

Land Rush and Social Change in Africa

Year: 2013

Place of fieldwork: Ethiopia

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- **Research background**

The lower Omo Valley in southwestern Ethiopia was characterized as one of the most inaccessible areas in East Africa by Uri Almagor, who conducted anthropological fieldwork among the Daasanach in 1968 and 1969. By the mid-2000s, however, this description of the area had become invalid. In contrast to its former 'isolation', the area has emerged as the front line for development and investment by national government agencies and national and international corporations. Currently, three large-scale development projects are in progress. The first is the construction of the Gibe III dam in the upper Omo river, intended for hydro-electric generation. The second is oil exploration by a multinational company, which began in 2013. The third is large-scale commercial farming, for which the government has leased huge areas of land to foreign and domestic investors who plan to produce crops mainly for export. Starting in 2007, Italian-, Indian- and domestically-owned farms have started to operate in the Daasanach land and many Daasanach have already been displaced without adequate compensation. Some conflicts have arisen between workers on commercial farms and the Daasanach living around the farms.

- **Research purpose and aim**

The purpose of this study is to clarify how the development of commercial farms influences local communities in contemporary Africa. Since the beginning of this century, many national and international corporations have acquired large tracts of land in Africa. This study focuses on the following three points: (1) the effects of commercial farms on local communities, especially how the displacement of local pastoralists impacts the pastoralists' livelihood; (2) the new farms' impact on social relations, not only between local people and farm workers but also among local pastoralists; and (3) comparisons with other areas where the operation of commercial farms has strongly influenced the local community.

- **Results and achievements by fieldwork**

The responses of the Daasanach people to the construction and operation of the commercial farms vary depending on age, gender, place of residence and economic situation. Generally speaking, young men who live in towns and who have graduated from secondary or high school expect the farms to provide them with good opportunities for employment. Yet the majority of village-dwelling Daasanach, who comprise 97% of the Daasanach, and particularly the young men who are responsible for herding and fattening livestock, express strong dislike of the farms and anxiety about the future. Some young Daasanach insist that 'we are people of livestock and do not need Highlanders' farms which are incompatible with our livestock'. Nevertheless, a few young men who live in the village but own few livestock have been employed by the commercial farms. They often complain about the farms, especially regarding their low salaries and certain bad behaviors exhibited by the Highlander workers, but not typically about the fact that the farms exist. In addition, some village elders were identified as community leaders

and encouraged to serve as proponents of the projects sponsored by the local government. As a result, tensions between and among the youth and elders have run high. Careful and continuous observation will be needed as the Ethiopian government tries to negotiate a balance between ‘democratic developmentalism’ and local autonomy.

- Implications and impacts on future research

I will continue to conduct field research to clarify the transformation of local communities and to communicate with other researchers who are studying the impacts of commercial farms on local communities in other areas such as the Gambela and Oromia regions of Ethiopia.



A commercial farm and its watchman



Day workers on an Indian-owned farm



A meeting between farm staff, local government officials and local pastoralists