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THE RISE OF NEW FORMS OF POWER IN AFRICA: THE EMERGENCE OF BIG MEN IN THE AFAR REGION OF ETHIOPIA

Gemechu Adimassu Abeshu

Abstract: This article chronicles the emergence of a new form of power in the Afar Region of Ethiopia. The Afar people are predominantly Muslim pastoralists who live in a territory referred to as the Afar-Triangle (located in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea). Fieldwork for this study was conducted on Dobi in the Afar Region of Ethiopia, the second largest salt mining site in Ethiopia. In 2004, Dobi fell under the control of an individual by the name of As Mohammed Humed Yayyo. This article focuses on this specific Big Man. Since his emergence, this Big Man became the sole power figure who grants access to mine salt on Dobi and who collects taxes. The nature of the relation between the Big Man and the Ethiopian State has been fluid and is characterised by collaboration and conflict.

Keywords: *Afar, Big Men, Dobi, Ethiopia*

Introduction

In the Afar Region of Ethiopia a new form of power has come into existence. The Afar people are predominantly Muslim pastoralists, who live in the Afar-Triangle located in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea (Yasin 2008: 39). Following the reorganisation of the Ethiopian state in 1991, the Afar National Regional State (ANRS) was created, which shares borders with the regional states of Tigray in the north, Amhara in the west, Oromia in the South West and Somali in the South. The Afar Region is organised into five zones and thirty-two districts. Based on the 2017 population projections done by the Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency, the population of the Ethiopian Afar state is estimated to be 1.8 million (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Central Statistical Agency 2018).

Fieldwork for this study was conducted on Dobi in the Eli Dar District in Awi Rasu Zone of the Afar Region. Dobi is the second largest salt mining site in Ethiopia, next to Afdera salt Lake. It extends over 40 kilometres cutting across the territories of two clans, namely the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan and the *Wandaba* clan. Since 2004, Dobi has fallen under the control of an individual by the name of As Mohammed Humed Yayyo.

Data for this article has been collected during three rounds of field visits conducted between October 2015 and April 2017. A number of data collection techniques have been used, including key informant interviews, observations, and review of secondary sources. In order to ensure safety and anonymity of key informants, their real names have been replaced by pseudo names.

Conceptual Perspectives to Study New Forms of Power

Big Men and networks

In this article, the concept “Big Men and networks” put forward by Mats Utas in 2012 will be used to study the new form of power in the area studied. Utas’s proposition combines Marshall Sahlins’s concept of “Big Man” (Sahlins 1963) with Clyde Mitchell’s concept of “network” (Mitchell 1974). The pioneering research on Big Men came from Sahlins’ study in Papua New Guinea of the early 1960s. In his much-quoted 1963 article “Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia,” Sahlins defined a Big Man as a highly influential individual in a tribe without this person having formal tribal or other authority (Sahlins 1963). Sahlins’s Big Man provides his followers with protection and economic assistance in return for receiving recognition and legitimacy, which he uses to increase his status (Sahlins 1963). The gathering of power and its maintenance are built on reciprocity and as such this is one of the defining characteristics of Big Men (*ibid*). This is also one of the defining features of the Afar Big Man.

Mats Utas combined Sahlins’s Big Man concept with the social network theory in order to study “informal power” in Africa (Utas 2012: 16). Network studies within social anthropology owe credit to Barry Barnes, one of the first scholars who ventured beyond classical

kinship theory (Mitchell 1974). Building on Barnes's work, Mitchell defined social network as "a set of personal relationships which cut across kin and identity-based groups, and as such deviates from 'traditional' social systems" (Mitchell 1974).

Several pastoral societies in Africa have traditionally organised their world through relations of descent, as descent theory explains. Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), Abbink's study of the Somali (Abbink 2009), Legesse's study of the Borana Oromo (Legesse 1973) and Getachew's (2001) study of the Afar in the Lower Awash Basin are some examples for this. A prominent British social anthropologist, Evans-Pritchard held that kinship is important in "traditional" societies because of its role in shaping social relations, access to and ownership of resources (economics) and forms of social organisation and decision-making (politics) (Evans-Pritchard 1985), and the latter two are embedded in kinship. The phenomena in my study area differ: kinship-based social relations, which existed before 2004, have been replaced by social networks in the post-2004 period.

Available studies on Big Men in Africa identify two important features of this new form of power. First, the power of Big Men is not structurally ascribed. In other words, it is not necessarily formally assigned. Their emergence depends on the Big Men's ability to create a following and to a large extent on his informal abilities to assist people (Utas 2012: 6). By assisting people, Big Men convert economic resources into power. Johan de Smedt's study of vote manipulation in Kenya's 2007 elections (De Smedt 2009) highlights the fact that "local 'Big Men' exercised authority by sharing out their wealth – the recipients of this redistribution, the poor, then 'inevitably owed obedience'" (De Smedt 2009: 583). In his book *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana*, Paul Nugent claims that in Ghanaian politics, Big Men "sought to win over potential voters by insinuating that some of their wealth would rub off on them – either directly (through patronage) or indirectly (because of the application of their business acumen to national affairs)" (Nugent 1995: 5).

