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Landscapes, salt and ethics: a visual ethnography of the ‘Afar caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2021

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Abstract

The PhD project *Landscapes, salt and ethics: a visual ethnography of the 'Afar caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia* combines Anthropology with Ethnographic Filmmaking as part of a PhD in Anthropology and Sociology.

The written dissertation explores how the decline in the salt caravan trade has affected the cultural, economic and social reality of one specific 'Afar pastoral community in north-eastern Ethiopia. The research investigates how the historical trajectories that led to the decline of the salt caravan trade in 2018 underlie broader questions about human agency, business ethics, trade relations, hospitality and self-identification processes in an ever-changing, precarious Ethiopian political landscape. My project argues that anthropology has to engage with the relationship – past and present – between political economy and human ecology over time and space.

Looking for different ways of understanding the complex economic and social dynamics of trade relations, business ethics, historical contexts and the environmental perception of agro-pastoral communities and nomadic wayfarers, this dissertation forwards an approach that I call *corresponding landscapes*. *Corresponding landscapes* can be seen as the knot connecting three interdependent ideas: the *productive landscape*, the *material landscape* and the *political landscape*. These ideas build respectively on discourses on landscapes and environmental perception, value and commodity exchange theory, and regional-specific political and historical developments.

The approach is grounded in concrete ethnographically derived understandings of local perspectives of the environment and economy. *Corresponding landscapes* further informs mixed collaborative methodologies, co-learning and shared experiences for qualitative research.

Alongside the written PhD dissertation, I submit a 30 min ethnographic documentary,

Arho – The 'Afar Salt Trade of Northeastern Ethiopia, that follows one caravan on their journey to the salt basin of the 'Afar Depression. The documentary relies on strong visual imagery and traditional 'Afar music selected by the 'Afar salt traders I worked with on this project. It shows how the decline of this trade affects daily life in the communities of Barhale district in north-eastern Ethiopia.

As part of my ethnographic practice and in the context of my concrete research experiences, I propose an *ethics of correspondence* for doctoral and early career researchers. The *ethics of correspondence* is a collaborative, dialogic and reflexive method to challenge post-colonial ways of practising anthropology. I suggest the use of audio-visual materials and filmmaking as a research tool to move beyond the written text as primary research output. Based on my research experience and following renewed anthropological interest in ethics and morality, I view research ethics as flexible, critical, and historically and culturally situated. My interest is the lessons we can learn from a direct engagement with other – non-western – notions of ethics in cross-cultural encounters. I consider how knowledge from this engagement can be applied to both ethnographic research and ethnographic filmmaking for doctoral and early-career researchers. I contend that ethics relate to interpersonal relations and can be neither fully demanded nor pre-determined, but must, instead, be negotiated based on the contextual understandings of the concrete, everyday situations encountered during ethnographic fieldwork.

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Note on citation and transcription

For in-text citations, I use the Chicago Manual of Style 17th edition (author-date). I quote Ethiopian authors according to the Ethiopian tradition with their GIVEN NAME, followed by their FATHER'S NAME, e.g. (Dereje Feyissa 2011) or if the authors use their GRANDFATHER'S NAME, the FATHER'S NAME will be abbreviated, e.g., (Yasin M. Yasin 2008). A full bibliography is given at the end of this dissertation. There Ethiopian authors are sorted by their GIVEN NAME followed by their FATHER'S NAME and (if used) their GRANDFATHER'S NAME, e.g. Haile Michael Mesghinna. 1966. "Salt Mining in Enderta." *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 4 (2): 127–35.

I use footnotes for further explanations or to point to additional literature. All dates and calendar notes are according to the Gregorian calendar, not the Ethiopian calendar.

Quotations

Quotations and interviews with interlocutors of more than 30 words are indented by 1 cm, blocked and without quotations marks. In-text quotations of less than 30 words are marked with "quotation marks". Words written in *italics* are either transliterations from 'Afar-Af, Amharic or Tigrinya (*wanna kätäma*) into English. They may also signify emphasis or key concepts such as *ethics of correspondence*. I further italicized all 'Afar and non-English words except the names of people and places.

Transcription of non-English terms

For the transcription of Amharic and Tigrinya I adapt the system used by the ENCYCLOPÆDIA AETHIOPICA (EAE) that has also been adopted by *AETHIOPICA, the International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies*.[1]

For terms in the 'Afar language ('Afar-Af) I follow the internationally accepted transcription system. Compared to the *Qafar Feera* ('Afar Alphabet) that is taught and used

[1]See the transcription/transliteration table under the following URL: https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/toc-aethiopica/Miscellaneous/Aethiopica_Transliteration.pdf (last accessed March 4, 2021).

throughout the ‘Afar region, I write the voiced pharyngeal fricative, as *‘* (not as *q*), e. g. *‘ada* instead of *qada* [culture or custom]. Similarly, I transcribe the voiceless pharyngeal fricative as *ḥ* and not *c*, e.g., *arḥib* instead of *arcib* [welcome or make yourself comfortable]. Further, the voiced retroflex plosive is written as *ḍ* not as *x*, e.g., *ḍāgu* instead of *xaagu* [information]. Additionally, I write double vowels aa, ee, ii, oo and uu as ā, ē, ī, ō and ū, e.g., *bāḍo* instead of *baaxo* [land, country].

Please not that in in some ‘Afar dialects ‘d’ and ‘r’ are interchangeable in some words. The meaning of the word remains the same.

Glossary

Terms in ‘Afar -Af

abba	father, leader
absuma	patrilinear cross-cousin marriage
af	mouth, language
affa	sub-clan
amanti	trust
amolé	salt block
arḥib	“welcome” or “make yourself comfortable”
amoyta	sultan, king (southern ‘Afar region)
arho	camel caravan
arho-t-abba	leader of the caravan
‘ada	custom, culture
‘Afar -Af	‘Afar language
‘ale	mountain
‘asboh	salt
bāḏo	land, country
bakal	kid goat
ḏāgu	‘Afar traditional information exchange systems
caddi	respect
cakki	honesty
dasiga	is an ‘Afar term that denotes sharing meat in the bush
derdar	clan leader (northern ‘Afar region)
diat	compensation for murder
didale	bees
fi’imā	age grade system
fi’imā-t-abba	a principal leader of *Fimaa*
gāla	camels
gāli bedu	camel mark (branding)
Gifta	polite form to address an elderly or respected person
gile	‘Afar dagger/knife
gulub	lineage
ḥan	milk
‘ibnaytu (*‘ibïna*)	guest (guests)
‘ibnaytïno ;’ibincadà	hospitality
kabil	trust (same as amanti)
kataysaw	friend
kedo	clan, kinship affiliation
kusa’a abēna	researcher
lā	cattle
lāhi mari	cattle herders / cattle people
lē	water
malab	honey
makēdoy	clan
meda’a	customary law
meda’a-t-abba	customary law leader
rakub	male camel
rēta	female goat
tobokoyta	brother

Ugogomo	revolution

Terms in Amharic and Tigrinya

ambesha	(Tigrinya) plain, slightly sweet bread with cardamon seeds common in Tigray and Eritrea
arhotay (pl. arhotot)	(Tigrinya) denotes Christian salt traders and leaders of salt caravans. Historically, the *arhotay* formed a socio-cultural subgroup in the Tigray region of Ethiopia
Ato	(Amharic) polite form of address for an elderly or respected person
Atse	(Amharic) title of Ethiopian Emperors
čat (khat)	(Amharic) catha edulis; a green-leaved plant and stimulant containing alkaloid cathinone, endemic to Eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula
Gashe	(Tigrinya) polite form of address for an elderly or respected person
masqal	(Amharic) Christian Orthodox Holiday celebrating "The Finding of the True Cross (of Jesus Christ)"
qebelle (kebelle)	(Amharic) level of administration
Ras	(Amharic and Tigrinya) title corresponding to "duke", *ras* literally means "head"
shemagelle	(Amharic and Tigrinya) group of elders or mediators chosen by a group to resolve conflicts
woreda	(Amharic) district administration, nominally approx. 100,000 population

Abbreviations

ALF	‘Afar Liberation Front
ANDP	‘Afar National Democratic Party
APDO	‘Afar Peoples Democratic Organization
ALF	‘Afar Liberation Front
ANDP	‘Afar National Democratic Party
ANLM	‘Afar National Liberation Movement
APDO	‘Afar Peoples Democratic Organization
ARDUF	‘Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front
Derg	(Amharic) ‘committee’; used of for Government of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-1991)
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopia People’s Liberation Front
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
HoF	House of Federation
HPR	House of People’s Representative
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front

Introduction:
Landscapes, salt and ethics: a visual ethnography of the ‘Afar caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia

Arho geḏot tan [the caravan is on its way].

Common ‘Afar expression

Life is a relation with the world; the individual defines himself by choosing himself through the world; we must turn to the world to answer the questions that preoccupy us.

Simone de Beauvoir

***

It is the first day of our journey through the Sabba Canyon, the caravan trail that leads to the salt basins of the ‘Afar Depression in north-eastern Ethiopia. For the past two days, a small camera crew and I have joined three ‘Afar salt traders, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, and a train of 15 camels on their caravan trail. In one day, we will reach the crystal-white salt desert to collect the salt bars [*amolé*]. It is April 2018, and the temperature has increased significantly over the past weeks. Temperatures in the northern part of the ‘Afar region around the salt basin and in the villages and along the Sabba Canyon, the primary route of the camel caravans for the salt trade, can reach 45-50 degrees in the summer months. To avoid the midday heat, we seek refuge under a rock overhang, providing enough shade for us to rest over coffee and tea. My legs ache from walking and my body is exhausted. The company of Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, the musty camel scent and the tea break is a balm to my blisters and sore joints. As we sit I ask Hussein if the salt caravan trade has changed over the past years. He responded:

> Yes, it changed. The salt that we buy on the salt flats and the price for which we sell it, is not profitable anymore. If we are lucky, we make ETB 1 [US$ 0,03] profit from one amolé [salt bar].

There was despair in Hussein's voice when he replied to the question. Hussein was no more than 50 years, shorter than average and a bit round in the stomach. He joined the salt caravans as a young man in the 1970s. For the past forty years, the salt trade was an integral part of his life. His close-cropped hair, open, guileless face had a welcoming aura, but when he spoke about the caravan salt trade's current situation, uncertainty and worry rang in his words and eyes. He said:

> Going to arho is not profitable anymore. But what other option do we have? We are looking for other means of income. Even if we sell our camels, we don't know how to invest the money, so we live from it until it is gone.

In the past Hussein, Abdu and Idriss and their families used to benefit directly from the salt trade. Their families rented out goat skins as water containers to caravaners coming from other parts of Ethiopia. They had a few goats, sheep and even owned some camels themselves. Over the past years, however, and especially since the introduction of trucks in 2010-11, the caravan trade has decreased. "It is hard to compete with trucks", Abdu said.

> They are faster and can transport more salt than our camels. But we hope we can still supply the local markets with our camels in the future. At the same time, the trucks and the Association can serve the international markets.

It is a harsh reality. Besides the meagre income, the human body also pays a heavy toll during the journey. While we were drinking our tea, Idriss got a massive nosebleed and headache. Even after twenty years of engaging in the salt trade and walking in this intense heat, his body had still not adapted to this immense fieriness. "This happens", he said, "even after twenty years

of going to *arho*, my body has not adapted to this heat. I do not think it ever will". At the same time, however, Idriss, Abdu and Hussein are now renting camels from other members of the community. They still embarks on the journey to *arho* in the hope of making ends meet. As Idriss explained

> These days, the *arho* leaves me with debt. After paying the rent for the camels, the camel scouts and other equipment for our journey, we are left with no profit. It does not make sense.

During my research, the journey to the salt basin and from conversations with Abdu, Idriss and Hussein and salt traders it became apparent that there was a huge cultural investment and strong ethos of *arho*. People did not want to give up going to arho or let the practice disappear as it was an important part of the *'Afar 'adā* [*culture and tradition*]. As Hussein mentioned twice to us during our journey

> Arho is part of the 'Afar culture. It is not good to completely forget and to let this practice disappear. But we want to continue by using trucks in the future. The way that we used to practice is no longer beneficiary for us.

These developments had severe consequences on the income and livelihood of Abdu and his family. In the past, many communities profited directly from the trade and exchange networks with the 'Afar and non-'Afar caravans coming from different parts of Ethiopia. Over the past decade, however, new actors, road infrastructure and trucks for transporting salt have all contributed to the gradual disappearance of the caravan trade. Former caravaners like Abdu and Idriss are now seeking other means of income.

But why do the people no longer profit from the salt trade? What developments led to the slow decline and eventually to the caravan trade's disappearance in August 2018? How has the decline influenced the daily life of former caravaners like Abdu and other members of his

and other involved communities? What means of income other than the salt trade can be found in the north-eastern ‘Afar region?

In this dissertation, I bring together ethnographic and audio-visual material to answers these questions.

Image 1: Picture taken during the making of *Arho* during the journey through the Sabba Canyon. We are taking refugee from the midday heat under a bolder and discussing the next steps in filming over coffee (photo: Tesfahun Haddis, May 2018).

1 The caravan salt trade of north-eastern Ethiopia

The salt caravan trade of the ‘Afar people in north-eastern Ethiopia is one of the oldest exchange networks on the African continent. Historically, the caravans led from the salt basin of the ‘Afar Depression to the mountainous plateaus of Abyssinia and the Red Sea’s coastal regions of modern-day Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Throughout these regions, the salt caravans are known as *arho* [meaning “caravan” in the ‘Afar -Af language]. The rectangular salt bars mined in the ‘Afar Depression, called *amolé*, were accepted as currency in Ethiopia until the 1960s. Still today, the natural salts find their way into the milk and meat products derived from the herds (camels, goats and sheep) of the communities in Ethiopia.

Traditionally, predominantly Muslim pastoralist ‘Afar clans, inhabiting the land from

the Red Sea of present-day Eritrea and Djibouti to the interior of Ethiopia, held a monopoly over the salt trade. At the turn of the 20th century, Ethiopian Emperors and colonial powers present in the Horn of Africa (Britain in Sudan, Kenya and Somaliland; France in Djibouti and Italy in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia) tried to gain access and control over the trade. Their involvement led to a steady process of increased European and Christian participation in this originally Muslim-dominated trade. This participation, together with taxation policies, the erection of frontier and trading posts, and attempts to monopolise the salt trade resulted in intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts between ‘Afar and non-’Afar groups. On the other hand, however, these new trade relations established new cross-cultural cooperation, bond-friendships and commercial networks. During the mid-20th century, the networks often overcome ethnic or ideological boundaries between ‘Afar Muslim and non-’Afar Christian groups from other parts of Ethiopia.

The end of the Ethiopian Civil War (1974-1991), the independence of Eritrea (1993) and the foundation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1994-95), slowly altered the nature of the trade. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, lorries, trucks, infrastructure projects, international mining companies and tour agencies led to a steady decline of the camel caravan trade. In 2010-11, the local *‘As ‘Ale Salt Association* monopolised the salt trade. It started using trucks to collect the salts from the ‘Afar Depression. A conflict broke out in August 2018, after Government actors and private non-’Afar investors acquired land in the salt basin. All caravans stopped and the salt miners refused to carry on working. The conflict was resolved months later, and the salt miners returned to their work. However, the caravans decreased dramatically. Trucks have now almost fully replaced camel caravans.

