Displacement and Resistance Strategies of the Pastoralists Afar in Ethiopia

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Abstract: This paper examines the resistance strategies of the displaced pastoralist Afar people in Northeast Ethiopia, focusing on the Lubakubo clan of the Dobi area. The Afar have historically practiced transhumant pastoralism, sustaining their livelihoods through the herding of livestock across arid and semi-arid landscapes. In 2004, a local "big man," backed by the Ethiopian government and private investors, forcibly displaced members of the Lubakubo clan to facilitate commercial salt mining in Dobi, disrupting their socio-economic systems, cultural ties to the land, and traditional pastoral routes. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and archival research, this paper documents how the Afar mobilized lineage members, customary institutions, and strategic alliances to counter and contest the dispossession. These resistance strategies ranged from legal petitions and engagement with Afar traditional governance and conflict resolution structures to confrontation and symbolic acts reinforcing territorial claims. By situating these strategies within the broader political economy of resource extraction and displacement in the Horn of Africa, the paper contributes to scholarly debates on Indigenous resistance, land rights, and state–local power dynamics. The findings highlight the agency of displaced pastoralists in asserting their rights against state-backed commercial interests, while underscoring the resilience and adaptability of pastoralist systems under conditions of protracted displacement.

Keywords: Afar; development-induced-displacement; displacement; Ethiopia; Horn of Africa; resistance

Résumé : Cet article examine les stratégies de résistance du peuple Afar déplacé dans le nord-est de l'Éthiopie, en se concentrant sur le clan Lubakubo de la région de Dobi. Les Afars pratiquent depuis toujours le pastoralisme

transhumant, assurant leur subsistance grâce à l'élevage de bétail dans des paysages arides et semi-arides. En 2004, un « grand homme » local, soutenu par le gouvernement éthiopien et des investisseurs privés, a déplacé de force les membres du clan Lubakubo afin de faciliter l'exploitation commerciale du sel à Dobi, perturbant ainsi leurs systèmes socio-économiques, leurs liens culturels avec la terre et leurs routes pastorales traditionnelles. S'appuyant sur des travaux ethnographiques menés sur plusieurs sites entre 2015 et 2017, notamment des entretiens approfondis, des observations participantes et des recherches archivistiques, cet article documente la manière dont les Afars ont mobilisé les membres de leur lignée, les institutions coutumières et les alliances stratégiques pour contrer et contester cette dépossession. Ces stratégies de résistance allaient des pétitions juridiques et de l'engagement auprès des structures traditionnelles de gouvernance et de résolution des conflits des Afars à la confrontation et aux actes symboliques renforçant les revendications territoriales. En situant ces stratégies dans le contexte plus large de l'économie politique de l'extraction des ressources et des déplacements de population dans la Corne de l'Afrique, cet article contribue aux débats scientifiques sur la résistance autochtone, les droits fonciers et les dynamiques de pouvoir entre l'État et les collectivités locales. Les conclusions mettent en évidence le rôle actif joué par les éleveurs déplacés dans la défense de leurs droits face aux intérêts commerciaux soutenus par l'État, tout en soulignant la résilience et la capacité d'adaptation des systèmes pastoraux dans des conditions de déplacement prolongé.

Mots clés : Afar ; déplacements induits par le développement ; déplacements ; Éthiopie ; Corne de l'Afrique ; résistance

Background

The Afar are among the most marginalized groups in the Horn of Africa (HoA) (Yasin 2008). Politically, they are divided across three countries—Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia—and economically, successive governments have appropriated their fertile riverine lands and mineral resources (Feyissa 2011; Yasin 2008). Within Ethiopia, the Afar Region has been euphemistically called an "emerging" or "developing" regional state (Feyissa 2011; Young 1999), a label that underlines Afar's economic marginality and political peripheral status (Markakis 2011).

Within this marginal status, different Afar clans' positions and experiences are not (internally) homogeneous. In the context of the study area, Dobi, located on the Ethiopia-Djibouti border, higher positions of socio-political life were

dominated by members of the Modaito[1] clan federation, compared to the non-Modaito clans[2] (Abeshu 2019; Trimingham 1952). Consequently, some clans, such as the Lubakubo, have been subjected to double marginalization. As an Afar, the Lubakubo occupied a peripheral position in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, and, as a non-Modaito clan, they occupied a subordinate position vis-à-vis Modaito clans. It is within these structured marginalities that big man and their networks (led by a notable big man named As Mohammed Humed Yayyo, from the Modaito[3]) forcefully displaced the Lubakubo in Dobi for the salt mining business. In literature, a big man is defined as a highly influential individual in a clan who occupies a central position within a web of social networks spanning both state and non-state spheres.