Understanding the nature of the relation between the Big Men and the State is also important. Klute and Trotha (2004) introduced the concept of "para-sovereignty" in order to explain the particular situation of chieftaincy in Mali. They describe a situation in which the

local traditional authority appropriates powers and functions from the central Malian state. In the present article, the concepts of para-sovereignty and *heterarchy* will be adopted to understand the nature of the relation between Big Men and the Ethiopian State with regards to the governance of Dobi. *Heterarchy* underlines the varying distributions of power foci and the fluid and changing relations between and among the different actors (Klute and Embalo 2011), according to which Big Men operate “besides the state” on a continuum of collaboration and conflict with one another. This notion of “besides the state” will be used to capture the relation between the Big Men and the Ethiopian State.

Sources of legitimacy of Big Men

Big Men construct and maintain their internal and external recognition through everyday practices of conferring legitimacy. This article is inspired by Klute’s approach to legitimacy which incorporates different forms of legitimacy into the concept of “basic legitimacy,” which refers to a particular form of recognition based on everyday practices, the tangible demonstration that those in power are capable of doing something (Kramer 2019). This article focuses on an aspect of basic legitimacy that is related to the ability to produce “state effects” (Kelly 2012 cited in Kramer 2019), including but not limited to collecting and redistributing resources. In her historical study in South Africa, Kelly shows that reciprocal patrimonial relations may be crucial for everyday practices of conferring legitimacy (ibid.).

The Rise of a Big Man in the Afar Region of Ethiopia

Features of the Afar Big Man

This section presents the rise of a specific Big Man by the name As Mohammed Yayyo. This Big Man has features that make him distinct from traditional forms of power (such as clan) known in the Afar Region. The Big Man is at the same time a state official, businessman, and a clan leader. It contradicts the “statist” assumption that state representatives and “traditional authorities” stand in an opposite relation to one another (Klute and Embalo 2011).

The Big Man as a businessman controls Dobi salt mining business

Up until 2004, although officially the Ethiopian State is mandated with land administration, in practice Dobi belonged to two Afar clans (the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* and *Wandaba* clans) and the respective leaders of these two clans had the power to decide who was to have access to Dobi according to Afar traditional law, known as Afar *Madaha* (which means law in the Afar language). From 2004, however, As Mohammed gained monopoly control over Dobi, the second biggest salt mining site in Ethiopia. He benefits immensely from the multi-million dollar business transactions from his control over Dobi. Individual control over a territory is a new phenomenon among the pastoral Afar, where clans traditionally held land communally. From the point of view of the Afar people, the rise of As Mohammed as an over-lord over Dobi represents a break from the Afar socio-political governance system for two reasons. First, according to Afar *Madaha*, territories belong to clans and respective clan leaders administer clan territories and related natural resources. Second, As Mohammed's control was not limited to the territory of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan, to whom he belongs, but extended to parts of Dobi that belong to the *Wandaba* clan.

Despite the provisions of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's (FDRE) of 1995 and the Afar National Regional State's (ANRS) Constitution of 1997, authorising the administration of land and related natural resources to the State, senior government officials in the Afar Region interviewed indicated that since 2004, Dobi has fallen under the control of As Mohammed Yayyo. In the words of my key informant, Aliye Suleyman, from the Afar National Regional State's Bureau of Mines and Energy, "As Mohammed is a king over Dobi. He is the one who decides who gets to mine salt on Dobi" (Suleyman, 13 November 2016, Samara). Fig 1 shows a photo of As Mohammed Humed Yayyo on the Dobi Salt Site.¹

1 The text at the top of the poster can be translated as "As Mohammed Ahmed Yayyo, a person with an exceptionally bright mind and an innovator."



Fig 1: Poster showing a photo of As Mohammed Humed Yayo on the Dobi Salt Site (February 2017, Afar Region)

The Big Man is a state official and a clan leader

Since 2005, As Mohammed is an administrator of Eli Dar District in the Afar Region in Ethiopia. In the following year, As Mohammed was selected to join the central committee of the Afar Peoples Democratic Party (APDP), the ruling party of the Afar National Regional State.

Furthermore, As Mohammed is a “leader” of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan. One of my key informants, Ali Mohammed, says that As Mohammed was handpicked by Ismael Ali Sero, the former president of the Afar Region, to become an intermediary between the Afar Regional State and the clan. My interviews with other members of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan also reveal that As Mohammed is not a legitimate clan leader. For instance, an elder person from this clan said: “As Mohammed is not a legitimate clan leader of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan” (Ali Mohammed, 1 November 2016, Dobi). As the author of the present article, I have personally met with the legitimate leader of the clan, and his name is Ibrahim Intibara in Dichoto.