Objective and significance of research

To date (2021), research about the salt trade has primarily focused on the history and social economics of the Ethiopian state and the Tigrinya-speaking *arhotot* communities. The *arhotot* are predominantly Christian salt traders and caravaners, who form a Tigrayan socio-

economic subgroup in highland plateaus of northern Ethiopia (Smidt 2017; Tsegay B. Gebrelibanos 2009; 2011; 2016). Other research has explored the political economy of iodized salt production at Lake Afdera, close to the Eritrean border (Dereje Feyissa 2011).

This dissertation researchers the history of the 'Afar's salt caravan trade as a social system in three districts Dallol, Konnaba and Barhale (in short Dakoba) in the northern 'Afar region. By focusing on the history and social dynamics in the northern parts of the 'Afar region along the modern-day boundaries of the Tigray and 'Afar regional state and Eritrea, it also takes a deliberate step away from studies and research of the southern and central 'Afar region. Over the past decades, studies on the relationship between the central Ethiopian government and the Sultanate of Asaita (Aussa) along the Awash region as marginalised periphery (Fantini and Puddu 2016; Maknun Ashami [1986] 2019; Puddu 2016a), the history and legacies of private international and national sugar, salt and cotton companies (Bondestam 1974a; Dereje Feyissa 2011; Kloos 1982a; 1982b; Maknun Ashami [1986] 2019), research on land resource management (Rettberg 2010; 2013; Müller-Mahn, Rettberg, and Getachew 2010) and conflicts over pastoral grazing lands between 'Afar and Issa-Somali clans (Idriss Mohammed Idriss 2010; 2011) have dominated the field of 'Afar studies. The history of north-eastern Ethiopia and discourse on Eritrea, Tigray and 'Afar have been dominated by a political focus on the liberation movements and ethno-linguistic and religious identity politics (Aalen 2011; Abbink 2011; Ali Said 1998; L. Smith 2013; Tronvoll 1998a). These dominating political narratives have partly impoverished the literature of the region (Gilkes 1991; Müller 2016; Reid 2014) and ethnographic research in these regions is almost non-existent.

By focusing on the specific dynamics of social and trade relations along the 'Afar and Tigray regional boundary, from the perspective of 'Afar salt traders and one specific community living along the path of the caravan trails, this dissertation hops to fill a gap in the existing literature on the salt caravan trade of north-eastern Africa.

2 Identity politics and landscapes: comparative approaches

By focusing on the social networks, trade relations, cross-cultural exchange and emic perception of the environment of the ‘Afar salt traders I worked with, my study shifts away from Ethiopian ethnic identity and state politics (Aalen 2011; Abbink 2011; J. Young 1996). I therefore deliberately move away from the influence the Ethiopian state has had on ethnic and religious identity politics and forward a distinctive approach. This is not to downgrade any of the existing approaches or prevalent theories applied to the study of identity in north-eastern Africa, but rather to recognise the process of self-identification and a sense of belonging as different phenomena, and thus establish further analytical precision within discussions of identity formation and group dynamics in the region. In contrast to many other accounts, my research goes beyond primordial, instrumentalist and constructivist theories of identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Schlee and Watson 2009a; 2009b) and creates trajectories of its own. This dissertation shows that particular concepts of landscapes, exchange, business ethics and normative behaviour based on customary laws are central to the understanding of cultural and personal self (identity) and group belonging of the different religious and cultural groups involved in the salt trade of north-eastern Ethiopia.

Specifically, I examine how trade relations were organised around an economy of trust, hospitality, reciprocity, faith and reliability. Accumulation of economic capital was not the prime motivation for exchange in the lifeworlds of the ‘Afar salt traders I worked with during my research. Instead, long-lasting trade relations were founded on honour, prestige, reputation and trustworthiness. I will show throughout my writing that these notions are deeply rooted and regulated through the ‘Afar customary laws (*meda’a*), the *ḏāgu* (an information-sharing meshwork) and the teachings of Islam. Together, these three systems serve as a moral codex of ethical behaviour towards the Other, including animals.

Trans-Saharan and trans-Himalayan trade networks

Comparative studies of the trans-Saharan trade in central Africa (Lovejoy 1986; Lydon

2009; McDougall 1983; 1990; Scheele 2010) and trans-Himalayan trade in central Asia (K. M. Bauer 2004; Fewkes 2008; Rizvi 1999; Saxer 2013) show that the exchange between diverse cultural, ecologic, religious and economic landscapes was more than a simple exchange of commodities.

The two exchange networks involved different groups inhabiting diverse economic and cultural frontiers linked to transhumance migration between distinctive ecological regions. Historically, in both cases, control over the sources of salt and its distribution was of primary importance in the articulation of economic, social, and political life.[2] Salt had symbolic value as an exchange commodity and the herds (camels, goats and sheep) of agro-pastoral communities also incorporated it into milk and meat products which satisfied human needs. Caravans, using camels in the trans-Saharan trade and yak in the trans-Himalayan trade, were of further symbolic value as they helped spread religion, information, technical knowledge and cultural features across regions. The trans-Saharan and the trans-Himalayan trade established cross-cultural cooperation, bond-friendships and commercial networks, often overcoming ethnic or ideological boundaries. Therefore, regional markets, local traders, moneylenders and debtors became central in these trade networks. Local, religious and cultural business ethics, customary norms of behaviour, political alliances and group-specific understanding of exchange turned both the trans-Saharan and the trans-Himalayan caravan trade into cross-cultural networks. Long-distance traders, regional merchants and brokers competed for economic and symbolic resources. The currency of these social relationships were trust and the cultural values of "reciprocity and reliability", as Kenneth Bauer, for example, writes in *High frontiers: Dolpo and the changing world of Himalayan pastoralists* (K. M. Bauer 2004, 127).

Therefore, the trans-Himalayan and the trans-Saharan trade serve as a useful comparison for my research, and I refer back to them when appropriate.

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[2] Central to the trans-Himalayan caravan trade between Ladakh (northern India), Dolpo (Tibet) and Upper Humla (between Nepal and China) was the salt-grain exchange between the highland regions of Ladakh and Upper Humla and the lowland plains of Dolpo.

3 Theoretical frame and research approach

Looking for different ways of understanding the complex economic and social dynamics of trade relations, (business) ethics, historical contexts and the vast literature on environmental perceptions of agro-pastoral communities and nomadic wayfarers, I forward in this dissertation an approach that I call *corresponding landscapes*. *Corresponding landscapes* must be seen as the knot that connects three interdependent ideas. These build on value and commodity exchange theory (Appadurai 1986; Escobar 1996; 2006; 2010; Gregory [1982] 2014; Munn 1986; Bourdieu 1977; Strathern 1987) and discourses on landscapes and environment perception as a guiding path (Fairhead and Leach 1996; Fumagalli 1994; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Ingold 2000; Tilley 1994). The approach needs further explanation.

Corresponding landscapes

In the context of my research, and to sum up theoretical debates from the vast literature on landscapes in anthropology and elsewhere, I borrow the definition of landscapes given by Christopher Tilley in his book *A phenomenology of landscapes places, paths, and monuments*:

> Perception of the world and the constitution of that which is important or unimportant to people does not work in terms of a 'blank environmental slate' on which perception and cognition sets to work, but in terms of the historicity of lived experiences in that world. The landscape is an anonymous sculptural form always already fashioned by human agency, never completed, and constantly being added to, and the relationship between people and it is a constant dialectic and process of structuration: the landscape is both medium *for* and outcome *of* action and previous histories of action. Landscapes are experienced in practice, in life activities (1994, 23 emphasis in original).

Landscapes are therefore not a single, set entity. Landscapes are dynamic and fluid. They are ever emergent. Social practice results from people's experiences, perspectives, agency and

being-with others in a particular landscape. Tilley and Cameron-Daum further define landscapes as "mutable, holistic in character, ever-changing, always in the process of being and becoming" (2017, 20).

To understand the interdependence between experiences, agency and *being-with*, Tim Ingold uses the term *correspondence*, which I borrow in my approach.[3] The idea is that neither experiences, agency nor *being-with* others can be seen in isolation. Instead, it is a *correspondence* between the three that creates a landscape. This correspondence transpires over time and space. Correspondence then, to use Ingold's words, "is the process by which beings or things literally answer to one another over time" (Ingold 2016, 14). To this extent the idea of correspondence helps explain the between of people's experiences, perceptions and agency as well as their descriptions of past events, informs their social practices in the present.

I now want to further detail the correspondence between the *productive landscape*, the *material landscape* and the *political landscape*. This discussion is key for my dissertation and informs my thought process throughout.

Productive landscape

The productive landscape is inspired by Tim Ingold's *ecology of life* and Arturo Escobar's post-constructivist political ecology.[4] To begin with Ingold, he says that his *ecology of life* is "active rather than reactive". It is the "creative unfolding of an entire field of relations within which beings emerge and take on the particular forms…, each in relation to the others".

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[3] Ingold does not speak of experience, agency and practice, but of *habit, agencing* and *attentionality*, and he builds his theoretical frame on the ideas of John Dewey (Ingold 2016, 14).

[4] The idea is further influenced by the Ethiopia ethnographic film series "Guardians of Productive Landscapes" (GPL) developed by Günther Schlee and Ivo Strecker of the German Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale. Throughout my research in Ethiopia (2017-2018), I was involved in this project. I worked as a second cameraman and assistant for two ethnographic documentaries for two Ethiopian anthropologists and filmmakers Mitiku Gebrehiwot and Tesfahun Haddis from Mekelle University. The films *Dancing Grass. Harvesting Teff In The Tigray Highlands* (Gebrehiwot 2018, 40 min) and *Abraham & Sarah II: Hosting The Gundagundo Pilgrims* (Haddis 2019, 41 min) are both available to buy or rent from the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Player. The ethnographic films of the GPL project portray agricultural and pastoral traditions in different parts of Ethiopia and show people's dedication to their landscape. The discussions I had with Ivo Strecker, Mitiku Gebrehiwot and Tesfahun Haddis further influenced my thinking about anthropology, theory and ethnographic filmmaking.

For Ingold life is then "not the realisation of pre-specified forms", but

> the very process wherein forms are generated and held in place. Every being, as it is caught up in the process and carries it forward, arises as a singular centre of awareness and agency: an enfoldment, at some particular nexus within it, of the generative potential that is life itself (Ingold 2000, 19).

Ingold's idea, as abstract as it may appear, entails an essential point. The notion of a fundamental interconnectedness of all things. At the core of Ingold's writing lies the idea that nothing can be considered in isolation. Human agency is part of a more extensive web, nexus, or meshwork as he calls it.[5]

As Simone de Beauvoir's quote at the beginning of this introduction also points out, human agency is entangled in an interdependent, co-constructed, ever-emergent relationship with the world we inhabit. Therefore, humans hold the potential to generate life itself, to create something new as Ingold states above. To do so, people need to correspond with their environment and those who inhabit it. For Ingold, the environment is then "continually under construction" and "never complete" as "it exists and takes on meaning in relation to me, and in that sense it came into existence and undergoes development with me and around me" (Ingold 2000, 20).[6]

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[5] Ingold develops this meshwork theory in response to the actor-network theory (ANT). He writes that the relation in a meshwork is not a connection, but rather "a path traced through the terrain of lived experience. Far from connection points in a network, every relation is one line in a meshwork of interwoven trails" (Ingold [2007] 2016, 93). Ingold further says that "the lines of the meshwork are the trails along which life is lived… it is in the entanglement of lines, …, that the mesh is constituted" (Ingold [2007] 2016, 83).

[6] A last point in Ingold's thinking should be mentioned here: the environment and nature are not the same things and their distinction "corresponds to the difference in perspective between seeing ourselves as beings within a world and as beings without it" (Ingold 2000, 20). In other words, nature can exist without people inhabiting it. The environment cannot. The idea of the productive landscape also lends itself to a "phenomenology of perception" found in philosophical thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger who influenced anthropological theory (Ram 2015). Given Heidegger's support of the German Third Reich, and his persona as "Nazi rector" (Villa 1996, 13), I have decided not to use him in any of my work. In studying Heidegger's private "Black Notebook" released in 2014, and letters between him [Heidegger], Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt, the philosopher Sarah Bakewell for example writes "Heidegger was Nazi, at least for a while, and not out of convenience but by conviction (Bakewell 2017, 80). Leaving out Heidegger is a conscious decision on my part as a German national. This decision, however, relates to broader questions about which thinkers should find their way into university curriculums and academic writing.

Ingold's approach of an "ecology of correspondence" (Ingold 2016, 22) resonates with the concrete experiences of the 'Afar salt traders I worked with during my research. Their agency, knowledge and perception of the environment are embedded within the landscapes along animal paths and caravan trails in north-eastern Ethiopia.

During the journey with the salt caravans, Abdu for example explained how 'Afar clans in control of the salt flats and the caravan trails were taxing the Tigray caravans from the highlands in the form of *ambesha* [a flat bread made with cardamon seeds typical of the highland regions of Ethiopia]. Pointing to a cliff on our journey through the Sabba Canyon, Abdu told the story of a Tigrayan *arhotay* [salt trader], who refused to pay the required *ambesha*. His refusal led to a dispute with the 'Afar men from the surrounding communities. "Standing on top of this cliff arguing", so Abdu told the story,

> the *arhotay* grabbed a young 'Afar boy by the arm out of the crowd of people, and leapt off the edge of the mountain shouting: 'I'll never see *arho* [the salt mines] and I'll never see my home country again'. Both died.

In this concrete example, the cliff in the Sabba Canyon triggered a specific memory of Abdu about a past event. Abdu had moved along these caravan trails for several decades. In the course of this, his memories and knowledge became deeply imbedded in this particular landscape.

Arturo Escobar's theory of political ecologies (Escobar 1996; 1999; 2006) is further useful when we want to understand the relationship between human ecology and political ecology. In framing his post-constructivist political ecology, and linking back to the example of Abdu given above, Escobar writes that:

> life happens in the engagement with the world in which we dwell; prior to any objectification, we perceive the world because we act in it, and we similarly discover meaningful objects in the environment by moving about in it. In this way,

things are neither 'naturally given' nor 'culturally constructed' but the result of a process of co-construction (Escobar 2010, 94).

For Escobar the goal of his theory is to study the "manifold articulations of history and biology and the cultural mediations through which such articulations are necessarily established" (Escobar 1999, 3). Each articulation, so he continues has its own history and is "related to modes of perception and experience, determined by social, political, economic, and knowledge relations, and characterised by modes of use of space, ecological conditions, and the like" (Escobar 1999, 4).

The first concept of the *corresponding landscapes*, the study of *productive landscapes*, then allows for the exploration of the concrete experience, memories, imagination and perception of individuals on the ever-changing economic, political and cultural trajectories of specific phenomena.