Dobi, Ethiopia's second-biggest salt mining site, is not a lake per se but rather a plain of pastureland where salt is mined by digging out the underground saline water and treating it on the surface. Given the salinity of the land, it is prime pastureland for the livestock of the Lubakubo, who lead a nomadic life based on herding livestock, such as camels, cattle, and goats. Since this study focuses on people being displaced due to salt mining, it may be framed as development-induced displacement.

This article has five parts: following this introductory section, the second section presents literature that makes a case for the study and the research question of the study; the third section presents the research methodology and approach; the fourth section discusses the key findings; and the last part presents concluding remarks of the study.

Situating the Lubakubo Afar in African Displacement and Resistance Literature

Studies have drawn attention to various forms of displacement in Africa, including conflict-induced displacement (Akiwumi 2011; Clapham 2023; Clements 1997; Rothbart 2020; Stoop et al. 2019), displacement induced by climate change and environmental disasters (Cao et al. 2020; Unfried et al. 2022), and development-induced displacement (Oliver-Smith 2009). According to Oliver-Smith (2009), development-induced displacement inflicts severe and complex impacts on local populations, extending far beyond the physical loss of land and homes. Displaced communities typically experience profound social disarticulation as established networks, support systems, and leadership structures are fractured, undermining social cohesion and collective identity. It also leads to risk of impoverishment, such as food insecurity, loss of access

to common property resources, often without viable new livelihood options, erosion of cultural heritage and connection to place, ultimately resulting in systemic marginalization and vulnerability for those uprooted from their land (Oliver-Smith 2009). In the context of the pastoralist population, studies have underscored how competing claims of belonging between "sons of the soil" and "newcomers" led to contestations and displacements in northern Nigeria (Higazi and Lar 2015), in Liberia (Bjørkhaug et al. 2017; Snorek et al. 2017), and Niger (Bezares et al. 2021).

Resistance to displacements takes different forms: discursive and material. Discursive resistance, which has not been adequately studied to date, includes counter-narratives, storytelling, or contesting dominant discourses (Lilja 2022a; Von Busch 2017). Lilja (2022a) contends that available scholarship in resistance studies emphasizes using material resistance strategies against oppressive forces. Lilja (2022b) critiqued the relegation of the discursive forms of resistance to the background in literature that discusses resistance in the Global South.

Multidisciplinary perspectives have been brought to bear on resistance strategies employed by displaced people in Africa. For instance, Bjørkhaug et al. (2017) study showed that displaced Liberians used protest to demand a change in how their government treated them. Similarly, Horst's (2006) study of the Somali refugees in the Dadaab camp in Kenya revealed how they used a protest to demand an end to their protracted displacement. Malkki's (1996) research with the Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania showed how they reconstructed narratives about their history to depict their autochthonous status in Burundi. They used this discursive resistance strategy not only to resist the forces of displacement but also to work towards reclaiming their "homeland" in Burundi (Malkki 1996). The current paper presents multiple resistance strategies (including claims of indigeneity to Dobi) used against a big man and his networks.

The concept of big men was first proposed by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, who defines it as "highly influential individuals in a tribe" (Sahlins 1963, 286). This definition is not adequate to discuss the emergent new form of power in Dobi (notably a big man in the person of As Mohammed Humed Yayyowho) since the one in the study area operated within a web of social networks and also occupied both the state (as district administrator) and non-state (interlocutor between the Ethiopian Government and Lubakubo ke Modaito clan), and as a renowned businessperson, which signifies a union of roles in a person, all of which he used as a source of his authority. Therefore,

this paper uses an analytical frame that combines Sahlins's concept of big men with Mitchell's (1973) concept of social networks. Social networks are defined as "a set of relationships which cut across kin and identity-based groups" (Mitchell 1973, 21).

Methodology and Approach

Conducting Multi-sited Ethnography

Following the tradition of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1998), this paper is an output of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in multiple sites: Asayta (the capital of the Haussa Sultanate), Eli Dar city (the capital city of Eli Dar District), Dichoto (the seat of the rulers of Aydahis Bara clan, and As Mohammed), Dobi (the salt mining site and foci of displacement), and Samara (the capital city of the Afar Regional Government). As Mohammed's actions of extracting salt and displacing residents began in 2004. However, fieldwork for this study commenced in 2015 and lasted for 11 months over a period of two years. Data were collected by interviewing ten research participants[4]: eight from the Afar people, a government official, and a big man. The researcher also employed non-participant observation to document protests by displaced Lubakubo Afar, arrests, and court proceedings. Furthermore, additional data were collected through oral histories (especially about ethnogenesis) recounted by clan elders, biographical interviews with the big man, and archival reviews.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptualization of displacement has been elusive ever since the emergence of the field in the twentieth century. And, more importantly, there remains an absence of a conceptualization of displacement which simultaneously involves compulsion and agency (Chatty 2012; Glick Schiller 2021) and makes a distinction between displacement (as a process) and forced migration (as an event) (Ali 2022).