Factors contributing to the rise of this Big Man

The post-1991 political dynamics in Ethiopia: multi-national federalism and developmental state

One of the core principles instituted by the post-1991 government in Ethiopia taking over power after a successful armed struggle was multi-national federalism, informed by a neo-Leninist political model called revolutionary democracy (Abbink 2011). In the post-1991 period, ethnicity is dominant in political discourse in Ethiopia and has permeated people’s identities and daily politics. It has inspired the governance model, the division and administration of the regional states, educational-linguistic policies and party politics (Abbink 2011).

Abbink identifies at least four stages in the Ethiopian ethno-federal model:

(1) Transition and stabilisation, including a democratic opening, political self-definition, and liberalisation, 1991–2000. This stage gave local elites the opportunity to capture power at the local level; one example is the emergence of ruling elites in the Afar Region.

- (2) Nationalist reconfiguration and ruling party reaffirmation, resulting from the 1998–2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian war and the internal division of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), 2000–2003;
- (3) Broadening the EPRDF party’s reach via incorporating and creating (new) regional political parties;
- (4) Building the “developmental state,” since May 2005 (Abbink 2011).

The post-2005 stage, which overlaps with the rise of the Big Man in the Afar Region, entails a full emphasis on nation-wide economic development, whereby “political” considerations will be secondary and legitimacy will be sought in the economic growth achievements. This developmental state stage witnesses huge foreign and domestic land-lease deals, often referred to as land grabs, stressing economic growth and not much else. A classical example of domestic land grab is Dobi.

The War between Ethiopia and Eritrea

The second important factor contributing to the rise of the Big Man over Dobi was the ingenuity of As Mohammed in taking advantage of the Eritrean-Ethiopian Border War, which took place between 1998 and 2000 (with the final peace only agreed to in 2018). This war, and the stalemate that trailed, brought with it two opportunities, which As Mohammed utilised to the fullest. One of the battlefronts of the Ethio-Eritrean War was at Bure, which is located inside Eli Dar District. As Mohammed convinced the Afar clans on the Eritrean side to collaborate with the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). Following the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia in the 1990s, the Afar Region became a borderland interfacing the two countries. The leaders of the *Aussa* sultanate, as the leaders of all Modaito Afar in Ethiopia and Eritrea, recognised no borders between Afar people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. This showed a difference in perception between the Ethiopian State and the *Aussa* sultanate regarding borders. The *Nasra ke Aginni* clan, a member of the Modaito clan federation, live on both sides of Bure, in Ethiopia and Eritrea. During the war, the Sultan’s family was divided regarding the decision whether to mobilise the *Nasra ke Aginni* clan in support of the ENDF (Vaughan 2003). The following story was told by Hussen Yayyo, who recounted that the division within the family was because

Descendants of *Moday* inhabit a territory that stretches from Bayihlul (near Assab) on the Red Sea coast in Eritrea, extending through Eli Dar District, encompassing all of the present-day Awusi Rasu Zone, a large part of the present-day Zone 3, Zone 4 and Zone 5. Therefore, the leaders of the *Aussa* sultanate recognise no borders between the Afar people in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The border war was not an Afar problem. (Hussen Yayyo, 2 December 2016, Aysaita)

This is one of the opportunities to which As Mohammed put his ingenuity, political calculus and savvy. As a member of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan, As Mohammed shares common descent with the rulers of the *Aussa* sultanate. As Mohammed used this narrative to step up and mobilise the *Nasra ke Aginni* clans in Eritrea in support of the ENDF. As Mohammed's role during the war opened up an opportunity to establish connections with key personnel in the ENDF.

The other important opportunity created for As Mohammed by the Eritrean-Ethiopian War was its impact on changing the actors' perceptions of Dobi. Before the war, salt consumed in Ethiopia was imported from Eritrea. According to the FDRE Ministry of Mines and Energy, prior to the independence of Eritrea, about 200,000tns of salt for human consumption in Ethiopia was obtained from the Red Sea. Following the outbreak of the war, salt import from Eritrea was banned. This led to an increase in the importance of salt lands in Ethiopia. The increase in value of salt lands at the national level encouraged entrepreneurs to open new salt mining sites in Ethiopia. As Mohammed was a notable entrepreneur who began commercial salt production on Dobi in 2004.

The formation of the Afar Peoples Democratic Party

The other important factor for the rise of the Big Man was the formation of the Afar Peoples Democratic Party (APDP) in 2000. From 1991 to 2000, the Afar Region was ruled by the Afar Liberation Front (ALF) party, which was led by Habib Ali Mirrah and Hanfare Ali Mirrah, the two sons of Ali Mirrah Hanfare, sultan of the *Aussa* sultanate. In 2000, all five political parties in the Afar Region, including the ALF, merged to form the Afar Peoples Democratic Party (APDP). With the formation of the APDP, the reign of the ALF's *Aussa* sultanate rule over the Afar

Region ended and Ismael Ali Sero became the new president. The new president appointed As Mohammed to various social and political positions, which opened up strong political networks between the two.