Thus, the *productive landscape* is best understood through knowledge derived from ethnographic research. I define a *productive landscape* as "the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them" (Ingold 2000, 193). Ingold's quote aptly renders the perceptions and experiences of the 'Afar salt traders, pastoralist and nomads I worked with during my research. In the *corresponding landscapes* approach, the information and data collected through my narrative interviews and conversations form, together with my observations and reflections, the central analytical tool for understanding this *productive landscape*. Thus, the *productive landscape* helps to bring people's perception and memory the salt caravan trade's history into dialogue with current social practices. As Christopher Tilley says "all locales and landscapes are embedded in the social and individual times of memory. Their pasts as much as their spaces are crucially constitutive of their presents" (1994, 27).

Material landscape

The second component of the *corresponding landscapes* approach is the *material landscape*. The study of the material landscape is twofold. First, it is based on historical data from secondary sources and from narrative interviews to compare the changing prices of certain commodities (salt bars, goats, coffee, wheat, grain etc.) over time. Here the study of the *material landscape* aims to outline and to document historical developments in a specific region. Travel accounts are a useful tool here – when used and engaged with critically – to compare current and historical data. The comparison of historical data and commodity prices is useful for contextualizing regional and country-specific developments, but less so, for anthropologists, when it comes to people's experience of historical and economic processes. Therefore, the second part of the *material landscape* looks beyond the bare *prices* of things and turns to the study of their *symbolic value* in trade and exchange relations (Bourdieu 1977).

Here the theories of the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1986; 1990) provide help. Appadurai explores the conditions under which economic objects – commodities – circulate in different "regimes of value" over space and time. Arjun Appadurai defines commodities as "things with a particular type of social potential" (Appadurai 1986, 5–6) that are "intended for exchange". Then he turns his attention towards the things themselves – a useful phenomenological notion in this context – and away "from the exclusive preoccupation with the "product", "production", and the original or dominant intention of the "producers" and permits us to focus in the dynamics of exchange" (Appadurai 1986, 9).

The commodity situation in the social life of any "thing", Appadurai says further, is defined "as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature" (Appadurai 1986, 13). Appadurai formulates "regimes of value". These do

> *not* imply that every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions, but rather that the degree of value coherence may be highly

> variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity. A regime of value, in this sense, is consistent with both very high and very low sharing of standards by the parties to a particular commodity exchange. Such regimes of value account for the constant transcendence of cultural boundaries by the flow of commodities, where culture is understood as a bounded and localised system of meaning… the commodity context refers to the variety of social arenas, within or between cultural units, that help link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career (Appadurai 1986, 15).

In the history of the ‘Afar salt caravan trade, the salt bars [*amolé*] were more than a mere “commodity” sold on a “market” for “profit” to satisfy human “wants”. Salt is also important for the survival of animals and humans. It is one of the key factors in the healthy growth of animals and the production of milk and meat for communities. Until the 20th century, the salt bars were further accepted as currency within the country, as well as for taxation and tribute. Ethiopian Emperors and local traders often preferred salt over the Maria Theresia thaler, the dominant coin used in trade throughout the region (R. Pankhurst 1963). The terminology of economists may be useful from the perspective of Western capitalist societies that have, without doubt, penetrated much of the world’s economic system. But this thinking has its shortcoming, and we have to recognise that much of our [western] economic understanding can often not account for the embedded complex of non-economic values involved in trade relations.

Political Landscapes

The third and last thread of the *corresponding landscapes* is the concept of *political landscape*. I broadly define a political landscape as fields of power, an expression borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the field of economics and the field of politics taken together constitute the field of power. The different players (social agents) adopt different strategies to maintain or improve their position within specific fields. At stake in the field is the accumulation of capitals (economic and symbolic), which are both the process within, and

product of, this field (Bourdieu 1990b, 51; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989, 50).

Adam T. Smith, the author of *The Political Landscape*, writes further that a political landscape includes “broad sets of spatial practices critical to the formation, operation, and overthrow of geopolitical orders, of polities, of regimes, of institutions” (A. T. Smith 2003, 5). Within the plurality of landscapes, defined as different spheres of authority (families, institutions, groups), Smith writes that the “political authority presents itself as the arena of spatial production of the last resort”. He says,

> Zoning laws, for example, reveal the ability of the political apparatus to intrude itself into the spatiality of other authority relations. However, this control over landscape production is never complete and often unsustainable. Hence, political landscapes are constantly shifting in response to factors far beyond immediate political relationships (A. T. Smith 2003, 110).

From this perspective, the study of political landscapes necessitated a critical engagement with regional/country-specific political developments and how they affect the concrete experience of individuals and communities (Chua 2015; A. T. Smith 2003; Warnke 1995).

In the history of the ‘Afar salt caravan trade, colonial powers, Ethiopian Emperors and governments have made decisions and policies over movement and the apprehension of spaces that directly affected the salt traders I worked with. Their decisions have further influenced the daily lives of the specific communities living along the former caravan trails. For the *political landscape*, I explore the history of the salt caravan trade in northern Ethiopia and show how different European powers and Ethiopian Emperors tried to control, tax and monopolise the salt trade. While historically ‘Afar clans held a monopoly over the salt basin, the control shifted at the turn of the 20th century when first Emperor Yohannes (r. 1872-1889) and later Emperor Menelik (r. 1890-1916) pushed for non-’Afar salt traders to move into the salt basin. The decision in 2018 to grant a large plot of land to a non-’Afar investor has essentially led to the

decline of the caravan trade.

While it is important to understand the economic and political agents that constitute the field of power within the *political landscape*, it is important to recognise, as Bourdieu urges, the power of social agents to act autonomously within this field. For Bourdieu, social agents are not the victims of these hierarchised power fields, as they possess the agency and the control to change their conditions within a particular field. Bourdieu writes

> no doubt agents do have an active apprehension of the world. No doubt they do construct their vision of the world. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints. And one may even explain in sociological terms what appears as a universal property of human experience, that is, the fact that the familiar world tends to be 'taken for granted', perceived as natural (Bourdieu 1990a, 130).

The point I wish to make in using the *political landscape* in my dissertation is to create an analytical tool to bring forth the perspective of people directly affected by decisions made by people and in places that are often unknown and intangible to them. The political landscape is essential because it helps to understand the Ethiopian politics of space (Clapham 1990; 2002; 2017), and how the Ethiopian government has shaped the experience of group identity and the relationship between an intimate sense of place and history and the larger *political landscape* in the country, especially since 1995.

Research questions and argument

The primary argument in this dissertation then depends on the three closely interwoven studies of the *corresponding landscape*. First, the decline of caravan trade in the 'Afar depression has to be understood from the perspective of the salt traders I worked with during my research. It is their concrete experiences, their memories, their perceptions of the environment and economic activities that guide my writing. To understand the everyday lives and current social practices of 'Afar communities formerly involved in the salt caravan trade, I

examine how members of these communities constructed their trade and social relations. As I show, these relations where enmeshed in cultural-specific understandings of business ethics and notions of hospitality, trust and reciprocity. The knowledge derived from this study is what I call the *productive landscape*. Here, I am particularly interested in the historical, economic, political and social trajectories in north-east Africa that led to the decline of the ‘Afar salt caravan trade. How have ‘Afar salt traders experienced these developments? To what extent has the introduction of trucks and lorries influenced the relationship between ‘Afar and non-’Afar groups? How did ‘Afar salt traders conceptualize these exchange relationships? In what ways do people formerly involved in the salt trade understand concepts of trust, business ethics, reciprocity and hospitality in these interactions? How are these understandings and perceptions embedded within the geographic and social landscape along the former caravan routes? Moreover, how have these conceptions changed during the political and economic transformations in the Horn of Africa since 1991?

Second is an analysis of the historical trajectory of relevant economic, political and social processes in north-eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti). This forms the *material* and *political landscapes*. I ask how these developments, over time, contributed to the decline and eventual disappearance of the caravan trade in 2018. Central here, however, is how the *material* and *political landscape* further shaped the perception of the regional Other, group identity formation and especially the notion of ethnic belonging among former groups involved in the caravan trade. I ask how multiple markers of ethnicity, culture, religion, kinship and language come into play during the trade relations and social interactions between ‘Afar and non-’Afar groups. And how the emergence of these identities shaped particular understandings of trust, honesty and reciprocity between groups.

4 Ethical framework of practice

In the context of this research, I am proposing an *ethics of correspondence* for doctoral and early career researchers, which is collaborative, dialogic and reflexive. It challenges specific ways of doing anthropology, based on my own research experience with the ‘Afar salt traders I worked with in the context of my fieldwork and the making of the ethnographic documentary *Arho*. In line with anthropological interest in ethics and morality, this research views ethics as flexible, critical, and historically and culturally situated (Amborn 1993; Fabian 2002; Pels 1999; Zigon 2008).

The specific form of ethical fieldwork I conducted was based on mutual trust and understanding with the ‘Afar salt traders I worked with. Even though this sometimes meant I was not able to write or show what I had initially hoped to, it offered other conduits and opportunities of collaboration, including the making of a documentary.

During a discussion on the issue of written consent forms for *Arho* from the people I worked with, Yusuf, one of my interlocutors and close collaborator for this research, told me:

> if you asked people to sign a document, they will not talk to you. They won’t trust you. People here trust you, because they know and trust me, because they know my father, my family and my clan. This is also why *Gifta* Ibrahim [a regional clan and religious leader and gatekeeper for my research] trusts me. You have to understand that we have decided to trust you and that you also a have responsibility towards us.

Therefore, the *ethics of correspondence* I propose takes further stimulus from contemporary theories in Visual Anthropology. Ethical reflexivity (Wiles, Clark, and Prosser 2011) is here regarded as the foundational basis for the relationships between filmmaker and participants in observational documentary (Nash 2011). This correspondence, so I argue, can neither be demanded nor pre-determined but must be negotiated based on the contextual understandings

of the concrete, everyday situations encountered during ethnographic fieldwork.

The *ethics of correspondence* helps explain the moral exchange between doctoral, early-career researchers and ethnographic filmmakers and the communities they work with. The *ethics of correspondence* is more than a theoretical concept. Instead, it is a collaborative research method for ethnographic practice and documentary filmmaking that creates an open space for dialogue and a moral place where researchers and interlocutors can mediate their own representations. This will help find new ways of doing anthropology. This will become more explicit in Chapters 2 and 5, and in the conclusion to this dissertation.

I am particularly interested in the lessons we can learn from a direct engagement with other – non-western – notions of "ethics", working together, and co-learning in cross-cultural encounters for doctoral and post-doctoral students, and in how this applies to both ethnographic research and ethnographic filmmaking. I ask how anthropologists can best understand these different conceptualizations of exchange, trust and hospitality, and the activities of pastoral communities in a ruptured, tension-riddled economic and political landscape, such as north-eastern Africa. And what meaning "acting and being ethical" may have for anthropologists in a post-colonial world. Who has the power to decide what is considered "ethical" in an ethnographic encounter? Furthermore, how can anthropologists best bring together the precarious and unstable ethnographic material resulting from such an engagement?

The underlying claim for this *ethics of correspondence* is not new and various similar framings exist (Amborn 1993; Fagerholm 2014; Diver and Higgins 2014; Irwin 2006). For instance, recent interest in ethics in the field of anthropology argues that ethics has become a subtle form of censorship, shifting ethics from a process that can help you think through research, towards issues of insurance, risk aversion and fear of being sued (B. Simpson 2011; E. Simpson 2016; Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017; Sleeboom-Faulkner and McMurray 2018a).

Edward Simpson argues that in the past few years, universities in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) have moved quickly in the direction of ethics as a form of compliance. I see the historical need for ethical guidelines and regulations, especially for anthropology, and believe that the discipline cannot succeed without rules to be complied with.[7] The principles of *Research Ethic Codes* (like the ones at SOAS) and the *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice* such as those issued by the *Association of Social Anthropology (ASA)*, are generally useful as they anticipate certain ethical dilemmas for doctoral and post-doctoral researchers during long-term ethnographic research. At the same time, however, these principles are "softly framed versions of complex areas of law, which have histories, case precedents, and specialized legal practices", as Edward Simpson further writes (E. Simpson 2016, 123).

Similarly, so write Sleeboom-Faulkner et al., formal research ethics that demand, beyond frustrating and confusing doctoral and early-career researchers, they privilege "research as defined by research ethics committees rather than in negotiation with the ethics ethnographers encounter in "the field""(Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017, 72).

While consent forms can provide some form of protection for informants, the usually protect universities and researchers more. As in the example given above, consent forms become problematic when they view research participants as mere "subjects" to be used, rather than as parties to be respected. Then, this form of consent is no different from an unequal exchange between coloniser and colonised. Or neo-colonial at the very least. It implies a power relationship rather than the trusting relationship which is the foundation of truly ethical

[7] Guidelines for ethics, research integrity and good research practice follow the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) of the UK and Commonwealth and the Research Ethics Policies and Procedures from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Here, the values of *honesty*, *rigor*, *transparency and open communication* and *care and respect* in conducting research are considered crucial for my research. For my funding body, *the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)*, I reviewed the guidelines for good research practice of the *German Research Funding Organization (DFG)* ("Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice", and "Leitlinien zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis" (only available in German)). Under all these regulations, I was asked to protect and secure personal information that would reveal someone's identity and to ensure that my research findings could not be used against groups or individuals in my geographic and social settings. I was further required to establish rapport with informants and get verbal (or written) consent from all individuals involved in my research. Verbal consent had to be obtained prior to and again after recording narrative interviews or oral histories.

fieldwork. While I do not object to institutional protection for researchers and research participants, I find it important to critically reflect upon and question ethical frameworks that ask for physical signatures or thumbprints.

The core idea for my argument about the *ethics of correspondence*, developed throughout this dissertation, is that ethics in ethnographic encounters, at least for doctoral and early-career researchers as well as ethnographic filmmakers, should emerge from mutual understanding, trust and respect.[8]

5 Research limitations

My research access was granted through an ‘Afar contact in London, who, through personal and family relations, established the necessary contacts for me in Ethiopia. This put me in a privileged position as my research was supported by Samara University and the Bureau of Culture and Tourism in Samara, the capital of the ‘Afar region. Samara University and the Bureau of Culture and Tourism granted me research permits to film and access specific locations.

I further write from a fortunate position as my research was fully funded by the *German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)*. This gave me the financial means to move about freely in Ethiopia and between research areas. The DAAD, who had funded my previous stays in Ethiopia as well, provided me with US$ 1642 per month (for 12 months), which granted me extended privileges in Ethiopia. With my German passport and authorisation permits from Addis Ababa in my back pocket, and under the protection of the German Embassy, I enjoyed entitled freedoms of mobility and movement. I enjoyed comforts often far beyond the reach of those involved in my research, including using domestic flights to cover large distances to avoid

[8] There is a different point to be made about ethic reviews and formalized ethical frameworks for anthropological/ethnographic research as part of grant project application, such as from the European Research Council (ERC). A discussion about these forms of ethics beyond the scope of this dissertation.

long bus journeys or staying in hotels to recuperate from longer stays in remote areas. Through my scholarship, I could afford to pay for a translator and research assistant when travelling to far-off regions, hire a car if needed and buy or rent equipment (such as voice-recorders, camera gear, external hard-drives etc.). My financial income put me in an asymmetrical relation with some people involved in my research. Nevertheless, people often rejected my offers to pay for rent, contribute towards food or pay for dinner.

