared public visibility and participation; they are used to being in the public sphere. The institution of the clan provides them social protection in case of marital abuse. Even after divorce, the divorcee is provided with material and emotional support from extended family and clan members. In many ways, the Afar women practically assert their full and equal share in the social and religious life of the villages. The Afar tradition (*Aada*) does not, for example, exclude women from mixing with their male counterparts, which is common practice in most Muslim societies, and their social and economic security depends on the clan, not on marriage alone. Unique to the Afar women in comparison with many cultural communities in Ethiopia, when they become head of a household, they become entitled to the rights over the children, including the entitlement to be named before their children's names. Among the Afar, it is common to use his/her mother's name as the family name. As the Afar saying goes, "*Buxah abba sahtam mawaay isi sahittam mageya*," which means, "The head of the house never lacks someone to be judged by, but has no one above him/her." At the clan level, that is, a female headed household has equal status with their male counterparts. Once they become heads

of their homes, they begin to exercise the same roles as male members in clan affairs, i.e. socially recognized authority of a household. They are considered socially equal and able to take part in



some public issues. They are also entitled to own livestock and other pastoral assets, with the exception of the camel. However, during inheritance, women might be given two or three camels, depending on the number, with use rights over milk and transportation while ownership remains with her eldest brother or uncle on her father's side. Among the Afar people, marriage is always arranged by clan members, and consequently, divorce is easy from both sexes.

Thus, the gender division of labour in Afar is now more determined by structural circumstances; both their roles and their responses to the market are contingent on the structure of the market economy and estranging national policies. To uncover such structurally contingent gender roles, this study compared women in completely urban to peri-urban communities. In the Afar region, recently, the economic importance of towns and peri-urban areas is growing. Those who settled in towns and peri-urban areas occupy positions between the rural and urban ways of

life. The trends of change from the pastoral-rural into urban commercial structures are quite visible as one moves from the peri-urban to the urban centre, in areas such as: 1) decline in pastoral dependence; 2) gradually growing urban population; 3) adaptation to the urban way of life; and 4) increasing desire to enter into commerce and wage employment. The Afar population living in towns is also gradually increasing in number, producing changes in the structure of livelihood production, patterns of consumption, and, consequently, the division of labour.

As stated above, the main challenges to the Afar women are no longer located in traditional attitudes, but rather in the nature and structure of the urban political economy. Modern business requires access to money, information, and technology. For example, employment opportunities in the urban-market economy demand some degree of modern education, for which the majority of the Afar women, especially those above the age of 40, are unprepared. Consequently, there are also regional and tribal variations in the occupational distribution in various offices. That is, the proportion of the Afar employed in various offices is very small relative to the employees who come from other parts of Ethiopia, especially from Tigray and Amhara regional states. Within the Afar themselves, most professional employees are from either the coastal areas of the Red Sea or Aysaita, as they were the first generations of the Afar who had favorably attended schools in the 1960s, while the political offices are mostly staffed by people from areas bordering Tigray and Amhara regional states, as either they attended some level of modern school or are politically trusted at the national level. Many of their children and grandchildren also pass through modern schools. They were the role models for many young seeking to pursue modern education and wage employment in towns. As wage employment demands certain levels of education and experience, some men from the middle generation with no education are engaged as security guards and watchmen while many women are participating in low-return activities. But women have

completely avoided socially undesirable activities such as commercial sex work, becoming housemaids, or selling khat and alcoholic beverages for religious and cultural reasons.

That is, with growing participation in formal education, the Afar women are increasingly joining the work force. Consequently, their dependence on men has already been reversed in urban centres relative to women in rural villages. Within the household, especially in urban areas, women are empowered. For example, the patterns of responses to son preference, allocation of food, and provision of services such as health and education are gradually changing. Contrary to the oldest and the middle generations, respondents from the younger generation have never had experiences of differential treatment. All of them agreed that if there is any form of gender bias in their home environment, the blame belongs to mothers instead of fathers.