In 2002, Ismael Ali Sero selected As Mohammed as the contact person between the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan and the Afar National Regional State. In 2004, Ismael Ali Sero appointed As Mohammed to become vice administrator of Eli Dar District. In 2006, As Mohammed joined the central committee of the Afar Peoples Democratic Party (APDP), the ruling party of the Afar National Regional State. Last but not least, Ismael Ali Sero provided the institutional vacuum and in effect enabled As Mohammed's free ride over Dobi. My key informant, Aliye Suleyman from the Afar National Regional State Bureau of Mines and Energy elaborates this last point as follows:

Ismael refused to approve the Afar Region's minerals proclamation. In fact, he swore that as long as he was the president, the ANRS minerals proclamation would not be approved. Due to this, the proclamation for the establishment of the ANRS Bureau of Mines and Energy, which was submitted for the president's approval in 2006, remained unapproved for over ten years. It was Haji Seyoum, successor to Ismael, who approved it in 2016. Ismael had allowed unlawful exploitation of the mineral resources of the region. So, the problem in Dobi was created due to the actions/inactions of our top government officials (Aliye Suleyman, 11 January 2017, Samara).

The Big Man and his networks

The Big Man resides in a web of social network relations that included the Ethiopian Nation Defense Force (ENDF), senior state officials, and clan leaders. As discussed above, the relations between the Big Man and members of the ENDF were forged during the Eritrean-Ethiopian War (1998–2000). Hussen Yayyo notes: "The ENDF, at its highest level in Addis Ababa, have endorsed As Mohammed's control over Dobi in return As Mohammed generously awards parts of Dobi to ex-military personnel" (Yayyo, 2 December 2016, Aysaita). Several of my key informants indicated that today nearly a third of Dobi salt land belongs to ex-military personnel. Ali Mohammed, a key informant

from Dichoto, the hometown of As Mohammed, claims that there was a strong connection between the Big Man and the ENDF:

When As Mohammed's mother passed away in 2011, she received a honorary burial, escorted by members of the ENDF, with salutation gunfire, an honour I thought was reserved for patriots and national heroes. I knew his mother very well. She was not a fighter. She was not a stateswoman. She did not do anything that merits this honorary burial. We knew that the ENDF did that to demonstrate their relation with As Mohammed. (Ali Mohammed, 9 December 2016, Dichoto)

Another important member of the Big Man's network is Ismael Ali Serro, who served as president of the Afar Region between 2000 and 2016. My key informant Hussen Yayyo states: "Ismael Ali Serro played a key role for As Mohammed's monopoly over Dobi" (Hussen Yayyo, 2 December 2016, Aysaita). Several pieces of evidence back this claim. First, in 2002 Ismael selected As Mohammed as leader of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan and made him a contact person between the clan and the Afar National Regional State. In the eyes of a member of the Afar sultanate, Hussen Yayyo and members of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan, the selection of As Mohammed implied a break from Afar *Madaha*, not only because of the illegitimate way in which he was selected but also because he was selected even though the legitimate leader was still alive. Second, in 2004, Ismael appointed As Mohammed as vice administrator of Eli Dar District, a district in which Dobi is located. Third, in 2006, As Mohammed was selected to join the central committee of the Afar Peoples Democratic Party (APDP), the ruling party of the Afar National Regional State. Due to these factors, some of my key informants went as far as saying that Isamel made As Mohammed. One thing is clear: Isamel was an influential member of the Big Man's personal network.

Members of the Eli Dar District Police Force are also part of As Mohammed's network, particularly those stationed in localities in and around Dobi, who proved to be the Big Man's loyal eyes, ears and acting hands. During my extended ethnographic fieldwork, I observed how As Mohammed uses the district police force in his network to ensure his grip over Dobi. During my fieldwork of 2017, a five-man strong Eli Dar District Police detained me despite presenting an official

permit letter signed by the ANRS presidential office. The police took me to the residence of As Mohammed (in Dichoto) where I was not only interrogated but also given a full flash back of all the places I had visited, people I had met, words I had uttered and even where I had eaten and slept. In return for their service, it can be expected that the Big Man generously rewarded the police force in his network.

Local government administrators are also key members of his network. At the local level this includes administrators of Dobi Kebele, the lowest state administrative unit below a district, and Galafi Kebele. Additionally, As Mohammed co-opted some of the leaders of the two clans in return for a salt mining plot and financial assistance. For instance, Umar Ida, leader of the *Gambel* sub-clan of the *Wandaba* clan, and Ibrahim Intibara, the legitimate leader of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan, received plots for salt mining in return for their recognition of As Mohammed's control over Dobi or at least their silence on the matter.