My research is limited to the ʻAfar perspective of the salt trader communities in the Dakoba region in northern ʻAfar. My research is further a predominantly male perspective on the ʻAfar culture. Even though I interviewed ʻAfar women and their involvement in the caravan trade, I did not further explore the role of women within the communities in north-eastern ʻAfar. I would have had to cross social boundaries that it would have been difficult to do as a man.

6 Writing style, dissertation structure, and chapter outline

I intentionally wrote parts of my dissertation in an alternative style following more recent creative, experimental, interpretative and reflexive forms of writing ethnography (Goodall 2000; Gullion 2016; McGranahan 2020b; Narayan 2012; Van Maanen 2011). I consider both ethnographic writing and filmmaking an educational craft that translates concrete solid fieldwork experiences into compelling accounts, narratives and stories (Goodall 2000, 30–31). Ponterotto and Grieger have called this moving from “thick description” to “thick interpretation” to “thick meaning” (Ponterotto 2006; Ponterotto and Grieger 2007).

Making sense of my concrete fieldwork experience and the ʻAfar salt traders I worked with, I structured two chapters of my written ethnography around journeys, movement and traveling. Carole McGranahan terms this form of ethnographic writing “theoretical storytelling”, which she refers to as different anthropological strategies and methods for translating research experiences into reflective narratives (McGranahan 2020a). She writes that theoretical storytelling is a “method of narration by both ethnographer and subject, a means of

organizing writing, a way of arguing certain ethnographic points, and an ethnographically grounded way of approaching theory" (McGranahan 2020a, 73).

I am aware of the problems of such an approach. The constraints and limits of such writing is that it often bypasses more in-depth exploration of historical events, theoretical discourse and analysis. My accounts may therefore appear to remain incomplete at specific passages. To make sense of my concrete fieldwork experience, however, this technique seemed to be the best way to recognise and bring together the different voices, entangled histories, and the dynamics between different agents involved in the salt caravan trade.

All the events and conversation I had with people, which I describe in my ethnography, did indeed happen, but not necessarily in the chronological order and in the places in which I re-tell them in the text. Concretely, this means that I situate people in other locations to fit my narrative. I am aware of the downsides of this style that conflates writing and editing to serve a narrative. However, this approach allowed me to protect my interlocutors' privacy and identity while still maintaining an authentic presentation of my field work experience (Gullion 2016, 33–34).

Following the code for good research practices of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the ethical guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropology (ASA), I had to exclude certain parts from my writing. My analysis and interpretations, therefore, may remain partial or incomplete. I communicated the intentions and objectives of my research with the people I worked and lived with. People gave their verbal consent to be quoted in my research. I have changed some names and personal characteristics that could identify the people involved in my research. I generalise age statements to mid-20 or mid-30. By doing so, I hope to protect the identity of the people involved in my research. In the text, I remained loyal to the people involved in my research and respected their wishes on how to include their voices. I paraphrase people, and embed quotes from interviews and notes in a dialogic style.

Dissertation outline

In this dissertation, I forward two distinct approaches: the *corresponding landscapes* and *the ethics of correspondence*. Both approaches become apparent when reading through the written dissertation *Landscapes, salt and ethics: a visual ethnography of the caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia* and watching the documentary *Arho – The 'Afar Salt Caravan Trade in Northeastern Ethiopia*, which is an integral part of the written text. This project is therefore best understood by reading from start to end rather than jumping between chapters.

I divided the dissertation into five chapters with sub-sections. Except chapter one, all chapters begin with fieldwork accounts or crafted vignettes of *being-with* or *talking-with* people. These accounts and my ethnographic data guide my writing.

Chapter I: Initial thoughts about Ethiopia: arrival and ethnographic research

In this first chapter, I continue to provide an overview of the theoretical and methodological considerations for my research. Above all, these pages introduce some of the interlocutors I worked with throughout my research in Ethiopia. To start with, I write about my previous stays, research and work experiences in Ethiopia starting in 2009. I explain how they have informed my current thinking about the region. I provide a brief historical background of the region for readers unfamiliar with the political and social contexts of the broader region of north-eastern Africa and the political events that unfolded during my research.

Chapter II: Geographic and social setting: entangled landscapes of north-eastern Ethiopia

In the following part, I examine how the salt caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia was related to particular social networks. I seek to identify the different communities of traders involved in the caravan trade. To this end, I discuss these communities within their regional and geographic settings, living as they do along the mountain-desert divide between the Ethiopian highland plateau and the 'Afar Depression. I describe the variety of ways in which we can define these communities, socially and culturally speaking, such as geographic, ethno-

linguistic, or else in terms of kinship, and/or religious groups. I frame the discussion in this chapter around a car journey along the road leading from Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, to Barhale, my main research site in the ‘Afar region.

The sub-sections of this chapter then engage with the historical and political context of the Horn of Africa, contrasting two theories that I deem helpful in understanding the region: the highland-lowland/centre-periphery and the borderland/frontier model. The first model assumes a geographic, religious and cultural boundary along the Great Ethiopia Rift Valley that divides Ethiopia and Eritrea into a highland and lowland area. According to this view, the centre of the Ethiopian Christian Empire lay in the highland areas while lowlands lying east and west of these centres, which the ruling Ethiopian nobility of the centre marginalised and exploited, made up the peripheries (Clapham 2017; James et al. 2002; Markakis 2011).

The study of borderlands and frontiers on the African continent has contested the centre-periphery perspective by examining the state-formation process through an anthropological and historical lens that focuses on the people as agents, thereby acknowledging the local power structures and different degrees of political and economic hierarchies as well as human agency in the “peripheries” (Asiwaju 1993; Baud and Van Schendel 1997; Dereje Feyissa and Hoehne 2010; Nugent 2002; Nugent and Asiwaju 1996).

The highland-lowland/centre-periphery and the borderland/frontier model tend to bind cultural and personal identities to specific places. This form of topoanalysis, e.g., the study of how human identities relate to the places people inhabit, obscures rather than explains the relationships between people and the landscapes in which they dwell when it comes to pastoral groups or subsistence cultivators. In line with phenomenological studies on identity and landscape (B. Bender 2001; Tilley 1994; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017), I show, however, that human experience, agency and social practice become inscribed within specific landscapes. At the same time, people create and mediate a sense of their cultural and personal self (identity) and group belonging in relation to specific landscapes. This is essential in understanding

political landscapes as productive.

Chapter III: Being a guest among 'Afar pastoralists: camels, trust and honesty

Having provided an introduction and established a sense of the different groups living along the historical caravan trading routes of north-eastern Ethiopia, chapter three of this dissertation, *Being a guest among 'Afar pastoralists: camels, trust and honesty*, explores the self-identification processes and notions of being and becoming 'Afar. The sub-sections of this chapter are ethnographically informed. I use concrete examples from my research to show that 'Afar identity is to a large extent constructed and negotiated around different concepts of hospitality and welcoming. These concepts are deeply rooted and regulated through the 'Afar customary laws (*meda'a*), the *ḍāgu* (an information-sharing meshwork) and the teachings of Islam. Together, these three systems serve as a moral codex of ethical behaviour in constructing a sense of self, and towards Others, including animals.

In this chapter, I do not intend to re-think or review concepts of morality, ethics or hospitality. My concern is different. I use anthropological discourses on hospitality to explore how ethical and moral behaviour is expressed in lived experience and in social interactions of daily life among different 'Afar groups I conducted my research with. The sub-sections of this chapter reflect on the concept of hospitality in philosophical thought, borrowing basic ideas from Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Kant. I then move on to link the discussion about hospitality to anthropological discourse (Candea and Col 2012; Herzfeld 1987; Molz and Gibson 2007; Pitt-Rivers [1977] 2012), which focuses on the guest-host relationships in ethnographic research. Reflecting on my concrete experience as researcher and guest in Ethiopia and specifically among the salt traders and the communities I worked with, led me to reconsider my positionality in the field and question my role as researcher, guest and friend *vis-à-vis* my hosts. Using ethnographic accounts, I am particularly interested in the reciprocal dynamics and changing roles between guests and hosts. I understand these dynamics as a *process of inversion* (Pitt-Rivers [1977] 2012) and *rite of incorporation* (W. C. Young 2007).

My writing partly reflects my (limited) engagement with Islamic teachings and ethics, based on my research and the time I spent with the ‘Afar salt traders and communities I worked with. My fieldwork has influenced my thinking and ethical approach towards participant observation, which informs the approach of an *ethics of correspondence* which I elaborate further in Chapter 5 and in the conclusion.

Chapter IV: Salt, trade and corresponding landscapes in north-eastern Ethiopia

Chapter four of this dissertation, *Salt, trade and corresponding landscapes in north-eastern Ethiopia* is based on informal and semi-structured interviews with former caravaners, women engaged in the salt trade and current representatives of the salt association in Barhale. This part shows the symbolic dimensions of the salt trade system and explores the extent to which salt played a role in maintaining the social aspects of Barhale trading networks.

In this chapter, I further conceptualize my approach of *corresponding landscapes*, specifically exploring the ideas of the material and productive landscape. In framing the productive landscape, I found myself particularly attracted to Tim Ingold’s alternative ecology of anthropology and alternative theory of perception (Ingold 1992; 2000; [2007] 2016; 2016) as well as Arturo Escobar’s post-structuralist and anti-essentialist approach to the study of political ecology (Escobar 1996; 1999; 2006; 2010). Both approaches both approaches resonate with the data from my ethnography on the ‘Afar salt trade, business ethics, commodity exchange. More importantly, they both entail a phenomenological perspective in understanding how wayfarers and pastoralists construct their relation to the environment they inhabit. These ideas inform my writing.

An understanding of the *material landscape* derives first from a study of the fundamental socio-economic and historical agents involved in a commodity exchange. The idea of the *material landscape* focuses on the specific dynamics of the “social arenas” (Bourdieu 1977) in which the exchange of salt bars and other commodities took place. For the material landscape, my theoretical framework relies on the works of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1990a;

1990b; 1996). I employ and further unpack Bourdieu's novel thinking on agency, field relations and exchange.

Narratively, I structure this chapter along the three-day caravan journey from Barhale to the salt basin of the 'Afar Depression. This journey guides my writing. In this chapter, I weave together my ethnographic data, the different histories embedded in the landscape along the caravan trails of north-eastern 'Afar, and theories of ecological, economic or political anthropology.

At the end of this chapter there is an invitation, I invite the reader to watch the film the documentary *Arho – The 'Afar Salt Trade of North-Eastern Ethiopia* on the online platform VIMEO. Please follow this link: https://vimeo.com/372906276 and enter the password: Arho20@0HH.

Chapter V: Reflections on Making Arho – The 'Afar Salt Trade of Northeastern Ethiopia

In this last chapter, I reflect upon making the documentary *Arho*. I analyse clips, photographs and sequences from *Arho* and reflect upon the ethical considerations encountered during the making of this documentary and how the collaboration with my interlocutors shaped the way the film was crafted. I do this by contrasting the theoretical foundations and ethical approaches of two anthropologists and filmmakers, Robert Gardner (2014) and Jean Rouch (2004). Here I rely further on analyses of ethnographic filmmaking as collaborative processes (Banks 2001; Gruber 2016; Pink 2006), and discuss the practical considerations of using montage and music in editing ethnographic films. I argue that collaborative research methods for anthropology and specifically for ethnographic filmmaking create an open space for dialogue and "a moral place where subjects and image makers can mediate their own representation" (Elder 1995, 94).

Conclusion – Corresponding landscapes and ethics of correspondence

In the conclusion, I summarise the findings of this research and propose potential

adaptations of my methods and the approaches of *corresponding landscapes* and *ethics of correspondence*. In particular, I propose an *ethics of correspondence* for doctoral and early career researchers and ethnographic filmmakers. The ethics of correspondence I propose takes further stimulus from my understanding of contemporary theory in Anthropology as a study *with* rather than *of*, *on* or *about* people (Amborn 1993; Bourdieu 1990a; Ingold 2008; Pocock 1976). I further argue that this correspondence can neither be demanded nor pre-determined but must be negotiated in the "spontaneous interaction" between the anthropologist and the people involved in the research.

Chapter I: Initial thoughts about Ethiopia: arrival and ethnographic research

Arho geḏot tan [the caravan is on its way/things are in motion].

Common ‘Afar expression

If you are open-minded and ready to learn, there are many things which you can learn not only from books and instructors but from the very life experience itself.

Haile Selassie
Emperor of Ethiopia

***

I had visited Ethiopia as a tourist in 2009 on a five-month backpacking trip from Cape Town to Cairo, after working in South Africa for over one year (2007-2008). In 2010, during my undergraduate studies, I returned to Ethiopia as part of an exchange program between Addis Ababa University (AAU) and my host University in Germany (University of Bayreuth). As part of a partnership agreement, I attended several courses at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology of AAU in the heart of Ethiopia’s capital. In the following years, I returned to Ethiopia to research Ethiopia’s parliamentary system and party politics for a German political foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES). I worked as a tour guide for an Ethiopian agency, taking tourists throughout the country (2010-11 and 2012). In 2014-15, I returned for a second exchange semester at Mekelle University in the Tigray regional state in the north of the country as part of my graduate program in Ethiopian Studies at the University of Hamburg (Germany).

During these years I studied the Ethiopian national working language Amharic and the regional language Tigrinya, spoken predominantly in the regional state of Tigray and in Eritrea. Further, I established social relationships throughout the country that would inform my knowledge about Ethiopia and north-east Africa at large. In short, I felt confident that my

previous experiences in Ethiopia, together with my language skills and social relations could translate into a PhD project.

The initial topic for my PhD research was "The construction and maintenance of cultural and ethnic identities along and beyond the 'Afar / Tigray regional Boundary in North-East Ethiopia". My research questions were concerned with 'Afar and "Tigrayan" ethnic and cultural identity constructions. I aimed to explore how these identities were maintained in different geographic and social settings/spaces along and beyond the regional boundary of 'Afar and Tigray states.

Second, I was interested in the power of symbols used by pan-ethnic and ethno-national movements to legitimise power or create a sense of belonging to specific groups. I expected to examine the specific strategies the Ethiopian government and its affiliated regional parties used to attract followers and strengthen or maintain political power. For this part of the dissertation, I planned to attend festivals and celebrations of national and regional holidays and capture them in a documentary film and images.

However, things turned out differently for several reasons.

7 Returning to Ethiopia: "state of emergency" and ethnic politics

In 2017, I returned to Ethiopia to undertake my doctoral research. The Department of Anthropology at Samara University, in the capital of 'Afar region, invited me as a visiting research fellow. An 'Afar contact in London had established the links to Samara University, which helped me to obtain my research documents. We agreed that during my first three months, I would assist the staff at the Department and support lectures. In return I would get language training in 'Afar-Af. After this, I intended to move between the 'Afar and Tigray regional boundary to commence my research.