This paper took its cue from Ali, who defines displacement as a process of coercive disruption to valued ways of living and functioning, which may (or may not) result in forced migration (Ali 2022). As a process, displacement starts before people are forced to abandon their effective rights to and relationship with their lands, and it can consist of an array of different pressures and constraints, as well as strategies of evasion and resistance (Nilsen 2016). In the study area, displacement was associated with salt mining activities, and as such, it may be conceived as development-induced displacement. Development-induced

displacement refers to the forced relocation of communities and individuals from their lands for economic development (Cernea 1997; Vandergeest et al. 2007).

Development-induced displacement may be operationalized as a process of coercive disruption to the clan's relations to Dobi, for whom land is not only central to their pastoral livelihood (pasture and water), and clan identity (as it is central to the territorialization of clan and clanization of territories) but also integral to the practice of absuma marriage relations (cross-cousin marriage) in which newlyweds are expected to reside with the bridie's clan territory for few years or until the first child is born. Displacement, by severing ties to their land, choked their right to use their land and erased the territory-based clan identity, and the bases for the traditional Afar marriage relations. Therefore, the severing of relations to Dobi impacted the whole Lubakubo clan: both those who were physically displaced and those who were not.

Displacement as a process encompasses the displaced people's agentive power of resistance (Vaz-Jones 2018). This perspective refutes the perception that displaced people are helpless victims lacking agency to resist the forces of displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014). James Scott's (1985, 1990) works are seminal in capturing everyday acts of resistance, such as the use of hidden transcripts—the banal forms of resistance. The mainstream approach to resistance overlooks the everyday strategies that marginalized communities often employ (Mahmood 2005; Vinthagen and Johansson 2013; Johansson and Vinthagen 2016).

Identity-based mobilizations against displacements of a particular group are not new (Holland et al. 2001). Displaced people who (claim to) share a common identity find strength in organizing together to resist the forces that have caused their displacement (El-Tom 2006; Hagan and Kasier 2011; Hyndman 2000; Lindley 2013; Milner 2016). This paper argued that neither the ethnic-based mobilization (as an Afar) nor the supra-clan-based mobilization (as Lubakubo Ke Modaitio) worked for the Lubakubo, and therefore, lineage-based mobilization became a key resistance tool. Resistance is operationalized broadly as a bundle of consciously taken discursive (for example, narrative claims of indigeneity) and material actions (for example, protest) through conventional (for example, traditional courts) and novel approaches (for example, going to state courts to resolve land issues which are uncommon among the Afar) aimed at reclaiming in the present what they lost in the past.

Discussion

Narratives of Big Men and Their Networks

Authority to Mine Dobi Salt

Despite the nomadic pastoral conditions of the Lubakubo, their contextual conditions of existence can be additionally conceptualized as protracted displacement. Before 2004, this clan lived and grazed their livestock in and around Dobi, a territory central to their pastoral way of life. Since then, through the actions of As Mohammed and his networks, salt mining coercively severed clan members' access to their territory and its resources. The big man and his network incrementally expanded their grip on Dobi, beginning with the territory of one sub-clan and eventually covering the territory of eight. However, its effect was felt across all clan members (estimated to be about 5,000 people). Therefore, the contemporary life of the Lubakubo, as a clan identity, cannot be understood without the conditions of their displacement.

As Mohammed and his network (such as Ibrahim Intibara, leader of the Lubakubo ke Modaito clan) refuted the Lubakubo's claims of being forcefully displaced. They did so by citing a couple of narratives. First, they argued that according to Afar traditional law (Madaha) Dobi belonged to the whole of the Lubakubo ke Modaito supra clan (ke means 'and'), and not just the Lubakubo. The Afkihe ke Mahad Madaha5, which recognized equal access for all members of the supra clan, was introduced by two Modaito rulers in whose honour it was named: Afkihe and Mahad. The Madaha included laws governing the day-to-day lives of the Afar, territorial boundaries of the supra clan, constituting clan members, and equal ownership right over the supra clan territory.

According to the Afkihe ke Mahad Madaha, leadership positions and the authority to make decisions about access to supra-clan territory were mandated to the Modaito/Aydahis Bara. Ever since the formation of the supra-clan (except during the socialist Derg, 1974 to 1991), decisions concerning access to Dobi were made by leaders of the Aydahis Bara, even though none of its members lived on Dobi, which meant that the Madaha, by design and in practice, elevated the Aydahis Bara as the ruling clan class. Therefore, the act of salt mining through the displacement thousands of families was not considered a breach of the Madaha. On the contrary, this multi-million-dollar salt mining business was applauded as a huge accomplishment.

The Afar Region Mining and Energy Bureau estimates that Dobi produced between 170,000 ql and 250,000 ql of salt per month in 2015 (Tekola 2015 int.).