A key feature of the Big Man's power is that the network differs qualitatively from the kinship relations (social group) associated with traditional authority (clan leaders). Here is the central argument. In the traditional Afar social organisation, which is clan-based, leaders emerge from and serve at the interests of closely-knit kin groups sharing common patrilineal descent. By contrast, the network weaved around the Big Man only comprises people from different religious, ethnic and social backgrounds. In fact, the people from Afar make up only a small portion in the list of people who have salt mining business in Dobi, the rest is constituted by non-Afar Ethiopians. This differs fundamentally from the age-old Afar social organisation rooted in kinship relations. Afar society is organised according to "bura" (extended families), "dalla" (lineages), "gullub" (sub-clans), and "keddo" (clans), which establish social relations, divisions, as well as rights and obligations. It was this kinship-based social organisation that defined access to land until 2004. From 2004 on, this has changed in fundamental ways. Since the rise of the Big man in 2004, access to Dobi has been secured mainly through connections with the Big Man rather than through kinship relations. The people in the Big Man's network come from across localities, religious affiliations, ethnicity and geographical origins. This seems to confirm Mitchell's theoretical differentiation between the boundedness of a social group and the unboundedness of networks (Mitchell 1974).

The Big Man as para-sovereign

The Big Man grants access to mine salt

One of the revealing indicators of the rise of a Big Man in the Afar Region may be attested by investigating who grants permits for salt mining operations on Dobi. For the sake of comparison let us look at Afdera and Dobi; the first and second biggest salt production sites in Ethiopia. The FDRE Mineral Proclamation from 2010 states under Article 5(1) “that mineral resources existing in their natural condition on, in, and under the territory of Ethiopia are the property of the Government and all the peoples of Ethiopia.” Article 5(3) of the same proclamation states “that the Government, acting through the licensing authority, that is, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Mines and Energy (MoME) and regional state Bureau of Mines and Energy (BME), shall control and administer mineral resources and grant, refuse and manage licenses” (Ministry of Mines, Mining Operations Proclamation No. 678/2010). According to my own research in the archives of the Afar Region’s Bureau of Mines and Energy, the Bureau gave 1670 licenses to investors in Afdera and none for Dobi. My key informant from this bureau, an expert, Gebru Tekola, says: “Access to Dobi is off-limit to us. I doubt that even you, a researcher, will get access to Dobi. Access to Dobi is granted only by As Mohammed.” (Gebru Tekola, 13 November 2016, Samara).

Additional evidence supporting the claim that the Big Man controls access to Dobi comes from Samara University. Samara University is the biggest federally funded academic institution located in the Afar Region. In the words of Samara University’s ex-vice president:

In 2010 Samara University approached the Afar Region’s Bureau of Mines and Energy to request for a permit to start mining salt in Dobi, but instead of in Dobi the Bureau offered a plot in Afdera. It was clear to us that Dobi was not under the Bureau’s control. At that time, as everybody knew, Dobi was under As Mohammed’s control. Due to this, Samara University’s president approached As Mohammed. After a lengthy process of pleading with him, we were offered a plot. But, As Mohammed did not give us an official letter or permit license. (Najash, Samara University, 19 November 2016, Samara)

The Big Man collects taxes from salt miners

Since 1991, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has introduced several proclamations aimed at governing mining operations in the country.² The most recent Proclamation (No. 816/2013 Article 11) set the following obligations on license holders: “The License Holder report to the Licensing Authority the quantity and type of mineral mined each month within 10 days from the end of such month and sell the minerals mined every financial quarter within 30 days from the end of each financial quarter and notify the same to the Licensing Authority” (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Mines and Energy, Mining Operation Proclamation No. 816/2013). Furthermore, Article 63 (1) of the Proclamation No. 678/2010 states that “The holder of a mining license shall pay royalty based on the sales price of the commercial transactions of the minerals produced in accordance with sub-article (2) and (3) of this Article” and Art 63 (2) states that the amount of royalty payable by holders of licenses shall be at the rate of 4% (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Mines and Energy, Mining Operations Proclamation No. 678/2010). The FDRE Mineral Proclamation of 2010 states:

Royalty means the payment to the government and the peoples, who are the sole owners of the mineral resources to be made by the licensee for producing minerals from the production site of minerals and the percentage rate of such payment is to be assessed from time to time excluding the price of production and risk expenditures. (Ministry of Mines and Energy, Mining Operations Proclamation No. 678/2010)

In 2012, the Ministry of Trade set the prices of salt: price at the production site at 160 Br,³ and then sold to wholesalers for 200 Br to 300 Br. These prices are maintained to date. This means that the calculation of royalty (4%) will be made at the price at the production site of 160 Br. According to the Ministry of Trade, as of 2012, the country consumes 300,000ql of table salt and 30,000ql to 40,000ql for industrial consumption per month. All of it was supplied from salt

2 It includes the Mining Operations Proclamation 2002; Mining Operations Proclamation No. 678/2010; and Mining Operations Proclamation No. 816/2013.

3 Birr is the national currency of Ethiopia. As of 2016, one Euro is exchanged for 21 Ethiopian Birr. As of November 2019, 1 Euro is exchanged for 33.47 ETB Birr.

production sites at Afdera and Dobi. According to the Afar Region's Bureau of Mines and Energy, all 570 active producers in Afdera have paid royalty payment. In 2016 alone, the ANRS collected 76 million Birr (about 3.6 million Euros) from Afdera salt producers. By contrast, no royalty has been collected from Dobi ever since commercial salt mining began in 2004.