When I arrived back in Ethiopia in August 2017, the country was under a "state of emergency". The political landscape was taut and explosive following protests against the

Ethiopian government, accompanied by ethnic violence throughout the country and especially in the capital Addis Ababa.[9]

To get my research visa and research permission from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in Addis Ababa, I had to sign and agree to the Institute's ethical guidelines. The IES urged me to stay away from any political gatherings, not to conduct research that could impede or harm the Ethiopian state and not to engage with political organisations. I had to pay US$300 for my research visa and signed the ethical consent forms and research guidelines. Further, I obtained a Temporary Resident ID and Researcher's Identity Card that I kept with me during my travels.

Figure 1: Temporary Ethiopian Residence ID (right) and Researcher's Identity Card (left) from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES)

Over the following months, anti-government protests forced the Ethiopian Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn (in power since 2012) to resign from office. In the first months of 2018, the political situation in Ethiopia remained tense, with ethnic clashes and protests in Addis Ababa, the southern region and along the Amhara and Tigray regional state. The situation only eased up when the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, selected by the ruling party, took office in April 2018 (Ylönen 2019; Ylönen and Meckelburg 2020).

[9] There were several conflicts taking place in Ethiopia: in the Oromo regional state (starting in April 2014) against the implantation of the so-called "Master Plan", which intended to expand Addis Ababa into the Oromia region. Further were newly arising conflicts along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border (June 2016). Because of these events, the Ethiopian government declared a "state of emergency" in 2016 that was extended until August 8, 2017. For an excellent analysis of the events see commentaries by Etana Habte at the Addis Standard (http://addisstandard.com/commentary-oromoprotests-oromo-street-africas-counter-protest-state/) and Réne Lefort on OpenDemocracy (https://www.opendemocracy.net/ren-lefort/ethiopia-s-crisis).

One of Abiy Ahmed's first decisions was to settle the differences with Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki, in power since 1991. Together they ended the situation of "no war no peace" that had existed between the two states since 2000, following the end of a violent two-year border conflict. In August 2018, for the first time in almost 18 years, the border between the two states was officially reopened (Müller 2019; Tronvoll 2020; Ylönen 2019). Most 'Afar groups, however, were not affected by the closed border. Throughout this period 'Afar groups had been crossing freely across the border between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean border war

From the end of the 19th century, several decisive developments transformed the permeable boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia, formerly known collectively as Abyssinia, into a border and barrier that restricted all cross-boundary trade. The beginning of Italian colonial occupation of Eritrea in 1890 separated the different 'Afar pastoral groups, Tigrinya-speaking groups and other ethnic groups living along, between and beyond the boundary of these two regions. The Italian period lasted until 1941, when British forces defeated Benito Mussolini's troops and ended the Italian East African Empire (AOI) that consisted of Eritrea, Ethiopia (occupied by the Italians since 1935-36) and Italian Somaliland (Hess 1966; Leonard 1982; R. Pankhurst 1999; Yemane Mesghenna 1988).

The British Military Administration of Eritrea

When the British took over Eritrea (and Italian Somalia) in 1941, they found chaos and despair. Italian resistance against the British continued until the mid-1940s when Italy surrendered in World War II. The British War Cabinet decided to keep Italian colonial laws and regulations. Initially, the British maintained all Italian-era personnel and administrative departments, except the police force, which they promptly disbanded. From 1943, the British allocated more personnel to Eritrea, which allowed them to assume exclusive decision-making responsibility while relegating the Italian administrators to middle-level positions. In 1947, a peace treaty ceded the administration of Eritrea to the four Allied powers: Britain, France, the

Soviet Union and the United States. However, the territory remained under British military administration until 1952 (Bereketeab 2007; Prunier 2015; Trevaskis 1960).

The British occupation of Eritrea was a social and political experiment that had long-lasting effects. The British founded civil and political institutions, such as trade unions, and allowed the formation of political parties. They introduced English language classes in schools, but at the same time they allowed the teaching of Tigrinya and Arabic to spread (Almedom 2006; Kelly 2014; Prunier 2015). In parallel, the British administration began a process of 'Eritreanisation', increasingly appointing Eritreans to subordinate posts in the colonial administration (Biziouras 2013; Gewald 2000).

In 1952, there were three possible futures for Eritrea. First, annexation by Ethiopia, a policy advocated by Ethiopia but initially opposed by the United Nations (UN) and the United States, who preferred an independent Eritrean state. Second, the formation of a 'Greater Tigray' uniting the Tigrinya-speaking groups in the Eritrean and Ethiopian highlands. In this scenario, the western lowlands would have fallen under Sudanese control. Third, the 'Bevin-Sforza Plan' (named after the British and Italian foreign ministers Ernest Bevin and Carlo Sforza) which proposed partitioning Eritrea: the western lowlands would be integrated into Sudan, and the Eritrean highlands and coastal region would be part of Ethiopia. Eventually, the UN General Assembly voted (Resolution 390 A (V)) to federate the autonomous entity of Eritrea with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930 – 1974). This outcome was against the will of the majority of Eritrea's population, which was not consulted in the decision (Adam Hussein 1994; Prunier 2015; Tekeste Negash 1997).

In 1952, Eritrea and Ethiopia formed the Ethiopian–Eritrean Federation, which lasted until 1962, when Ethiopia annexed Eritrea. The Eritrean population grew increasingly resentful of the Ethiopian monarchy and of the authoritarian socialist regime that followed under Mengistu Haile Mariam (r. 1974 – 1991). Between 1952 and 1991, several liberation movements, often organised along ethnic lines, fought for independence, first against Emperor

Haile Selassie and then against the Ethiopian socialist government, the Derg. The liberation war had especially long-lasting consequences for local communities Eritrean and Ethiopian boundary (Jacquin-Berdal and Mengistu 2006; Reid 2003; J. Young 1997).

Traveling between the ‘Afar and Tigray regional state, I met several former liberation fighters as well as soldiers of Derg government. One of my interlocutors was *Ato*[10] Mengesha, a general during for the Derg. He was a local business owner in Samara where I befriended him during my research.

Life between two violent frontiers

Ato Mengesha and I often shared my lunch and dinner. Born in the border area between Tigray and Eritrea, Ato Mengesha’s brothers had joined the liberation struggle to fight against the Ethiopian monarchy under Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974) and later against the socialist Government of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-1991). Ato Mengesha’s childhood, as he often remembered, was shaped by war and violence. Instead of joining the liberation movements against the government, he became a student at the Haile Selassie I University, the later Addis Ababa University. “I was a critical student and challenged the Government with my ideas”, Ato Mengesha once told me over dinner as we shared the Ethiopian flatbread [*injera*] and spicy meat sauce [*qey wot*]. Ato Mengesha remembered his German professor, who predicted in the 1980s that the socialist regime would not survive for more than 10 years because the underdeveloped regions in the South and West were not suited for the Socialist idea. “I will never forget these words”, Ato Mengesha said, “because he was right”.

Part of Ato Mengesha’s family fought for the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) and part for the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) (in Ethiopia). Despite fighting for different armies, his brothers were united in their struggle against a common enemy, the Derg. Ato Mengesha, on the other hand, joined the military of the Mengistu government and fought

[10] *Ato* is a polite form of address for an elderly person in Amharic, similar to “Mister” in English or “Herr” in German.

in the Government army for nine years until he became a three-star general. “I did not want Eritrea and Tigray to separate from Ethiopia”, he answered when I once asked him what led to his decision to join the Derg.

The Derg fell in May 1991, and Eritrea became an independent state in 1993 under President Isaias Afewerki, who still rules the country today. At the end of the war and the introduction of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, Ato Mengesha was imprisoned for several years. Reflecting on this time he once mentioned: “they did not brainwash me; it was more of a brain drain”. After serving his prison sentence he lived in many places in Ethiopia, then went to the Middle East to work. He decided to divide his time between the ‘Afar regional state, where he conducted business, and the outskirts of a small town in Tigray, where he built a house for him and his family.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean War (1998-2000)

The independence of Eritrea marked a second decisive period in the relation between the two countries. In 1997, the Eritrea government introduced the *Eritrean nakfa* as currency, replacing the Ethiopian birr. In the following year, a border incident in the strategically and economically unimportant town of Badme led to the Ethiopian-Eritrean Border War (1998-2000). Several authors have commented that the: the war was politicised by both sides. This reawakened a feeling of being a distinct (political) nation on the Eritrean side and fostered a sense of “Ethiopianness” ‘through the creation of an us-versus-them mentality (Abbink 2001; 2003; Bach 2014; Jacquin-Berdal and Mengistu 2006; Tronvoll 1998a). Jean-Nicholas Bach has argued that for the Ethiopian Government the war against Eritrea “meant resorting to broader federating symbols and pivotal events stressing the “unity” and solidarity of Ethiopian peoples” (Bach 2014, 8). The war certainly helped the Ethiopian government paint a picture of a strong “Ethiopianness”, an argument supported by Dominique Jacquin-Berdal and Aida Mengistu. They write that “in the midst of all the confusion and general scepticism about the ethnic federalism, the War against Eritrea seemed to have fostered a sense of common Ethiopian

identity" (Jacquin-Berdal and Mengistu 2006, 95).

As noted above, after coming to power in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed restored peace between the two countries. He reopened the border and was seen by many as a political saviour who brought peace and stability to the region. For orchestrating this rapprochement, Abiy Ahmed won the Noble Peace Price in 2019.[11]

Ethnic tensions and political instability: historical background

Ethiopia's thin layer of peace and stability brought about by Abiy Ahmed rested, however, on a deep ocean of political tension and ethnic hostility. The "national question" of ethnic belonging, and how to grant equal and shared participation to the diverse ethno-linguistic groups, had by that time dominated Ethiopia's political landscape at least since the unification of the country in late 19th century. It is the same question that manifested itself in the mid-20th century as student protests against the Ethiopian monarchy and its last Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974). With the socialist revolution of 1974, the monarchy and its political narratives that dictated the country's history for millennia crumbled into pieces. Under the Derg and its leader Mengistu Haile Mariam (r. 1974-1991) Ethiopia descended into a civil war. Liberation movements, organised mainly along ethno-linguistic lines, were founded in all parts of the country to fight for the right of self-determination against the socialist government (Baxter, Hultin, and Triulzi 1996; Clapham 2002; Crummey 1990; D. L. Donham 1986).

One of the leading fronts was the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that operated in north-eastern Ethiopia, along today's Tigray and 'Afar regional boundary. During my journeys along and beyond this boundary, I met former TPLF fighters who I introduce more closely in the following chapters.

Now, I want to provide more information about the history and ideological background of the TPLF. This is important as the TPLF took an active role in the post-conflict

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[11] At the end of 2020 a conflict between the Tigray regional state and the central government escalated. This analysis is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

reconstruction of Ethiopia after the end of the 17-year civil war period. Until 2018, the TPLF further dominated the Ethiopian political landscape.[12]

Historical and ideological background of the TPLF

The TPLF started their small insurgency in Northern in Northern Ethiopia in the 1940s and developed into the core of the Ethiopian government. Aregawi Berhe, a co-founder of the TPLF and member of the party's leadership for eleven years, comments that the TPLF was originally an "ethno-nationalist movement that aimed to secure the self-determination of Tigray within the Ethiopian polity" (Berhe 2004, 569). Resistance against the central Government in Addis Ababa rose in Tigray in the 1940s, when Haile Selassie's Government, together with the British Royal Air Force, attacked and destroyed the Tigray region, including its capital Mekelle.

The peasant uprising led by Haile Maryam Reda became known as "the first rebellion" [*qädamay wäyanä* in Tigrinya]. The following years saw a worsening of the relationship between the central Government and the TPLF. This was due to the Government's inability to act responsibly and lastingly on the famines that struck the region in 1958-59, 1965-66 and 1972-74 (Berhe 2009; J. Young 1997). The origins of the later TPLF can be traced back to the Tigrayan National Organization (TNO), and the Tigrayan University Students Association (TUSA) formed at Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa in the 1970s. Aregawi Berhe, who headed the TUSA for one year (1972-73) comments as follows on the ideological background of the time:

> Although class-based ideological orientation was prevalent among the student body, ethno-national mobilization was also a concomitant ideological stance in the students' movement. Marx's stand on the Irish national question - that it had to be resolved if the British proletariat were to advance to socialism - was recalled to justify the question of nationalities in Ethiopia. The theories of Lenin and Stalin on

[12] The political events that took place after 2018 are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

> the national question were also used as tools for combating national oppression in Ethiopia. In Leninist fashion, revolutionary students referred to Ethiopia as the 'prison house of nationalities' (Berhe 2004, 580).

It was only in the late 1980s that the TPLF turned to the concept of *abeyotawi democracy* [*revolutionary democracy*]. Originally, the basis for this concept was a far-left interpretation of Marxism-Leninism promoted by the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT), a political group led by the later Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi (1991-2012), and Abbay Tsehay. Jean-Nicholas Bach describes revolutionary democracy as a "bridge between pre-capitalist and socialist societies" (Bach 2011, 641).

Other scholars see revolutionary democracy as an ideology that opposes capital liberalism and democratic centralism, but endorses the fundamentals of liberal democracy (Abbink 2011; Bach 2011; Merera Gudina 2003). According to Jon Abbink, the concept can further be seen as a hybrid "derived from Leninism, infused with some democratic principles, and confronted with or applied to ethnic diversity in the country" (Abbink 2011, 602). The ideology is inspired by Lenin's revolutionary project during his fight for power against the Social Democratic Party in the Soviet Union in 1918, the principles of Mao's new democracy and the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the TPLF/EPRDF. To understand later developments, it is important to note that the term democracy generally has a different purport for the TPLF/EPRDF Government, one that greatly differs from its Western liberal counterpart. Revolutionary democracy is "based on communal collective participation and representation based on (forced) census", rather than on individual and pluralistic participation in the political process (Tronvoll 2011, 124).

With the end of the Cold War in 1991, the Derg lost the former Soviet Union as its main provider of military equipment. Eventually, it had no other option but to give in when the liberation fronts led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) marched into Addis Ababa in May 1991 and took the initiative at the transitional conference of July 1991. Members of the

Conference were mainly other liberation movements organized along ethnic lines, whereas multi-ethnic parties like the *Coalition of the Ethiopian Democratic Forces* (*COEDF*), which included the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (*EPRP*) and the *All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement* (*MEISON*), were excluded. According to Merera Gudina the TPLF "made sure to selectively invite weak political groups most of which were created overnight, and selectively excluded the actual or potential real power contenders from the process" (Merera Gudina 2011, 69).

Ethnic federalism: the Ethiopian model

In 1994, the Ethiopian government, led by a coalition of parties called the Ethiopian *People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)*, spearheaded by the TPLF under the leadership of Meles Zenawi (r. 1991-2012), reconstructed the country into nine regional areas along assumed cultural boundaries.