There were also asked to establish who actually has control over profit. All agreed that the women themselves controlled the money that they obtained, which is exceptional when compared to women in the other parts of Ethiopia. Many informants reported that they have full rights over assets produced by their labour and cash profits generated from the market. According to them, tradition despises husbands who approach their wives for money. But the money raised is used for medical, school, and household expenses at the will of the women themselves. As a result, more girls are being sent to school, an increasingly changing phenomenon nowadays. Harmful practices embedded in tradition (*Afar Aada*) such as female genital mutilation and cross-cousin marriage (*Absuma*) are also changing in the context of urban areas. In the past, *Absuma* was compulsory among the Afar in rural villages, but in urban contexts many girls, especially those who excelled in their formal education, are gradually exercising the right to choose their future husband. They are practically participating in family decision-making and increasingly becoming breadwinners

for their households. They make choices about the use of money to ensure the wellbeing of their families. They often pay school fees for their children and other young relatives living with them in towns, and thus they have contributed to the growth of an educated labour force. Though these successes are small, the Afar women are becoming more enterprising. Given modern education, youths are living on wages and salaries from local agencies. As they are being viewed as role models, more parents are further encouraged to let their children and younger relatives attend schools and eventually enter into wage labour. This was almost non-existent half a century ago. The growing public visibility of women, including educated youths, implies improved bargaining power in the household and therefore higher social status. Improved financial position and gains increased community respect and participation in social networks. They are also politically and legally conscious, but still lack the real power to exert influences over national and regional policies and projects.

Some women are also investing more in houses in towns outside the region, such as Dessie and Combolcha of the Amhara regional state. Because they are now in charge of distributing and allocating family finances, many of them are having urban lands registered in their name which contradicts tradition. An informant, aged 58 claimed, “Tradition dictates that the tribe controls land and camels, which virtually belong to us all. In those days, I knew of no man who owned, for example, land privately, but now people are having land attached to their name. I believe that should be the way forward.” The informants were also asked to list all livelihood activities in which they had engaged during the past five years in the order of their preference and to estimate the average income earned doing each activity. The preferable source of income is salaried employment followed by livestock rearing and marketing, which indicates the shifting nature of

livelihood production. Some also mentioned activities derived directly from the natural resource base such as craftworks and charcoal production.

The production and selling of charcoal were the last choice for most of them; it is seen as the “last resort” survival option adopted by people who lack sources of working capital. However, in Gewane more women, especially widows, were actively engaging in the charcoal business, mostly as middlemen, and others have also moved to charcoal burning centres to set up small business such as foodstuff vending, small restaurants, and guest houses.

This partialization of activities, endorsed by the structures of the market and estranging power of state policies, is also partly supported by tradition. That is, the gender division of labour among the Afar people is known to be culturally stratified into high-status activities for men and relatively low-status activities for women.



Traditionally, women's work includes: 1) household chores; 2) fetching water from wells; 3) nurturing of children; 4) preparation of home building materials, as well as dismantling and installation whenever they move from place to place; 5) milking of animals, except camels (camels are considered to be the sacred property of the clan, and therefore accounted only to the male line); 6) searching for lost cattle; and 7) preparation and marketing of dairy products. Searching for lost camels, milking camels, and provision of protection and security are the traditional men's work. According to women informants, such cultural stratifications are being extended into "men's work" and "women's work" in the urban-market economy. High-return activities in government offices and the selling of camels are still being reserved for men, while the women are relegated to low-return activities. These were observable in the cattle bazaars and weekly market centres. For example, there was a predominance of women selling palm dates, goats, crafts, stone mills, and other pastoral products, but their prices and profit margins are low compared to commodities under the domain of the men. As the convention demands, the selling and buying of camels is the sole domain of men.



However, many of the informants strongly agreed that these gendered social functions have undergone tremendous changes at the household level, especially for those who are living in the urban and peri-urban areas. In most cattle market centres, the vendors are mainly women ranging from 30 to 60 years of age. There were also girls who sell a cup of cold water for a birr, which could be taken as evidence that the Afar people are increasingly experiencing the ups and downs of the market economy that cut across generations.