Moreover, in stark contrast to Afdera, Dobi has not become a beneficial resource to the people of the Region. According to Gebru Tekola, a senior expert in ANRS MEB, "we hear that Dobi produces from 170,000ql to 250,000ql per month. We also know that As Mohammed collects taxes from all producers at Dobi. But we do not know to whom he pays, or if he pays it. I know he didn't pay royalty to us. So, the Afar people are not benefiting from Dobi, as they should. From this perspective, I say Dobi is a curse" (Gebru Tekola, 13 November 2016, Samara). The claim that As Mohammed collects tax payments from salt producers at Dobi is corroborated by evidence from Samara University, one of the actors in Dobi between 2010 and 2014. A review of archives at Samara University reveals that the university paid taxes to As Mohammed during their first year of salt production in 2011.

The Big Man amasses immense wealth from Dobi

During the time of my fieldwork, I have observed that the Big Man controls the entire Dobi plain, which is tens of kilometres. Unfortunately, my attempts to enquire from As Mohammed and the Afar Region's Bureau of Revenue about the actual amount of wealth generated from Dobi have been unsuccessful. Due to this, I generated an estimate based on the Afar Region's report about the size of salt produced from Dobi, as shown in the table 1 below. This table shows the size of salt produced from both Afdera and Dobi, the first and second biggest salt producers in Ethiopia.

Table 1 Amount of salt produced from Dobi and Afdera

| | Estimated production size from 2004 -2016 (in Quintals) | | Quota since September 2016 (in Quintals) | |
|--------|---|----------------|--|--------------|
| | Monthly | Annually | Monthly | Annually |
| Afdera | 350,000 | 4.2 million Qt | 282,000 quintals | 3.38 million |
| Dobi | 170,000-250,000 | 2.04 mil-3 mil | 57,000 quintals | 684,000 |
| Total) | | | 387,000 | 4.6 million |

Source: The Afar National Regional State Bureau of Mines and Energy, September 2016

In 2012, the FDRE Ministry of Trade (MoT) set the prices of salt: at the production site at 160 Br⁴ (\$ 7.30/100 kg), and wholesale price between 200Br (\$ 9.13/100kg) and 300 Br (\$ 13.7/100 kg) (Fortune 2015). Based on this price, it is possible to estimate the annual wealth generated from Dobi.

Table 2 Estimate of the amount of wealth extracted from Dobi annually between 2012 and 2016

| | At the production site | | At Wholesaler | |
|--------|------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| | In Birr | US Dollars | Birr | US Dollars |
| Afdera | 672 million | 30.7 million | 840 million to 1.26 billion | 40 million to 60 million |
| Dobi | 326.4 million | 14.9 million to 21.9 million | 408 million to 900 million | 18.6 million to 41.1 million |

Source: Researcher’s own analysis, October 2017

From table 2, it is possible to generate an estimate of wealth generated annually from Dobi between 2012 and 2016. If all produce is sold at the production site, Dobi may have generated between USD 14.9 million and 21.9 million, while at the wholesale price it may have fetched between USD 18.6 million and USD 41 million. On average, it may be argued that annually 28 million US dollars were extracted from Dobi. In 2014, the Afar Region received 3.1 Billion Birr (which is about US \$ 142 Million) as subsidy transfer from the federal government (Ethiopian Business Review, 2014). In comparison, the wealth generated from Dobi amounts to about nineteen percent of the subsidy the Afar Region received during that budget year.

4 As of 2016, 1USD was exchanged for 21.9 Ethiopian Birr.

The Big Man constructs basic legitimacy through a patrimonial distribution of resources

One of the key features of the Big Man is that there is a reciprocal relation between the Big Man and the members in his network. The Big Man generously rewards people in the network. In the words of my key informant Ali Mohammed, “As Mohammed gives access to whom he decides, and the recipients of his assistance fight for his interests and images” (Ali Mohammed, 9 December 2016, Dichoto). This reciprocal relation between the Big Man and members of his network is implicitly acknowledged by As Mohammed himself, as can be seen in the following quotation: “people who have a stake in Dobi salt mining business are like chicken whose one leg is tied to a rope. Whenever I need something from these people I just pull the rope” (As Mohammed, 24 August 2018, Dichoto).

As Mohammed’s way of evading royalty payments to the state while distributing to the people is partly rooted in Afar traditional morality. One of the central values that govern intra-clan relations among the Afar is the obligation to assist each other in defence of their land, people and livestock and to support each other when their members face a problem, such as during droughts. Above the clan level, the *Aussa* sultanate used to coordinate efforts to provide assistance to the Afar people in times of drought.

The decline of the *Aussa* sultanate created a vacuum with regards to providing assistance to the pastoral Afar population facing recurrent droughts. Traditionally, Afar relied on a big brother, who provides emergency assistance during times of need, which they call “lahu” (an Afar term describing a response to a distress call, or to cases of emergency). This role, which used to be shouldered by the *Aussa* sultanate, has now been de facto handed over to the Big Man. Since starting salt mining on Dobi, As Mohammed emerged as a Big Man not only economically and politically, but also socially.