In monetary terms, this amounts to CAD $28 million per year (Tekola 2015 int.). To put this in perspective, in 2015, the Afar Regional Government received CAD $142 million as a subsidy from the Federal Government of Ethiopia (Ethiopian Business Review 2015). The mining wealth equals almost 20% of this Federal Subsidy. Therefore, it can be argued that wealth has been generated by dispossessing and displacing thousands of Lubakubo from their ancestral homelands.

Ethiopian Government's Narrative of Clan Homogeneity and Developmentalism

The Ethiopian government was not a neutral actor in the displacement of the Lubakubo from Dobi. The Ethiopian government structures—county, district, regional, and federal government—supported and legitimized the claims of As Mohammed and his networks in two ways: first, it claimed that the Lubakubo and the Aydahis Bara are part of the same clan family—homogenizing the displaced and the displacers, and in effect, dismissing the pleas of the former. Secondly, the Ethiopian Government's narratives were that As Mohammed converted a dry and barren land into a "white gold"—a canvas of white salt that created jobs and income. In the eyes of the Ethiopian government, the claimants and As Mohammed are members of the same clan, and the claimants brought forward complaint cases simply because they were envious of a successful businessperson who transformed Dobi from a "barren land into a white gold." According to Yassin, a Lubakubo clan elder:

> Since 2004, our clan elders had unsuccessfully pleaded six times at the district and regional state levels. During each of our attempts, we were threatened with imprisonment if we distracted the mining activity (Yassin, 19 August 2017, interview).

The government praised As Mohammed's success in salt mining. For instance, he was glorified with displays of banners, documentary videos, and gold medals (in 2010 and 2014), labelling him a "model businessman" and "hero of development" for converting "barren land into white gold canvas" (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation 2014). One of the earliest banners displayed in 2007 in Dichoto town in honour of As Mohammed, read as follows:

> የልማት ጀግና ዓስ መሐመድ ያዬ
> የብሩህ አእምሮ የፈጠራ ዉጤት ዶቢ (am.),

which may be translated as:

> The Development Hero, As Mohammed Yayyo
> Dobi, the creation of a bright mind.

The constitution of the Afar Regional state emboldened the claims of As Mohammed. Article 38 (3) of the Constitution of the Afar National Regional State indicates that the right to ownership of land and all natural resources is exclusively vested in the state and the Afar people (Afar National Regional State Council 2022). Therefore, salt mining by As Mohammed (an Afar) on Afar land was not considered a transgression. In January 2016, three Lubakubo elders (Ali Mohammed, Hussen Yassin, and Hanfare Hassan) came to Samara to speak to the head of the Afar Region's Justice Bureau. I followed them unobtrusively: I sat at a roadside coffee shop, in front of the justice bureau. To the onlookers' dismay, the three elders were taken from the premises of the Bureau into custody, which is located behind the justice bureau, less than a kilometre away. The elders were told that Dobi belonged to all Afar and that they had no basis for complaining about the salt mining business.

For the Lubakubo, Dobi became a space from which they had been economically excluded, physically displaced and culturally threatened. In the words of Yassin:

> Dobi became a place where people who have connections with As Mohammed became millionaires before our eyes, while we were excluded from it. Dobi salt mining became a risk to our pastoral way of life since we are denied access to seasonal and perennial pastures available on Dobi. Furthermore, the commercialization of Dobi brought a wave of [non-Afar] daily laborers from the highlands, who do not speak our language. We see this as a threat to our identity (Yassin, 19 August 2017, Galafi).

The combined effect of all these exclusionary and marginalizing actions and narratives was that the Lubakubo staged resistance against As Mohammed and his networks.

Lineage as the Basis for Resistance Narratives and Actions

I now show how clan members resuscitated the narrative of the Lubakubo as a separate clan identity in response to forces of displacement. As indicated above, the Lubakubo are part of a supra-clan known as Lubakubo ke Modaito, which was created by superimposing the Aydahis Bara clan onto the Lubakubo during the reign of Sultan Aydahis (a Modaito) between 1801 and 1832 (Pankhurst 1997), as part of a bigger initiative to ensure Modaito rule over the rebelling non-Modaito (Trimingham 1952)[6]. The Lubakubo clan members claim that Dobi has always been settled by their members, and even today, there are no Aydahis

Bara clan members within an 18 km radius. However, since the creation of the supra clan, decisions concerning access to Dobi have been made by the leaders of Aydahis Bara, to whom the big man belonged.

Until the beginning of salt mining in 2004, Modaito's lordship over Dobi did not have significant material ramifications, as Dobi was not particularly appealing from the standpoint of economic profit-making. This changed with the beginning of commercial-scale salt mining operations. The mining-induced displacement brought to the foreground memories of the historical injustices (and subordinate positions) the Lubakubo faced at the hands of the Aydahis Bara (Modaito) rule within the supra-clan. To reclaim their territory and end their protracted displacement status, they began coalescing around their lineage: the use of lineage-based identity as a mobilization tool for clan members to stand in unison against forces of displacement.