Decentralization with an ethno-linguistic criterion was perhaps necessary for state reconstruction, because the dominant political actors post 1991 were mainly ethnic-based liberation fronts, and also due to the fact that the political terrain of Ethiopian history had been riddled with ethnic conflicts. Such a justification was reaffirmed by the transitional president, also Ethiopian Prime Minister and leader of the TPLF until his death in 2012, Meles Zenawi, in an interview with Sarah Vaughan in 1994:

> From a purely legal point of view, what we were trying to do was to stop the war, and start the process of peaceful competition, peaceful expression of political opinion, and so forth. The key cause of the War all over the country was the issue of nationalities. Any solution that did not address them did not address the issue of peace and War. People were fighting for the right to use their language, to use their culture, to administer themselves. Therefore, without guaranteeing these rights it was not possible to stop the War or prevent another one coming up (Vaughan 1994, 4).

Several observers of Ethiopian politics believe that the implementation of ethnic federalism as a state-model has changed the perception of territory, borders and boundaries. Until today, this influences self- and group-identification processes in Ethiopia. Christopher Clapham, for example, writes that after the introduction of federalism in Ethiopia all ethnic groups "were now defined in terms of nationality, and their boundaries had to be drawn to coincide with the settlement patterns of each particular group" (Clapham 1996, 245). In his reflection on Ethiopia's ethnic federal experiment, Jon Abbink comments that ethnicity remains "the dominant rhetorical figure in political discourse" in Ethiopia and "has permeated people's identities and daily politics, whether they like it or not". Ethnicity, so his argument goes, has "inspired the governance model, the division and administration of the regional states, educational-linguistic policies and party politics" (Abbink 2011, 597). More recently, Markus Breines has stated that in Ethiopia ethnicity "remains a key source of controversy" and that the Ethiopian Government "politicised and essentialised ethnicity to an unprecedented extent by territorialising ethnicity and ascribing it to individuals" (Breines 2019, 13).

The political tensions in Ethiopia, and the lasting effect of the opening of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border, such as violent clashes, demonstrations and protests continued throughout my research period. I had to stay in bigger cities as certain roads were closed for travel, and my interlocutors advised me against returning to my field sites. The German Embassy, the British Foreign Office, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the School of Oriental of African Studies (SOAS) issued travel warnings for specific regions.

Researching identity politics, ethnicity and the use of political symbols in this highly emotional and conflict-laden political landscape required constant careful consideration.

8 Research reconsiderations: methods and sources

In light of the charged situation, I reconsidered my initial research questions and focused my project on the social dynamics of different groups between the 'Afar and Tigray regional boundary in north-eastern Ethiopia. Between September 2017 and January 2018, I rented a room from a Muslim family in Logiya, a small town about 8 km away from Samara, the capital of the 'Afar regional state. The capital of the 'Afar region was moved from Asaita (or Aussa), the seat of the 'Afar sultan of the region, in 2008, in an attempt to boost the economy and tourism around Samara. Samara is strategically located on one of the two asphalted roads connecting Ethiopia with Djibouti, the second of which leads from Dire Dawa to Djibouti via Shinille. A newly constructed road also connects Samara with Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.

Map 1: Map of north-eastern Ethiopia with showing the regional capitals of Mekelle (Tigray) and Samara ('Afar). My main research sites in the northern part of the 'Afar region are marked with a blue circle (map created with STEPMAP).

The University, Government offices, international NGOs and the Ethiopian Airlines office were all situated in Samara, while the majority of people lived in Logiya. Situated along the highway connecting Djibouti with Addis Ababa, the air was polluted by exhaust fumes from trucks transporting different commodities in both directions. Every morning I commuted by bus to Samara University, where I received language training in 'Afar-Af and supported the staff of the Anthropology Department. During my time in Samara, I visited Mekelle and other research locations in the northern part of the 'Afar region in the Barhale, Dallol and Konnaba districts, about three hours from Mekelle.

While discussing my research with interlocutors, friends and colleagues in Addis Ababa, Samara, Logiya and Mekelle, the salt caravan trade seemed an exciting lens to apply. The history of this salt trade would allow me to focus on regional interactions and the formation of group identities through highly specific, localised ethnography, rather than engaging with primordial notions of ethnicity in the national sphere. Further, there was a literature gap in the exploration of the salt trade. While the salt caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia had been researched from the Tigrayan side, the 'Afar perspective had only been considered peripheral (Smidt 2017; Tsegay B. Gebrelibanos 2009; 2011; 2016). There were no existing studies that explored the caravan trade from the 'Afar perspective.

Life in Samara and Logiya

My landlord during my stay in Logiya and Samara was Adam, an Ethiopian Muslim in his mid-30s, who had moved to Logiya with his family. Adam studied engineering in Addis Ababa, and because of the higher wages in the 'Afar region, Adam, his wife, Farha, and their two-year-old daughter bought a house and land in a quiet neighbourhood in Logiya. Adam and Farha, who worked as a clerk three days a week, helped me settle in. In return, I assisted with babysitting and gardenwork. Adam and Farha also introduced me to their friends and colleagues. Two of these, Khadir and Said, were 'Afar who lived in the same neighbourhood. They became essential interlocutors for my research.

Khadir and Said came from the same district in the northern ‘Afar region along the caravan trails. Khadir, in his mid-40s, had gone to boarding school in Addis Ababa in the 1990s and settled in Logiya to work for the regional administration. He was a proud ‘Afar, always wearing a *shiret*, a tube-like cloth resembling a *sarong*, commonly worn by Muslim men around the world and the conventional dress of ‘Afar men. Khadir’s favourite restaurant in Logiya was Dakoba, which is short for the three ‘Afar districts in northern ‘Afar: Dallol, Konnaba and Barhale. The owner exclusively served goat meat with rice. Dakoba became our regular meeting spot as Khadir did not like nor eat other Ethiopian food. “I only eat ‘Afar halal” he pronounced repeatedly. Khadir was the son of an influential clan and religious leader in his community and was well known and respected in Logiya. On his belt he always carried a *Nagant M1895*, a Soviet revolver that his grandfather had given to him. At first, Khadir appeared intimidating, and it took me a few weeks to get used to his demeanour. At heart, however, Khadir is one of the most considered, gentle and generous people I have ever met.

Said, who was kin relative of Khadir, had just graduated from a University in southern Ethiopia. Khadir got him a position working for the regional government in Samara. Said was in his late 20s, often dressed in jeans and more western style clothing. Together with his older brother, Mohammed, he rented a small room not far from Adam’s compound. Said, Mohammed and I would often meet in Logiya for dinner or tea in non-’Afar Ethiopian restaurants. With Said and Mohammed, who were both closer to my age, I could converse more freely than with Khadir on Ethiopian politics, life in Addis Ababa and religious matters.

Notebooks

Throughout my entire research, I kept notes from conversations and observation. I always carried with me a notebook size 15 x 9 cm. Over the course of my research, I produced seven notebooks, one diary and three language books that have been scanned and partly analysed during my research. These notes form the basis of my dissertation.

My notes followed a general logic, and I recorded entries under three categories 1)

information (from interviews and conversation with people); 2) observations; and 3) personal experiences (German: *Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse*), meaning how things appeared to me as I experienced them (Hüsken 2006). The advantage of this technique was its holistic character that allowed me to follow and reveal the interconnections between the gathered information, the observed and my reflections. The technique further provided a neat structure. The daily writing of notes and diary entries was to ensure progress, follow up cues and clues, bring about critical engagement with empirical data and reflect on previous mistakes and future corrections. The notebooks also allowed me to develop initial sketches of my arguments. The category personal experiences provided room for my inner life, my emotions, polemics, passages about loneliness, destabilization, isolation and angst. This form of writing is therapeutic and further helps the researcher to critically self-reflect. Reflected upon from a spatial, temporal and intellectual distance, the personal emotions of the research often revealed interesting insights. I made all people I worked with during my research aware of my notebook and asked for consent before taking notes. I asked interviewees to choose their own pseudonyms. I further used anonymization and de-identification for geographic settings, people and places. In my notes, I did not use the names of smaller villages and towns but instead used abbreviations or fictitious names.

Čat houses and informal interviews

Khadir and Said would often call me up around lunchtime, invite me to eat and then sit with me during the afternoon to chew *čat* (*catha edulis*). *Čat* (also written *khat, ch'at* or *qat*) is a green-leaved plant and mild stimulant containing alkaloid cathinone, endemic to Eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, where it has been consumed for hundreds – if not thousands – of years (Gebissa 2004; Kennedy 1987). Čat is legal in Ethiopia and is the country's second-biggest export product after coffee. *Č*at houses in Ethiopia, like coffee/tea houses and bars, can be considered as third or safe spaces (Oldenburg 1999), where people of different age groups, class, ethnicity, gender and social status come together and often engage in social, political and

philosophical discussions. Given the political landscape in Ethiopia since 1994, and based on my previous stays in the country, discussions about social and public matters are much less likely to unfold in public arenas than in more familiar settings including čat sessions, where people tend to know each other.

Čat can have adverse and destabilising effects, however. It can be dangerous, and if not reflected upon, it can have devastating effects on the self (individual). It can have ramifications on the social and economic livelihood of users. There are only a few long-term studies of the psychological effect of čat on the individual (Odenwald 2007; Odenwald et al. 2009; Yosef Zenebe, Garumma Tolu Feyissa, and Krahl 2015). However, there is undeniably a link between čat consumption and psychosis. But, as Klein et al. note, it is not čat "*per se* that is related to psychosis but particular patterns of use. Such patterns include early intake in life, and excessive use (that is more than two bundles a day)" (Klein, Jelsma, and Metaal 2012, 9). Like any other drug, overconsumption can lead to isolation and self-retreat, which in turns results in loneliness and depression.

Doubt, waiting in vain and gatekeepers

The initial three to four months of my research in Logiya (September to December 2018) were often difficult. Most people I knew in Logiya chewed čat and there was often nothing else to do during the day. To not lose contact with Said and Khadir, I often felt obliged to join them during their čat sessions. It was difficult to meet with people without chewing. Often several days would go by without me making any progress on my research. I would wait in vain and become anxious about my undertaking. These feelings were often intensified by chewing čat. As noted in my diary on November 26, 2017 after four days of chewing čat:

> I feel lonely and anxious – I'm unproductive and fear that there will be no prospect / no future. Merqana [the highness effect of čat] is strengthening this existential Angst I'm currently experiencing. I doubt myself, my research and my undertaking here in Ethiopia. I am afraid to achieve what I have set out to do. Will I ever be able

> to speak 'Afar-Af fluently? What will my research achieve? Thoughts of doubt and fear. I have spent the days unproductive in front of my smartphone, surrounded by people with whom I couldn't engage in a conversation – how did I even end up in this place with these people, I had never ever met before? No work, no reading to be done. It's paralyzing. Chewing "chat" makes the day pass by quicker in a hope for a better tomorrow. The four days now seem all the same to me. Every day new plan for tomorrow, but then… back to the green gold – more plans, more ideas, more worries. It accumulates until I'm kept in an interwoven knot of ideas that I cannot untie. The only solution seems to be: chew more "chat". This, however, just generates new ideas, which lead to more knots that I can't unravel. The knots tighten, fast and quickly. I'm no longer able to keep a focused mind and concentrate on my research. I lose track of time and my life. All ideas, my notes and plan as brilliant as they may appear to me, remain just thought experiments. I don't implement them and make myself believe that everything will be fine – everything! All problems will solve themselves and I can finally do… what? What exactly will I do?[13]

Many people involved in my research chewed čat regularly. Chewing with people and bonding over the experience of "highness" was important for my research experience.[14] The classical čat 'high' goes through several stages. Some ten to fifteen minutes into the process of mastication, the first wave of euphoria known in Amharic as 'merqana' kicks in. During 'merqana' people typically get highly engaged in a conversation and start plans. The stage of 'merqana' is normally followed by a quieter and introspective stage, where one is highly focused on one specific task. This focused phase includes reading, writing, playing an

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[13] For my entire research I kept a čat diary to explore and reflect upon the effect of the highness of "merqana" and to better deal with these episodes of doubt, angst and loneliness. I presented part of this reflection at the 20th International Conference of Ethiopia Studies (October 1-5, 2018, Mekelle, Ethiopia) under the title *The Farenjii who stares at Goats – Observations from the "Land of Märqana"*.

[14]

instrument, cleaning a room or organising documents. Towards the end of the consumption, the 'chipsi' takes over. During 'chipsi' one is normally restless and disoriented, and often nostalgic or sad. Depending on the quality and amount of čat, this cycle can take between five to eight hours. I started to chew čat as an exchange student at Addis Ababa University in 2010-11. I shared a small apartment in northern Addis Ababa with an Ethiopian student, and almost every Saturday we invited friends to join us. After a couple of months, this became a regular gathering, and we started to refer to Saturday as "Čaturday". During my other stays in Ethiopia, I chewed with different people, ranging from high-profile Ethiopian businessmen and politicians to the local street dweller. I chewed alone to study or together with friends, sometimes strangers, of different gender, age, social, religious and ethnic background. I chewed in the back rooms of small shops, 5-star hotels, run-down guest houses, minibuses, homes, on the street, and places where people engaged in illegal gambling, smoked shisha or watched pornography.

During the holy month of Ramadan in May-June 2018, I spent several nights chewing čat, reading passages from the Koran and discussing religion with some of my interlocutors. Part of my research is informed by these informal discussions in čat houses.

Khadir and Said saw themselves as the gatekeepers of my research. They helped me with my 'Afar-Af language training when my classes got cancelled and questioned me on the record cards that I prepared for studying. When I had a question about an aspect of the 'Afar culture that they could not answer, they would leave no stone unturned to find someone who could. In December 2017, when a German tourist was killed around the volcano of Erta Ale, in the 'Afar region bordering Eritrea, Khadir and Said saw it as their responsibility to provide me with the full story, because the tourist was one of my "country-men". Before any other news about the incident had reached the media, I was fully aware of all circumstances surrounding the death of the tourist, who together with an Ethiopian guide had been separated from the main

group and was hit by a stray bullet fired by fighters of the regional liberation movement, called *Ugogomo*. The incident happened a week before the celebration of Ethiopia's Nations, Nationalities and People's day. The attack was not aimed at the tourist, but rather at soldiers of Ethiopian-Eritrean border security who accompanied the tourist group.

Khadir and Said introduced me to former 'Afar salt traders, caravaners and men who grew up in the northern 'Afar regions of Dallol, Konnaba and Barhale (Dakoba for short) along the former trails of the salt caravans. Friends and clan relatives invited me to travel and visit places in Dallol and Konnaba and I undertook occasional shorter trips (3-7 days) from Mekelle.

Khadir was further concerned about how my research would portray the 'Afar. Both Khadir and Said urged me early on to be cautious about whom I talked to about what. Said once mentioned to me that "among the 'Afar, information is passed quickly, and you have to be careful with whom you share what, Tillo!"[15] He added that "blood and clan relations can easily reveal someone's identity among the 'Afar, and you have to make sure that you do not pass on false information".