During the 2015 drought, while I was conducting my first fieldwork, I observed As Mohammed delivering fodder and water to the livestock of the *Lubakubo ke Modaito* clan members affected by the drought. I also observed As Mohammed’s vehicles transporting emergency food and water assistance to the most needy in the Dobi area. In

a biographical interview, As Mohammed confirmed that during the 2015–2016 drought he personally covered all expenses associated with the emergency assistances provided around Dobi, including transportation with his private trucks (As Mohammed, 24 August 2018, Dichoto).

The actions of As Mohammed speak to Peter Ekeh’s argument about morality, in which he identified “two morality spaces,” namely, the immoral official public space and the moral primordial space (Ekeh 1975: 91). This study corroborates Ekeh’s distinction in which he saw morality as shifting resources from the immoral official public space, that is, the state, towards fulfilling their expected moral obligations and benefiting the primordial public, which is perceived to be moral. However, Ekeh’s two public spaces are not enough to understand the actions of As Mohammed. The Big Man’s generosity is not limited to his kin: the Afar. According to Hussen Yayyo, “As Mohammed levies tax on all salt miners on Dobi. He does not pay taxes to the government, yet he distributes part of it to the people allied to him and his protectors to Afar and non-Afar” (Yayyo, 2 December 2016, Aysaita). As Mohammed’s generosity to the people in his network and his supporters points to the existence of a third public space, extending Ekeh’s two public spaces. The third space, rooted in reciprocal beneficial relation between As Mohammed and the people in his network, seems to be amoral, that is it is not driven by rights and wrongs, but by interests.

Nature of the relation between the Big Man and the Ethiopian State: collaboration and conflict

Since the rise of As Mohammed as a Big Man, two important proclamations have been introduced that can have affected his grip over Dobi. The Afar Region signed into law the long awaited Rural Land Use and Administration Proclamation in 2009 (Afar National Regional State Rural Land Use and Administration Proclamation, 2009). This proclamation calls unequivocally for taking rural lands from non-state authorities, which it describes as inefficient and a challenge to development, and for putting these under the Afar Regional State. However, this law did not change As Mohammed’s control over Dobi. The other proclamation was the proclamation introduced by the FDRE

Ministry of Mines and Energy - the Mining Operations Proclamation No. 678/2010. Neither of these laws had any effect on changing the Big Man's monopoly control over Dobi. It seems as if the Big Man and his network are immune to the state rules. The Big Man was tolerated. Even during this period of an apparent accommodative relation, the Big Man has fallen out with some government officials. My key informant from the Afar Region, Aliye Suleyman, notes:

None of the salt producers at Dobi, including As Mohammed has paid royalties to date. By law he is expected to pay. So, as a staff in the Afar Region Mining Bureau, I wrote several letters to As Mohammed to request royalty payments. In 2014, As Mohammed rang me by phone and threatened to kill me if I did not stop bothering him. He threatened to kill me. I informed my clan members about it. It became a big issue. In Afar culture threatening someone with killing is a big crime. So, influential Afar elders intervened to mediate the dispute according to Afar traditional law, Afar *Madaha*. The elders passed judgment on As Mohammed to kill a camel to resolve the dispute, which he did. (Aliye Suleyman, 11 January 2017, Samara).

The largely accommodative relation between the Big Man and the Afar Region faced another hick-up in September 2016, when Isamel Ali Serro was removed from his position as President of the Afar National Regional State. The Big Man lost his longtime ally. According to my key informant Aliye Suleyman, the new president, Haji Seyoum, made a bold move to remove As Mohammed from membership in the central committee of the ruling Afar Peoples Democratic Party (Aliye Suleyman, 11 January 2017, Samara).

The news of the fallout between Haji Seyoum and As Mohammed circulated through the Afar Region like a wild fire. Soon, Afar people's perception of the power of As Mohammed was put to question. This was nowhere more evident than among the *Wandaba* clan. From December 2016 to January 2017, members of the *Wandaba* clan staged the biggest protest ever on Dobi, which halted salt mining on the site. The protesters, numbered in the hundreds, blocked the access to and from the salt mine. *Wandaba* clan members claimed that Dobi belongs to them and that no one could produce salt without their consent. The protest failed to bring the desired result: removing the Big Man from

his grip over Dobi. In fact, district police forces detained five men they accused of leading the protest. These five men, accused of threatening public safety and security as well as of anti-developmental activities were brought to the Eli Dar District Court where each was sentenced to three to five years in prison. After an appeal to the Awi Rasu Zone High Court, the sentence was overturned and all five men were released from prison. The decision of the High Court became a symbolic defeat for the Big Man, who until that time was used to getting what he wanted. This sent a message that the Big Man's power over Dobi was fragile, as can be seen from the words of Aliye Suleyman:

Since Haji Seyoum came to power, it seems we have entered a new stage. He ordered the Head of the Afar Region's Bureau of Revenue (BoR) and me to demand As Mohammed to pay the twelve years of unpaid royalty. The Head of the BoR replied to Haji Seyoum that he would not demand As Mohamed for the unpaid tax backlog but that he will demand payments from 2016 onwards. I, too, am of the same view. (Aliye Suleyman, 11 January 2017, Samara).