The Lubakubo used lineage internally to coalesce around a common identity and externally to contest the claims of the state and the Big Man. The internal-external bifurcation speaks to Barth's (1969) concepts of "internal and external boundedness," which help to understand how a social group defines its boundaries. In the study area, internal boundedness involved claiming a common lineage to create/resuscitate a sense of shared identity and cohesion within the Lubakubo clan. The Lubakubo defined "us" and "them" by emphasizing external boundedness vis-à-vis the big man's Aydahis Bara clan. The Lubakubo realized that neither the ethnic-based mobilization (as an Afar) nor the supra-clan-based mobilization (as Lubakubo Ke Modaitio) would end their displacement. As a result, lineage became a key uniting and mobilizing tool. They forged internal cohesiveness by recounting their myth of ethnogenesis. Mohammed, a Lubakubo elder, noted:

> We descended from an ancestral father Ana Haysi, who had five sons: Alalo, Haysi, Lubakubo, Balahito and Askak Mali. These five sons, over time, grew to form five clans. The Lubakubo clan on Dobi are the descendants of the third son, Lubakubo which currently includes the following sub-clans: Lubakubo, Aysa Mali, Asdara, Gambel, Asduri, Dala'ala, Hamiltu, Harkalto, Hirgo. The direct descendant of the Lubakubo, Hassan Dawud became of the leader the clan in 2007 (Mohammed, 2016, interview).

Since the death of Hassan Dawud, the lineage-based clan leadership passed on to his son, Hanfare Hassan. Hanfare notes:

> My name is Hanfare Hassen. I am the son of Hassen Dawud (who died in 2013). I continued my father's legacy of leading my clan in resistance against As Mohammed's aggression against our territory. Our resistance and the imprisonment of our kin began in 2004. In 2006, our elders went to the Eli Dar District Justice Office to voice our problems. They came back without any solution. So, they blocked the salt mining on Dobi. Our elders were arrested. My father was among the first to be imprisoned on this cause. My mother was imprisoned in 2009. I was imprisoned in December 2017. Since 2005, we risk imprisonment every time our kin protest [him]. We were told that we could not remove As Mohammed from Dobi. A struggle that began over fourteen years ago, when my father was a clan leader, continues today (Hanfare, 20 August 2017, interview).

The clan had a taste of sitting at the helm of decision-making positions. In 1974, when the Socialist Derg Regime came to power in Ethiopia, it removed the Haussa Sultanate and disbanded all supra-clan arrangements (including Lubakubo ke Modaito) and the privileged positions of the Modaito. In its place, a local state administration, known as Dobi Peasant Associations (DPA), was formed in which all residents have an equal voice and elect their leaders. DPA existed from 1975 to 1991, and its leaders were elected through majority rule. Lubakubo elders reminisce about those years, since DPA leaders were mainly elected from the demographically majority subgroup, the Lubakubo clan members.

This changed in 1991 after the Derg was defeated and the new regime under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) reinstated the Haussa Sultanate (Modaito) and the supra-clan arrangements. In the words of Ali Mohammed:

> During the Derg, the *Aydahis Bara* were removed as leaders of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito*. We became equals. We were organized into a peasant association, and we elected our leaders. After the Derg was defeated, we went back to the pre-1974 system. We were placed under *Aydahis Bara* rule again (Mohammed, 2016, interview).

In 2016, during an interview with Hussen Yayyo, a senior member of the Haussa Sultanate, noted:

> The EPRDF reinstated Ali Mirah Hanfare as sultan at the helm of the Haussa Sultanate, while his two sons ruled the Afar Regional State as presidents in succession (Hussen Yayyo, Samara, 2 December 2016, interview).

This unification of the state and traditional authorities in the hands of the Modaito strengthened the power of the Aydahis Bara over the Lubakubo. The resuscitation of the supra-clan and legitimation of Haussa Sultanate rule meant that all conflicts concerning the communally owned supra-clan territory should first be presented to the supra-clan leader, an Aydahis Bara, a Modaito, the big man's uncle.

In the face of these hurdles, the Lubakubo found lineage as a key tool for mobilization and resistance against the forces of displacement. First, it helped coalesce the whole clan (displaced and otherwise) under a singular goal of reclaiming their territory. In other words, lineage became the reference point to galvanize all clan members to take part in protests and other forms of resistance. Secondly, drawing on their lineage, the clan lined up behind their leader, Hanfare Hassan, while rejecting the authority of the supra clan leaders. Thirdly, narratives of distinct Lubakubo lineage were used to invoke indigeneity in Dobi.