Accordingly, women are more prepared to take up alternative income generating options than men. Though the respondents were not willing to report the correct figures of their income, they were propped up by their household purchases and assets in the home. In addition to basic items such as clothes and provisions, many households have newer appliances such as televisions, refrigerators, and air conditioners. However, they are both less accustomed with and powerless to

influence the rules of modern business. Consequently, they are consigned to small enterprises that tend to work in the same kind of businesses, such as small shops and food huts that require very little startup capital, which in turn saturates the markets. Very few small businesses grow into medium ones. In addition, women tend to have meager financial capital at their disposal, and yet their enterprises are more successful than those of the men.



Conclusion and Recommendation

This report is an investigation into the major changes observed in the pastoral system of the Afar of Northeastern Ethiopia, with special emphasis on the shift towards the market, the application of money and technology, and the associated changes in gender relations. The Afar people have been suffering a series of livelihood shocks since the 1950s due to drought, policies,

and violence, and consequently, pastoralism has gradually been dying out but is not yet dead. In the face of multiple challenges, the Afar women continued to effectively market their traditional products and are actively participating in wage employment, increasing both in number and significance. This study has found that Afar women are trying to face new realities through pastoral commoditization, including labour. With trendy commoditization, the social utility value of pastoral assets, goods, and services is increasingly changing. These assets, goods, and services were once used entirely for subsistence, but nowadays they have begun to have an exchange value as products are being sold and bought from the market with the use of paper money. The Afar women have gradually adapted to market forces, the rules of demand and supply, and understanding when to buy and when to sell for small profits, savings, and further reinvestment.

However, the application of money and technology has happened against the background of a highly politicized policy environment, and as a result most of the businesswomen are more interested in risk aversion than profit maximization. That is, their success has been hugely constrained by various structural forces, notably state policies, a lack of formal financing, price fluctuations, and the absence of appropriate technologies that have proved to be significant while tradition plays a minor role. The fundamental policy differences between the state and the pastoralists are reflected in their narratives about the dying status of pastoralism and the purposes of policy interventions. The state views pastoralism and pastoral production as backward, both in cultural and economic terms, and has been trying to legitimize top-down policy interventions such as sedentarization, formalization of livestock marketing centres, and restriction of informal cross-border trade. It has fervidly been justifying these interventions as strategies to better provide public services such as schools, health care, and accessible marketing centres. Nevertheless, the pastoralists perceive them as the major causes for their downward mobility in both social and

economic terms compared to where they had been few decades ago. The pastoralists argue that the objectives of the state projects are political and administrative control, and are significantly restricting their livelihood options and opportunities. Pastoral livelihoods, they argue, could be as resilient as they had ever been if they could operate in a politically and socially flexible policy environment. The Afar frequently cite their memories of how drought induced famine had the same impacts to support their argument. Most of the informants perceive the state as ignorant about local needs and preferences, blindly determining all aspects of their existence, and hence lacking in legitimacy.

The Afar women are living in a region with the lowest savings rate in Ethiopia. There are very few commercial banks and no formal microcredit agencies. Consequently, the pastoral bankruptcy caused by the expanding commercial farms has been followed by financial bankruptcy with no available money for profitable business and no formal credit schemes, letting many people remain idle in towns and fall short of subsistence. Moreover, the collateral requirements, their restricted location, and Islam's prohibition against interest are further constraining their access to credit from the few commercial banks in the region. Furthermore, changes in the demographic, economic, and administrative structures of towns are further affecting the majority of the Afar by hindering the appropriate integration of their pastoral products into the local market economy, which deserves further in-depth investigation. Thus, as a grassroots response to all of these failing circumstances, the Afar women are filling the gap between state policies and local realities. The women are actively engaging in market activities by facing barriers such as long distances to market centres, lack of capital, price fluctuations, and other circumstances beyond their capabilities.