During this period of *deep hanging out* with Khadir and Said, I became increasingly conscious that the Ethiopian political landscape had provoked political tensions and animosities between 'Afar and non-'Afar groups along the 'Afar-Tigray regional boundary and between that and the Eritrean border. The death of the German tourist was just one of many examples. Given the intimacy that developed between Khadir, Said and I, and their willingness to share contacts and introduce me to their networks, I changed my research to the 'Afar perspective of the salt trade. I moved further away from my initial research topic, "The construction and maintenance of cultural and ethnic identities along and beyond the 'Afar / Tigray regional

[15] In Amharic, my name sounds like the term for "worm" or "little bug", which often leads to laughter, but also breaks the ice, when I introduce myself. People in Ethiopia generally called me Tillo to avoid confusion. Since my time as a student at Addis Ababa University (2010-2011), friends have called me "Tilahun", a common Ethiopian name meaning "being there for someone". Some 'Afar, having trouble with my name, called me Imran. In certain places, I used my second name Jakob (a name also found in Ethiopia) when introducing myself, to avoid lengthy discussions. However, most people called me Tillo or Tilahun.

Boundary in North-East Ethiopia", and focused on one specific district in northern ‘Afar along the former salt caravan route as my primary research site.

In December of 2018, Khadir introduced me to Yusuf, who, according to Khadir, I needed to talk to for my research. Little did I know that Yusuf would become not only a collaborator on my research but also a close friend who deeply shaped my perspective on life.

Yusuf had attended boarding school with Khadir in Addis Ababa and over the past ten years had worked for several international mining companies and tour agencies in the ‘Afar Depression and along the camel trails. From my conversation with him, it became apparent that the caravan trade was currently under considerable threat and might disappear. The caravan trade had been in steady decline since trucks started to transport the salt from the salt basin of the ‘Afar depression ten years earlier. Trucks were faster and could load more salt than any caravan. In the following months, Yusuf and I travelled to the communities in northern ‘Afar to speak to former caravaners, government representatives, clan and district leaders and other community leaders, members from the Bureau of Culture and Tourism and the head of the local ‘As ‘Ale Salt Association in Barhale. They all confirmed Yusuf's and my suspicion that the caravans had no chance of surviving much longer. From a strictly economic point of view, the caravaners no longer generated income, and it was surprising that caravans had kept going at all, let alone for such a long time.

Narrative interviews

With the permission of and in correspondence with clan and religious leaders, Yusuf and I documented *episodic life histories* and conducted narrative interviews with key interlocutors. These histories and interviews are understood as ethnographic encounters that differ in theory and method from what oral historians do, as they combine a focus on personal narratives and the documentation of behavioural patterns as well as the setting and the environment, all of which leave room for interpretation for the researcher (Bernard 2011; Leonardo 1987; Spradley 1980; Stocking 1966). In addition, *episodic life histories* allowed me

to study the changing perceptions of the regional Other in connection to the ‘Afar salt trade and political developments as they unfolded during my research. Beyond this, the two methods of *episodic life histories* and narrative interviews left room for experimental approaches such as using memory aids (videos and photos) to trigger certain memories from which a dialogue would emerge (Evans and Jones 2011). We chose both methods as they allowed us to “reveal multiple truths apparent in others’ lives” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 4), however *partial* and incomplete.

During my research, I worked closely with Yusuf, who acted as my translator and interpreter. Yusuf had previously helped facilitate documentary projects for National Geographic and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). With the support of salt traders and communities along the former camel paths, we decided to document the journey of a caravan train through film.

9 Filmmaking for fieldwork

An important aspect of my research was the planning and making of an ethnographic documentary about the journey of a caravan from a small village in the north of the ‘Afar region to the salt flats in the ‘Afar Depression. From the beginning, the documentary was a collaborative undertaking, and those involved in the documentary were involved in all phases of its making (pre-production, production and post-production).

From the projector room to making ethnographic documentaries

My interest and first experiments with film date from 2005. Between 2005 and 2007 and again during 2009, I worked as a full-time projectionist in an arthouse cinema in my hometown in southern Germany. I started out at the popcorn machine and sold tickets before professional projectionists trained me to operate a *Kinoton FP 30 D 35mm Cinema Projector*. This was before the digital revolution. Documentaries and movies were still shot on 35 mm celluloid film. Movies arrived at the cinema in separate reels. My tasks as projectionist included analogously putting the reels in the right chronological order using a film splicer (or film

joiner).[16] Companies produced commercials, trailers and advertisements on 35 mm celluloid, which needed to be added to feature films.

Heaving the reels onto the projector and changing films often needed to be done by two people. Compared to modern-day light-weight cinema cameras and digital memory cards, USB sticks and cloud-storing services, the combined film reels of a feature film could measure up to 4000 m of film, equal to a run time of 2 hours and 43 minutes, and weigh up to 15 kg.[17]

Around that time, I started experimenting with photography and video. I used the analogue, digital single-lens reflex Minolta camera from my mother to understand composition, lighting and framing. Before joining university, I took several film workshops and editing classes in Munich. Cinema, photography and film always remained an integral part of my life and I started to use photography and video to document my life, work and travels in South Africa and across the African continent (2007 to 2009) and during my stays and travels in Ethiopia (2010-11, 2012 and 2014/15).

First contact: engagement with ethnographic film

I first came in contact with visual anthropology and ethnographic film during my exchange semester at Addis Ababa University in 2010-11. Susanne Epple, a German filmmaker and anthropologist, taught a course on visual anthropology as part of the Anthropology undergraduate degree. The course focused primarily on the history of ethnographic film from its inception to the early 2000s. I also completed courses with the Japanese anthropologist and

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[16] In early years of cinema in the 1920s, assembling reels, and cutting and editing film was primarily done by young working-class women. During the silent era, the job of the editor was often unacknowledged and uncredited because the work was compared to sewing, weaving or stitching, which was considered an uncreative process. Frances Flaherty, the wife of Robert Flaherty (*Nanook of the North, 1922*) and Yelizaveta Svilova, the wife of the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera, 1929*) were the first female editors. While their husbands are well-known and praised for their films, the work and contribution of Frances Flaherty and Yelizaveta Svilova remain largely unacknowledged. It was only when film and sound where synchronized that men took over the editing work (Meuel 2016; Warren 2019).

[17] In 2007, the three arthouse cinemas of the region, all belonging to the same owner, started a film festival that has been running for 14 consecutive years. In 2007 and 2009, I was part of the organising committee. I had the chance to meet, interview and talk with different German-speaking filmmakers, directors, producers and actors. In particular, I was drawn to the films and documentaries of post-war German directors of Werner Herzog and Volker Schlöndorff. Both were initially part of the New German Cinema generation, established in the 1960s and early 1970s, that has influenced German ethnographic cinema (Knight 2004; Oksiloff 2001).

filmmaker Itsushi Kawase during my graduate studies in Hamburg (2013-2016). The films discussed in the course were explicitly concerned with Ethiopia or directed by Ethiopian filmmakers and anthropologists.

My primary engagement with ethnographic films was, however, practical rather than theoretical. During my stays in Ethiopia, I had the privilege to work with experienced directors, cameraman, editors and ethnographic filmmakers. During my PhD research (2017-2018), I assisted and learned first-hand from the ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists Ivo Strecker, Itsushi Kawase, Mitiku Gebrehiwot and Tesfahun Haddis. I accompanied all four into the field during the making of their ethnographic films and observed them filming and editing. Additionally, from September to December 2018, the first months of my fieldwork, I worked as a second cameraman and assistant on two ethnographic documentaries, *Dancing Grass. Harvesting Teff In The Tigray Highlands* (Gebrehiwot 2018) and *Abraham & Sarah II: Hosting The Gundagundo Pilgrims* (Haddis 2019).[18]

Filmmaking and ethnographic writing

Using a camera during fieldwork allowed me to engage with experiences as they unfolded in real-time. Compared to pen and paper, the classical tools of the anthropologist's enquiry, a camera can document social action as it unfolds. The processes involved in making an ethnographic film, including the editing process, so I believe, are a different form of anthropological theory-making. The work in an editing suite offers possibilities of a different kind of storytelling in anthropology compared to written ethnographic text. Editing can, therefore, also serve as analysis.

My ethnographic documentary was to conform with the norms associated with anthropological fieldwork, including participant observation (Henley 2000; Henley and Flores

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[18] Both films are part of the *Guardians of Productive Landscape – Film Series* developed by Günther Schlee and Ivo Strecker at the German Max Planck Institute, Halle/Saale. They are available to buy or rent from the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Player.

2009; Ruby 2000). I used a small crew and rented the camera and sound equipment as well as a stabiliser from friends in Mekelle. Using this specific camera gear was a conscious production choice. I wanted to use walk and talk interview techniques so as not to disrupt the natural flow of events and daily routines (Evans and Jones 2011; Pink 2006). I regard recording video and audio while walking with people as a form of both *inscription* and *description*. This technique, to quote Sarah Pink further,

> offers opportunities for viewers to engage empathetically with both the idea and the feeling of moving forward in a world, and thereby to gain a sense of knowing through participation (rather than through merely watching) (Pink 2011, 148).

Filming of this documentary, *Arho – The 'Afar Salt Trade of North-Eastern Ethiopia* – took place in May 2018. During the remaining month of my research, I was able to get a first rough cut that I presented and discussed with the communities involved. Until the end of my research in October 2018, I used clips and photographs from the documentary as visual props for other interviews.

After making the film, I created rough cuts on my laptop and returned to the people and communities involved in the making of the documentary. I further shared the footage with Khadir and Said in Logiya and other interlocutors in Mekelle and Addis Ababa. After I returned to London, I continued the editing process on my own. I took an immersive 12-day editing class at Filmmaking 4 Fieldwork under the editing advice of Andy Lawrence and Kieran Hanson. I shared my new edits with Yusuf and other members via VIMEO, an online streaming platform, for comments and feedback, and allowed them a right to veto the film. I reflect further upon the making of this documentary in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

My ethnographic research and especially the making of the documentary early on became a collaborative undertaking. Yusuf, Khadir, Said and other members of the Barhale community were involved in all phases of making this documentary (pre-production,

production and post-production). I felt that my ethical responsibility lay first and foremost with Yusuf, Ibrahim and my interlocutors in Logiya, Samara and Dakoba.

Chapter II: Geographic and social setting: entangled landscapes of north-eastern Ethiopia

Those who make journey/travel together, knows each other better than those who live in the same home.

'Afar proverb

Walk from one place to another or approach it from a different direction and everything will change. Things that loomed large in your visual field may become small, or look different. What was at the centre may now be on the periphery; what could be seen has now disappeared, and new horizons have come into view.

Christopher Tilley
British Anthropologist

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From the centre of town, I take the road leading north past the long-distance bus stop which connects Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, with the surrounding areas. On mornings like this, travelling passengers cross the road unattentively between moving cars and departing buses. I have to slow down, drive carefully. But this lets me observe the crowded scene. Small, navy blue three-wheeled taxis [*bajaj*] navigate swiftly between the swarm of people, buses and coaches to drop off passengers for their journey. Travellers buy snacks and water bottles off wooden wheelbarrows from road-side vendors before entering through the gate of the bus station. Drivers, conductors and ticket sellers shout out the destination of different buses parked in the compound "Maychew!", "Dessie!", "Kombolcha!". After the bus station, I turn right into a cobble-stoned alleyway. I stop in front of a hotel at the end of the path. I am here to pick up Yusuf, who over the past months has become a close friend and primary interlocutor for my research. Today, we plan to drive from Mekelle to Barhale, the district capital of zone two of the 'Afar region and historically the most important node for the salt trade. *Gifta* Ibrahim, a friend of Yusuf, has invited us to stay with him there.

I wait a few minutes then give Yusuf a missed call on his phone. The clock on the car

radio shows 8:17 am. After about ten minutes, he comes out of the hotel with his small rucksack. He sinks into the passenger seat. “Let us stop for coffee somewhere on the road, Tillo”, Yusuf jokes as he closes his eyes and dozes off.

Away from the bus station, and the line of small hotels and guest houses, the road meanders through an industrial district with car workshops and garages; an area just awakening, the first big red construction trucks pulling in for service. Small breakfast and coffee houses are already open for business, and a few customers, wrapped in warm jackets and scarfs, are enjoying their meals outside on the small verandas. It is January, which means winter [*bega*] or dry season in the Tigray region. In Mekelle, about 7000 ft (2000 m) above sea level, temperatures in January can reach 20 to 25 degrees Celsius, but mornings are quite chilly, often accompanied by frost.

The road leads on, winding up the mountain that watches over Mekelle at its northern flank. The way up twists and bends. I cannot see around the next curve. I hoot to warn descending minibuses with commuters from the surrounding villages and trucks to stay in their lane. I am caught behind a slow-moving truck transporting iron rods and other construction materials. I look out the passenger window, past the sleeping head of Yusuf. From up here, I have an unobstructed view of Mekelle lying in the valley below. My gaze falls on the old castle and compound of Emperor Yohannis, who ruled this region in the late 19th century (1872-1889) and is buried in the *Medane Alem Church*, one of the many churches in Mekelle. Northwest of the castle is Mekelle’s Muslim quarter with the oldest mosque in the city where Yusuf and I prayed during Ramadan. Across the central part of town overlooking Mekelle from the southwest stands the martyrs’ memorial monument [*hawalti*]. The memorial commemorates the freedom fighters of the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) who lost their lives in the Ethiopian Liberation War (1974-1991). Next to the memorial monument sits the business campus of Mekelle University, with the History, Language and Sociology Department where I studied for a year in 2014-2015.

I can finally overtake the truck and drive over the last small foothill. As soon as we get to its peak, the green, vast fields of the Ethiopian highland plateau appear. I roll down the window and breathe in the cold, fresh morning air. Barhale is now a three-hour drive away.

Why this road matters

I first drove the road from Mekelle to Barhale with my partner in a 4 x 4 Land Rover Jeep as part of a tourist group to explore the salt flats of the 'Afar Depression. During my research, I subsequently travelled this road countless times for longer and shorter research stays in the three districts of the northern parts of zone two of the 'Afar region, Dallol, Konnaba and Barhale (Dakoba for short). Driving myself, like on this January morning, in a friend's borrowed 5th generation 1980s white Toyota Corolla, picking up hitchhikers along the way, or together with Yusuf in or in crowded minibuses, or in a rented car with a driver, I became increasingly conscious of the slowly changing geographic and social landscapes along this road that today links the Tigray and 'Afar regional states. Historically, the salt caravans moved from the salt basin of the 'Afar Depression to the Ethiopian highland plateau and from there either north towards Massawa, the most important trading port on Eritrea's Red Sea coast, or south to the salt markets of Mekelle and the surrounding areas. Today there are almost no more caravans along this route. However, the road remains vital for merchants who use predominantly Japanese ISUZU trucks to transport the salt bars from Barhale to Mekelle from where they sell it to other parts of Ethiopia.