When I first arrived in Dobi in 2015, I heard about a clan named "Lubakubo ke Modaito." Hussen Yassin, one of my earliest acquaintances and a research participant, taught me about the internal differentiation within this supra-clan. In their oral tradition, the Afar nation was created through the intermingling of the indigenous Afar (also referred to as Adal), Asahymara (those who claim to have descended from Saudi Arabia), Ana (those who claim to have descended from Oromo), and Gabalah (those who claim to have descended from Somali). The displaced Lubakubo Afar see themselves as indigenous to Dobi. As descendants of Ana, the Lubakubo clan claimed that they were the original owners of Dobi, "sons of the soil," to use Geschiere's term (2009). The Afar differentiates between *sugeet* (Indigenous) and *yimeeti* (newcomers). The latter are subdivided into *naharka yimeeti*, which means those who came first, and the *farake yimeeti*, which means those who came later. According to my key informant, Ali Mohammed, members of the Lubakubo clan are *sugeet* (Indigenous) on Dobi, (Mohammed, 1 November 2016, interview). He further notes:

> Centuries ago, before the arrival of the Modaito, all the land from Dichoto to Galafi was the territory of the Lubakubo clan and the Aydahis Baras' are late comers ['farake yimeeti] (Mohammed, 1 November 2016, interview).

Ibrahim Intibara, the leader of the Lubakubo ke Modaito clan, noted that his lineage stretches back to Arabia. Ibrahim recounted their ethnogenesis, saying:

> Our ancestral father, Harel Mahesi, who came from Arabia, from the land of the Prophet Mohammed (SAW), had three sons: Moday, Sanbola Oli, and Adi Ali. We are the descendants of Moday (Intibara, 2016, Interview).

While the Aydahis Bara acknowledge their *farake yimeeti* (latecomer status), they dismiss any claim to Dobi based on indigeneity, arguing the Afkihe ke Mahad Madaha provides that Dobi belonged to the whole of the Lubakubo ke Modaito clan (Intibara, 13 November 2015, interview). The Lubakubo claims of *sugeet* status (indigeneity) and a separate lineage have been used to legitimize their claims to Dobi.

Traditional Court as Resistance Avenue

The Afar traditional court7 has three levels: the *mablo* mediation (to resolve intra-clan conflicts), the *maro* and *hera* arbitration courts (to resolve inter-clan conflicts), and *sangria* (Sultan's cessation court). Since the Lubakubo are treated as part of the Lubakubo ke Modaito clan, any grievances among constituting members were considered an intra-clan conflict, a jurisdiction of mablo mediation. However, the mablo bench did not work for the Lubakubo. According to Momina Abubeker:

> Mablo court was a dead-end from the outset because to resolve the problem of our displacement, we had to present our case to Ibrahim Intibara, leader of the Lubakubo ke Modaitio clan, As Mohammed's uncle and a beneficiary of Dobi salt mining. On several instances, our elders approached him, but he refused to recognize our problem, claiming it was a minor dispute between individuals.' (Momina Abubeker, 29 March 2017, interview).

Between 2004 and 2015, As Mohammed and his networks expanded salt mining to territories of eight sub-clans, further escalating the displacement crisis. In addition to repeatedly pleading with the mablo court, the Lubakubo leaders also reached out to Sangria (the highest traditional court in Afar) in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2015, and 2017. For instance, Hussen Yayyo remembers:

> Three clan elders met with Sultan Ali Mirrah. Ibrahim Intibara, leader of the Lubakubo ke Modaito clan, refused to come to this meeting. According to our law (Madaha), as mablo chair, he was expected to bring the issues to the sultan. However, since Intibara was unwilling, Lubakubo elders brought their case directly to the sultan. The meeting

ended without any resolution because the sultan noted that the chain of complaint submission was not followed (Yayyo, 2 December 2016, interview).

By bringing their case to Sultan Ali Mirrah, Lubakubo elders were performing submission to the sultan/sultanate. Hussen Yayyo remembered "When the Lubakubo elders came to meet with Sultan Ali Mirrah, they stated 'We are your children. That is why we came to you for a solution'" (Yayyo, 2 December 2016, interview). A few decades ago (up to 1974), when a non-Modaito met a sultan, he/she was accompanied by Modaito overlords (such as Aydahis Bara) to speak on their behalf. Now, the Lubakubo, who came to the sultan, with their leaders and representatives, were not accompanied by the Lubakubo ke Modaito clan leader. Yet, still, they submit to the sultan to get their voices heard. Kea and Roberts-Holmes's study of female asylum seekers in London documented that female asylum seekers exercise their agency by reproducing the existing narrative of powerlessness and victimhood, as victims of backward practices and patriarchal systems in their countries of origin, to get their asylum applications approved (2013).

The highest traditional court bench did not solve the conflict because, according to one of the meeting's participants, Ahadu Ahmed, "The Sultan explained that cases can only be referred to the sangira by the immediate lower benches- malo or hera." (Ahadu Mohammed, 24 December 2016, interview). According to traditional law, appellants who wish to bring their cases to the sangria court must do so by referral from the maro or hera court. However, since the conflict was not referred to the cessation court from the maro/hera court, it was not even considered for deliberation at sangira. To begin with, the maro and hera courts refused to hear cases presented to them by Lubakubo elders, claiming that it was an intra-clan issue under mablo court jurisdiction. In effect, the traditional courts—mablo, maro, hera and sangira—did not resolve their problem.