Recently, however, women have started to organize small savings and credit clubs outside of the state's structures to mobilize their private assets. These clubs provide small, interest free credit services to members. This indicates that instead of the outright rejection characteristic of the past, the Afar women are now exercising their capabilities and their commercial strengths and are evolving slowly over time. They are producing traditional crafts for local markets, and some of them have already become full time business entrepreneurs. Decision making for marketing activities is often gender specific, and food security at the micro-household level depends on the wife's ownership of livestock and financial resources. They diversify their household incomes. The success which begins with financial and material gains has already expanded into social services such education for their children, modern health care, and technologies. Thus, they contribute to the growth of an educated labour force, and, in the absence of formal financial agencies, traditional sources of capital and money transfer arrangements remain important to the livelihood systems of the Afar people.

This shift has enhanced household cash income and mobility, thereby improving household food security for the Afar living in urban and peri-urban areas. Particularly for those in wage employment and in full-time trade, they have already achieved upward economic and social mobility. However, the majority still perceives the shift as downward mobility relative to the pastoral position of previous generations. Regarding literacy and numeracy, most youths are becoming educated, and consequently further enhancing their social and economic statuses. Generally, the use of money has made the Afar people living in urban areas better off economically than their rural relatives, yet more research should be done to determine appropriate livelihood options and opportunities in the context of the urban-market economy rather than concentrating pastoralists in unproductive barren lands through a failing sedentarization scheme.

As the men who lost their livestock move into towns and predominantly spend their time chewing khat—the common source of financial and social stress within their household—women are taking over many economic and social responsibilities favorably approved by clan and religious leaders and successfully directing changes. They are successfully creating the necessary conditions to adapt to an urban way of life, and hence standards of occupational evaluation are changing in favor of women. A significant number of young people are living on wages and salaries and are being viewed as role models, and more parents are letting their children and younger rural relatives attend schools and eventually enter into wage labour.

All in all, we observed that the underlying causes of livelihood risks in the region are social and political, and, as a result, the sustainability of urban livelihoods that is obtained through the use of money and technology and the positive changes in gender relations depend on both the commercial capabilities of the Afar women and the political choices of the state. Accordingly, any future policy intervention aiming to reverse livelihood vulnerability in the Afar region should be based on a combination of the following broad strategies:

- Sustainable pastoral livelihood as a strategic objective for people and environment
- Attainment of livelihood sustainability by enhancing pastoral productivity by supporting the Afar to benefit from local products, especially salt and hides, which are now externally controlled by outside forces
- Appropriate technologies and techniques for sustainable pastoral development
- Appropriate strategies for human and institutional development capable of reducing exposure to livelihood shocks and strengthening pastoral resilience

- Expansion of urban, market-based livelihood options and opportunities, including access to culturally relevant financial institutions and money provision schemes, affordable and adaptable technology, and entrepreneurial skills
- Empowerment of the pastoralists to make their own choices and decisions

All of these recommendations demand working toward long-term objectives, and require that policies be flexible to continuously adapt to local circumstances and resolve conflicts of interests through meaningful involvement and motivation of the pastoralists in the region. They call for new ways of governance and new ways of tackling livelihood crises, including clear property rights, suitable environmental policies, and decentralized financial policies and decisions. Such changes at the national level could promote regional and local authorities to establish formal microfinance agency and deliver financial services to people willing to engage in commerce. They also require the recovery of grazing lands along river banks and appropriate resource-sharing mechanisms between commercial farms and the pastoralists.

More studies should be done to examine built-in tensions between the state and pastoralists, and to identify appropriate interventions to shift the current competitive relationships into complementary ones. In the short term, market information about prices of commodities in various markets inside and outside of the region could produce constructive impacts on business knowhow and expand the possibilities of livelihood diversification. It could be helpful if training about basic accounting, marketing, and capacity building, including the provision of revolving startup capital and new technologies suitable for pastoral production, packaging, and storage, are provided.

As their physical mobility in search of pasture, water, and markets are being constrained by violence, there must be policies appropriate to transform and improve peace and security in the

region and bordering territories. Then the Afar women could resume using various historic trading routes and market options along the bordering regions.

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