This shows that the relation between the Big Man and the state is dynamic, swaying between accommodation and conflict. Since April 2018, the Afar Region and the FDRE have appointed a new president and a prime minister, respectively. The present article does not discuss how the regime change in Samara and Addis Ababa may have affected politics and business in the Afar Region in general and on Dobi in particular.

Conclusion

Three important conclusions can be drawn from the process discussed in this article. The first conclusion is that in the post-1991 period, two very different forms of power have decided access to Dobi: neotraditional authorities (1991–2004) and the Big Man with his network (post-2004). The neotraditional authorities are rooted in kinship (patrilineal descent system), confirming the classical segmentary theory (Evans-Pritchard 1985). In the post-2004 period, a new form of power emerged over Dobi, in the shape of a Big Man, taking away the power of the neotraditional leaders (and even the state) to grant access to the Dobi salt mines. This new form of power

has unique features, which makes it qualitatively different from the neotraditional forms of power. For instance, Dobi's Big Man is at the same time a state official, a businessman and a clan leader. This contradicts the "statist" assumption that state representatives and neotraditional authorities are in an opposite relation to one another. This contradiction has also been observed in the person of Governor Serufuli of North Kivu discussed by Jourdan (2008).

A key feature of the Big Man is his social network, which differs fundamentally from kinship-based social groups associated with Afar neotraditional authority. In the neotraditional Afar social organisation, clan leaders emerge from and serve at the pleasure of a closely-knit kin sharing common patrilineal descent, rooted in kinship. By contrast, members of the social network woven around the Big Man are heterogeneous and include actors from different walks of life. The network constitutes actor groups from various religious, ethnic and social backgrounds. It includes institutions such as Samara University, local Afar from around Dobi, Afar from a distant clan, and people from other ethnic groups and religions. In fact, Afar make up only about a third of the people who have salt mining business in Dobi, while the rest is constituted by non-Afar Ethiopians. This confirms Mitchell's theoretical differentiation between the boundedness of a social group and the unboundedness of social networks (Mitchell 1974).

The second conclusion is that the Big Man can be seen as a "para-sovereign." As I have shown, the Big Man in Dobi took over the functions of neotraditional authorities and the state. The Big Man grants investors access permits for mining salt on Dobi and collects taxes from these investors. The Big Man's functions of granting permits for salt mining on Dobi, collecting taxes from investors, and providing protection relate to Klute's proposition of "para-sovereignty" (Klute and Trotha 2004). Klute and Trotha introduced the concept of "para-sovereignty" to explain the particular situation of a chieftaincy in Mali. They describe a situation in which the local traditional authority appropriates the powers and functions of the central Malian state. The present article concludes that this concept may be useful for understanding how Big Men appropriate some of the functions from the Ethiopian state.

The third conclusion is that the Big Man in Dobi constructs and maintains his legitimacy through a redistribution of his wealth to the people in his network and the wider Afar people. In my research, I encountered the dual nature of Big Men. The Big Man in Dobi is a Robin Hood in disguise. He collects taxes from salt producers on Dobi but evades tax payments to the state. He spills some of his wealth to his clan members, an action drawn from the traditional Afar moral space. This brings to mind Ekeh's argument that colonialism in Africa has created two public spaces: the primordial public realm and the civic public realm (Ekeh 1975). These two public realms are governed by different moral codes.

In the primordial public realm, primordial groupings, ties, and sentiments influence and determine an individual's public behaviour. This is the moral realm. The civic public realm, by contrast, is historically associated with the colonial administration and based on civil structures: the military, the civil service, the police, etc. Its main characteristic is that this realm has no moral linkages with the private realm. The main theme of Ekeh's article is that most African elites are citizens of these two public spaces within the same society. On the one hand, they belong to a civic public space from which they gain materially but to which they give only grudgingly. On the other, they belong to a primordial public space from which they derive little or no material benefits but to which they are expected to give generously and do (occasionally) give materially. Their relation to the primordial public space is moral, while the one to the civic public space is amoral. Ekeh's argument is that African elites use the civic public space to gain financially so that they can please their communities. As such, it is regarded as legitimate to be corrupt in order for one to strengthen the primordial public space. According to him the civic public space is starved of morality (Ekeh 1975).

The actions of the Big Man in evading tax payment from the "civic public space," while distributing financial and material assistances to the primordial space, that is, to his kinsmen during times of need, is "moral." I argue that the fact that the Big Man distributes money to members of his network who are not necessarily members of his clan, points to the existence of a third "space," which differs fundamentally from Ekeh's two public spaces discussed above. The third space, which is rooted in reciprocal beneficial relations between As Mohammed

and the people in his network, seem to be amoral, that is, not driven by rights and wrongs, but by private interests.

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