As highlighted above, even though clan members were aware that the traditional court was unwilling and/or incapable of resolving the problem, they still used it as one of the avenues. Western liberal notions of agency may problematize Lubakubo elders approaching the traditional courts (run by the same individuals and systems that maintained their marginalization and displacement). I argue that clan elders made a conscious and agentive choice to try to get a resolution through the traditional court, which entails lodging their complaints through the available avenues and submitting themselves to the decisions of the traditional courts. This brings to mind Saba Mahmood's

(2005) study, which demonstrated how women in Cairo living up to Islamic moral teachings, rather than challenging them, did not mean that these women did not have agency. It is a testament to the malleability of agents and the power of their agency.

Protest as Resistance

The Ethiopian Government structures (Dobi County, Eli Dar District, and Afar Regional State) were roadblocks to the Lubakubo's resistance against displacement. The Big Man was the administrator of Eli Dar District, a district in which Dobi is located. His office repeatedly dismissed the pleas of Lubakubo elders and told them to first submit their complaints to Dobi County Administration and follow the state structure upwards. However, the county administrators refused to receive their complaints. Having received no resolution at the county and district levels, clan elders even knocked on the Afar Region Justice Bureau's doors in Samara (the capital of Afar Region), located 80 kilometres away. For instance, in 2009, elders approached the Bureau only to be told that their complaint should first be lodged at a lower state structure and then pass through a chain of government structures before reaching the Bureau (Mohammed, 24 December 2016, interview). Their attempt to approach the Bureau in 2016 ended with the detention of three clan elders. Therefore, protest and physical confrontations were the primary resistance strategies left to the clan members.

In 2016, members of the Lubakubo clan (displaced and otherwise), staged the biggest protest ever under the orders of their clan leader and elders. It took place on Saturday, 24 December 2016. On that day, I was in Dobi conducting an interview. Hundreds of clan members poured into Dobi, blocking the Addis Ababa-Djibouti highway, one of Ethiopia's import-export lifelines. It brought salt mining to a standstill. It was a significant act of defiance by the Lubakubo against As Mohammed and his networks. Towards the evening, Eli Dar District Police rounded up about thirty-four people and took them to prison. After a few days, all except five were released. The police took the five elders to Eli Dar town. They charged them with organizing and leading the protest, and with violating the state of emergency proclamation, which was in place at the time.

After weeks in detention, the five defendants were brought to the Eli Dar District First Instance Court on 11 January 2017. The defendants were transported from and to Asayta prison (one hundred seventy-eight kilometres) on the back of an Isuzu Elf8 for others to witness the mistreatment that anyone who stood against As Mohammed would receive. Although it is not uncommon

to see the use of Isuzu for transportation purposes, given the social status of the defendants as clan leaders and respected elders, it was not something they would have done on their own. It was clear to the defendants' families that by transporting them in this way, As Mohammed and his network wanted to intimidate the accused and project their power.

Eli Dar First Instance Court passed a guilty verdict on all five on 12 January 2017. All defendants requested an appeal against the court's decision, and three months later, the Awusi Rasu Zone High Court passed a judgment that all five appellants were free from the crimes they were accused of. It overturned the decision of the First Instance Court. This decision sent shockwaves across the Afar Region because, for the first time in over a decade, ordinary Afar had won a court case against As Mohammed. It was a huge symbolic victory for the Lubakubo. However, it did not bring about an end to their displacement.

Since the beginning of their displacement in 2004, the Lubakubo approached all the different traditional court benches. Furthermore, clan members approached state administrative and court structures, from the county to the regional state level. However, neither of these two avenues resolved the problem. It poses a key question as to whether resistance should be measured solely by its outcome.

Resistance is not measured only by whether it leads to a resolution to the problem at hand, but also by the act of resisting itself. The evidence presented in this paper underscores that resistance is an act of agency, regardless of the outcomes. Marginalized communities' resistance against displacement and exploitation is counted not necessarily by winning against powerful forces, but by asserting their right to space and place. This assertion is an intentional act of resistance that carries meaning, even if it does not always result in immediate success.

Conclusion

This paper aims to contribute to the debate in the anthropology of displacement and resistance. The work began with the realization of the conflation of displacement (as a process) and forced migration (as an event). For the Lubakubo, displacement has been a protracted process of coercive disruption to their valued way of life, that is, severing of relations to Dobi, for whom land is not only central to their pastoral livelihood (pasture and water), and clan identity (land is central to the territorialization of clan and clanization

of territories) but also integral to the practice of absuma marriage relations (cross-cousin marriage). Displacement, as a coercive severing of clan ties to their land, impacted all members: those who were eventually physically uprooted and those who were not. In other words, displacement, as a process, involves people who were physically uprooted from Dobi, as well as those who were dispossessed of their right to own and access Dobi without being physically displaced. Resistance was also a collective act.

Displacement studies often regard affected people as helpless victims lacking resources and agency (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014; Kea and Roberts-Holmes 2013; Glick Schiller 2021). However, as the evidence presented in this article demonstrates, the displaced have the agency to resist power by using both overt and covert as well as discursive and material tactics. Lubakubo members used lineage to rebuild a sense of separate clan identity, organize behind their leaders, and assert their indigeneity to Dobi. Furthermore, the Lubakubo knocked on the doors of the government structures and traditional courts to end their displacement. These practices of switching between state and non-state structures—forum shopping (von Benda-Beckmann 1981)—and switching from discursive narratives of resistance to full-blown out protests, all testaments to their agency.

The failure of the multiple tactics to dethrone the forces of displacement leads us to ask whether resistance should be measured by a resolution of the problem at hand or by recognizing the innate value of the act of resisting itself. This paper argued that resistance must not result in an immediate resolution to the problem at hand in order to be meaningful; instead, all forms of resistance are acts and manifestations of agency. Evidence presented in this paper underscores that resistance is an act of agency, regardless of its outcomes. Marginalized communities resist displacement and exploitation not necessarily by winning against powerful forces, but by asserting their right to space and place. This assertion is an intentional act of resistance that carries meaning, even if it does not always result in immediate success.

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Notes

1 In oral tradition, the Afar nation was created through the intermingling of the indigenous Afar (also referred to as Adal, a non-Modaito, to whom the Lubakubo belongs) and "newcomers," which includes Asahyammara (those who claim descent from Saudi Arabia), Ana (those who claim descent from Oromo), and Gabalah (those who claim descent from Somali).

2 The Afar is a segmentary society organized into keddo (a clan), gullub (sub-clan), dalla (sub-lineages) and buxxa (extended family). At the highest level, the Afar has a unique feature: supra-clan structures created through clan fusions—through imposing one clan onto the other in a dominant-subordinate hierarchy. The Aydahis Bara (modaito) and Lubakubo are part of this unique feature, in which the latter occupied a subordinate clan position.

3 For details on the features of the big men and their network in the study area, see Abeshu 2019.

4 Names of research participants have been anonymized. However, following the tradition in political anthropology in which real names of major big men were used, such as the study of Governor Serufuli in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Jourdan, 2008) and Ibrahim Ag Banhage in the Kidal in Mali (Boas, 2012), the real name of the big man in this study area, As Mohammed was used.

5 There are five Madahas in the whole of Afar land. They are Afkihe ke Ma'ad Madaha (cover Haussa Sultanate), Burquli Madaha (Biru Sultanate), Budihito Badi Madaha (Rahayta Sultanate), Bodoyta Melah Madaha (Tadjoura Sultanate), and Debine ke Waqima Madaha (Gobad Sultanate). Dobi falls under Afkihe ke Ma'ad Madaha.

6 According to Trimingham (1952), in September 1725, the Modaito invaded Dobi from the Red Sea Coast area and burnt the state of Awsa, and ransacked Adali (non-Modaito) settlements. By 1734, Kedafo established the Modaito dynasty, which remains in place to date.

7 There are three conflict resolution pathways in Afar: (1) the traditional court based on Afar Madaha (law); (2) the religious court/the Sharia Court; and (3) the state courts. My research participant, Ali Mohammed, notes that Sharia courts deal with familial and marital affairs disputes, and land disputes are almost exclusively dealt with through the traditional court/ Madaha (Mohammed, 26 December 2015, Dobi).

8 Isuzu Elf is a medium-duty truck used mainly to transport goods.

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Interviewees

Ahadu Mohammed, a resident of Dobi and an elder arrested during the conflict. Interviewed 19 August 2017.

Aisha Ahmed, a female resident of Dobi. Interviewed 15 January 2017.

As Mohammed Humed Yayyo, current owner of Dobi Salt Land, Dichoto. Interviewed 24 August 2017.

Hanfare Hassan, a resident of Dobi. Interviewed 20 August 2017.

Hussen Yayyo. Interviewed in Samara on 2 December 2016.

Ibrahim Mohamed, a resident of Dobi and clan militia leader. Interviewed in Dobi, 27 August 2017.

Ibrahim Intibara, resident and clan leader, Dichoto. Interviewed 27 August 2017.

Mohammed Ali, resident of Dobi. Interviewed 11 January 2016.

Momina Abubeker, a female resident around Dobi. Interviewed 29 March 2017.

Tekola Gebru, staff member at the Afar Region Mining and Energy Bureau. Interviewed in Samara, 3 November 2015.