The stories of my journeys along this road and the conversations I had with Yusuf, friends, hitchhikers and strangers during coffee breaks between Mekelle and Barhale are tone-setting for this chapter. I introduce the ethnohistorical background of the different communities that currently live along the boundary between the 'Afar and Tigray regional states. The boundary came into existence in 1994/5 with the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

What interests me here are the histories embedded in the villages and towns along and

beyond the roadside, especially those that are interwoven with different narratives of the Horn of Africa: the foundation of the modern Ethiopian state under Emperor Menelik II in 1890, the Italian colonial occupation of Eritrea (1890-1942), the rule of Haile Selassie and the downfall of the Ethiopian monarchy (1930-1974), the military revolution of 1974, the violent episodes of Ethiopia's liberation war (1974-1991), the more recent history of the independence of Eritrea (in 1993), the formation of the Ethiopian Democratic Republic (1994-1995) and the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war (1998-2000). These events are vital as they have shaped, and continue to shape, the relationship between the various ethno-linguistic and religious groups along the modern regional boundary of Tigray and 'Afar. These different narratives and historical actors have influenced the salt caravan trade as well. I regard them as essential and bring them into my writing when relevant. However, this is not a historical dissertation, and in the following sub-sections I focus my discussion on those aspects of past political events that are most manifest in the unfolding landscape.

My intention in this chapter is to familiarise the reader with the geographic and social setting of my fieldwork. I gradually introduce the histories and different narratives of this part of Ethiopia and north-eastern Africa. By the end of the journey, when we have reached Barhale, I want the reader to feel comfortable with the changing landscapes of the region. Then I will be better able to introduce Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and the other members of the 'Afar communities I worked with during research. Therefore, I want you to be continuously attentive to changing geographic and human landscapes that I reveal along the road.

10 From Mekelle to Agula: Tigrinya-speaking groups

Yusuf is still sleeping while I drive along the open fields of the highland plateau. There is less traffic now. The road that was the lifeline of the city now appears as a mere dash in this open landscape. I drive through a few smaller villages that have just awoken. Shop keepers remove the metal protections from the windows and move wooden boxes with fruit and

vegetables, and sacks filled with grain and rice outside for display. Through my sideview mirrors, I see small groups of people sitting together drinking coffee and tea on either side of the narrow sidewalks. The smell of freshly roasted coffee beans streams into the open window and arouses my senses. Today is Sunday. Along the roadside between two villages, men, women and children are pilgriming in their white festive scarfs to a monastery that lies on top of a tiny hill.

Highland, lowlands and productive landscapes

This part of Ethiopia is known as the Tigrayan highland plateau that is part of the Great African Rift Valley. It stretches from Eritrea's Red Sea coast southwards through Ethiopia to Kenya. In Ethiopia, the altitude ranges from - 168 m in the 'Afar Depression and the salt basin to about 2000 m in Mekelle. Central Ethiopia has the country's highest peak, Ras Dashen, with an altitude of about 4642 m. The capital, Addis Ababa, lies above 2000 m and Lake Turkana on the Ethiopian-Kenyan border, at 100 m. The characteristics and features of this environment have led to a distinction in Ethiopia's economic and political history between either *highlands* and *lowlands*, or *highland core* and *highland and lowland peripheries*. This distinction is represented in physical terms by the agro-ecological lands of livelihood of pastoralists along the escarpments of the Great Rift Valley (Clapham 2017; James et al. 2002; Markakis 2011).

Christopher Clapham notes that in the political and historical context of northeast Africa, to make the distinction between highlands (core) and lowlands (periphery) is to

> ascribe a privileged position to the 'core', which has provided an understandable source of grievance to the peoples of the other area [the lowland peripheries], whom it implicitly degrades to a lowlier status. Not only are the highlands, and especially the Northern plateau, the geomorphological feature that most clearly distinguishes the Horn from other parts of Africa, but they have historically created the power structures to which the peoples of the peripheries have been, and to large extent

> continue to be, subordinated, and to which, therefore, they have to react (Clapham 2017, 9).

As other scholars have also pointed out, the *highlands* constituted the political and cultural core (centre) of Ethiopia or Abyssinia as the region was known until the Italian occupation under Benito Mussolini in 1935. Orthodox Christianity and the Ethio-Semitic languages Amharic and Tigrinya became the languages of power of the ruling nobility, aristocrats, kings and emperors. Traditionally, ox-plough farming and subsistence agriculture are the predominant modes of livelihood production in the area. Land and its produce were the cornerstone of the economic activity of this region. The majority of Ethiopian rulers and much of the nobility relied on tribute and land taxation.

An examination of the Ethiopian nation-building process from a purely political point of view reveals that the peripheries (lowlands) lying outside the political centre (highlands) were culturally ignored, economically exploited, powerless and marked by "[their] marginal position in the power structure of the state" (Markakis 2011, 7). Proponents of this centre-periphery perspective further argue that the nation-building and state formation processes of the regions have to be explored from the point of view of different political hierarchies. Jon Abbink, for example, says, the "centre-periphery relation should not be based on geographical or cultural criteria", but instead has to be explored from "a model of the structure and distribution of political power" (Abbink 2002, 157). The centre-periphery discourse, even though it is based on an assumed "asymmetric relationship of coercion, domination, dependence, resistance or negotiation" (Bach 2016, 275), is nonetheless important as it acknowledges the dynamic relation between the core and the peripheries. Bach further argues that the "centre/periphery dichotomy is still determinant" in the "interpretations of history and state building that shape today's Ethiopia" (Bach 2016, 276). The problem with this approach is that it assumes that all "peripheries" are constituted in the same way. In addition, peripheralness (or remoteness) is a relative condition. It "depends on where one chooses to

locate the center" (Saxer 2013, 426), as Martin Saxer for example shows in his work on the salt trade in Upper Humla in Nepal on the border with China.

In the Ethiopian case, Jean-Nicolas Bach describes the centre-periphery relationship by saying "that these 'peripheries' were often former political centres that actively took part in the (re)negotiation of the national political order, among the plural state and non-state actors" (Bach 2016, 281). The centre-periphery approach may make good sense to historians, economists and political scientists. But it is less rewarding for anthropologists when it comes to people's concrete experience of the landscapes they inhabit, and their attendant sense of self and sense of belonging.

From an anthropological point of view, the concept of landscape is more useful as it offers a fresh perspective on the self-identifying processes that are linked but not limited to different socio-political and economic dynamics occurring over time and space. As Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum for example say:

> Landscapes are not inert; they are an active presence in which the identity of landscapes and the identities of people that inhabit them are indelibly intertwined so that they co-produce each other in dynamic ways that always change through time (Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017, 288).

The memories of individuals and entire peoples and their sense of temporality are an essential part of their engagement with the landscapes they inhabit. To quote Christopher Tilley once more:

> People routinely draw on their stocks of knowledge of the landscape and the locales in which they act to give meaning, assurance and significance to their lives. These qualities of locales and landscapes give rise to a feeling of belonging and rootedness and a familiarity, which is not born just out of knowledge, but of concern that provides ontological security. They give rise to a power to act and a power to relate

> that is both liberating and productive. The relationship of individuals and groups to locales and landscape also has important perspectival effects. The experience of these places is unlikely to be equally shared and experienced by all, and the understanding and use of them can be controlled and exploited in systems of domination (Tilley 1994, 26).

Different ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious groups inhabit and construct different meanings and experiences from the changing landscapes along and beyond the road that leads from Mekelle northwards further into the Tigray region towards Eritrea and eastwards into ‘Afar land. In the following sections I provide an overview of these different groups.

Driving on: ethno-linguistic and religious groups in Tigray and Eritrea

It is 9:11 am now and the sun slowly, but surely, journeys along the morning sky. Passing the monastery on my right, I continue the road further northwards. Yusuf is still asleep next to me in the passenger seat. If we followed this road northwards, it would lead us deeper into the Tigrayan highland plateau—a region known for its ancient monasteries and rock-hewn churches, some dating back to the 9th century AD. Along the road, about 10 km north of a town called Wukro is the Negash Mosque, built in the 7th century AD. The mosque was renovated relatively recently (2018) with funds from the Turkish government to honour the followers of the Prophet Mohammed. They came to this region in the seventh century to seek refuge from the persecution in Mecca. The Negash Mosque [*Negash Amedin Mesqid*], named after then Abyssinian King of the region, is one of the oldest mosques in the region and an important pilgrimage destination for Ethiopian and international Muslims. The Muslim salt traders and other Muslim ‘Afar I worked with during my research often referred to Negash Mosque as the second Mecca. In the 9th century followers of the Prophet Mohammed, including one of his daughters, migrated from the Arabian Peninsula to the Negash Mosque. They travelled through present-day Konnaba district of the ‘Afar region. Several of the followers died. This history of Islam in north-eastern ‘Afar is still unexplored and would require further research. A study of

the Negash Mosque and the pilgrims add another layer to the history of north-eastern Ethiopia. It would counter some of the Ethiopian centre-state narratives and the perception of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea as a primarily Orthodox-Christian region.

When talking about modern-day Tigray and Eritrea, it is critical to differentiate between various religious, toponyms, ethnonyms and linguistic terms. There is no clear-cut differentiation between ethnic 'Eritreans' and ethnic 'Tigrayans' that could serve for further analysis. Regarding Tigray and Eritrea today, there are (at least) three different groupings that should be differentiated from each other.

First, the English terms "Tigray" and 'Tigrayans', as well as "Eritrea" and "Eritreans", can be used to describe all the people living in the Tigray region or Eritrea respectively. These terms, however, do not reflect the ethnic composition in both regions, which are inhabited by other groups that do not necessarily identify as "Tigrayans" or "Eritreans".[19] The most common term is *Tigrinya-speakers* or *Tigrinya-speaking groups*, used to describe the linguistic identity of people living in Tigray and Eritrea. Most people in Tigray and Eritrea speak the language Tigrinya, an Ethio-Semitic language of the Afroasiatic language phyla, as a first or second language. There are, however, slight phonetical differences between Eritrean Tigrinya and Tigray Tigrinya. This is why the German ethno-historian Wolbert Smidt refers to Tigrinya-speakers in Eritrea and Ethiopia as an "ethno-regional community" rather than a distinct ethnic group (Smidt 2010a, 908).

The second distinctive grouping is indicated by the self-denomination *tegaru* (*tegraway* masculine singular, *tegrawit* for feminine singular) in Tigrinya. This term refers to people of Tigrayan descent and is a category which may or may not be based on history, language, culture,

[19] Other groups include the *Irob*, *Kunama*, *Djeberti*, *Tsellim Bet* and the *'Afar* and the *Saho* who settled along the regional boundary between Eritrea, Tigray and 'Afar (Van der Beken 2015; Population Census Commission 2008; Smidt 2010a; 2010b).

territory, or genealogy. The term *habesha* is a more inclusive term commonly used in Tigray and Eritrea and by most Tigrinya-speakers. Amharic- and Gurage-speaking Ethiopians, in central and southern Ethiopia also use the term *habesha* as self-denomination, which usually translates as "Abyssinian" (Habecker 2012). The term *habesha*, as Smidt argues, provides "all the emotional promise of belongingness and closeness typical of an ethnonym" (Smidt 2010b, 66).[20]

Third and last, beyond the different ethno-linguistic and toponymical denominations, there are many different characteristics that people may regard as important for constructing Tigrayan or Eritrean identities. These include genealogical communities, religious associations that follow certain saints, village assemblies, strong network and support organisations in urban areas and traditional social forms of organisations in the rural context, as well as church as and neighbourhood communities a discussion which is beyond the scope of this dissertation (F. D. Bauer 1985; J. Hammond 2002; Smidt 2010a; 2010b; Tronvoll 1998b). The following map provides an ethnolinguistic and political overview of Tigray and Eritrea.

[20] In Arabic, the migration to Abyssinia, when the followers of the Prophet Mohammed fled from the persecution of the ruling Quraysh of Mecca in the 6th century, is called *al-hijra 'ilā al-habaša [migration towards Habesha]*. Many Muslim 'Afar I worked with during my research referred to this as the *First Migration* [al-*hijrah*]. In their book *The Life of Muhammad: a Translation of Isḥāq's Sīrat rasūl Allāh*, Ibn Isḥāq and Ibn Hishām write "The Prophet Mohammed realized that he could not protect his followers from the attacks, and said 'go to the Habesha, there is a Christian king there. There is justice in his kingdom. Habesha is the land of truth. Therefore, go there until we achieve victory with the help of Allah" (Ibn Hishām and Ibn Isḥāq 2001).

Map 2: Ethno-linguistic and political map of Tigray and Eritrea. (Smidt 2010b, 60).

We save a journey further into the Tigrayan highlands to explore the socio-cultural dynamics among the different groups living along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border for another time. Today, we are driving along one of the former trails of the salt caravans heading towards Barhale close to the salt flats of the ‘Afar depression. After an hour of driving along this road, we reach a two-way junction, at a town called Agula.

Agula: the Tigrayan salt traders [arhotot]

At the Agula junction, just after a small abandoned-looking gas station, I take a right, eastwards onto the road leading through town. Cows, donkeys, goats, sheep and children have turned the wide road into a pedestrian zone. I have to slow down, now gently using my horn as

a cautionary notice of my presence. People move out of the way unhurriedly. Agula, which is part of the Enderta region of the Tigray province, emerged in the past as an essential salt trading centre; caravan traders coming from the ‘Afar Depression and those from the Tigray highlands met and did business here. Throughout Ethiopia, salt caravans are known as *arho*. *Arho* simply means ‘caravan’ in the ‘Afar language. While originally an ‘Afar term, *arho* is also used, in the Tigray region, as a toponym (name of a place) for the ‘Afar desert basin. The term *arhotay* (pl. *arhotot*) in Tigrinya further denotes Christian salt traders and leaders of salt caravans. Historically, the *arhotay* formed a socio-economic subgroup in this region. Since the decline of the caravan trade, many former *arhotay* are now invested in other businesses in Mekelle or have bought trucks to transport the salt bars from the ‘Afar Depression to Mekelle (Tsegay B. Gebrelibanos 2011; Smidt 2017; Helina S. Woldekiros 2019). The memories and legacies of the former salt traders in this region are, however, still very much alive.

One of my interlocutors in Mekelle, Che, who became a close friend in 2014, traced his ancestry back to this region when I asked him about his past.

> I am not from Mekelle. My father was an *arhotay* from Enderta and I am a child of Enderta [*enderta lidj*]. He [my father] told me about his journey to the salt flats. At night in the desert, they had to sleep with their heads facing west, so in the morning they could remember their way back. The heat was very strong, and it was dangerous.

Che does not identify as “Tigrayan”, but in our conversation referred to the occupation of his father, who was a Christian salt trader [*arhotay*] from the Enderta region, to construct his own identity. The reference to Enderta is particularly interesting. Che and his wife Haregu, both in their mid-30s, now run shops in Mekelle. During my stay in Mekelle in 2014-15, Che and I spent much time together. At the time, Haregu owned a small coffee house and restaurant in the town centre, a regular meeting spot for Che’s friends and relatives. Between 2015 and 2018,

Che and Haregu moved to Addis Ababa for business, but in mid-2018, during the political unrests in Addis Ababa that also targeted people from Tigray, they returned to Mekelle.

Between my first time in Mekelle in 2014 and my return in 2018 I noticed a shift in how Che and other friends spoke about their feeling of regional and cultural belonging. While there was a strong ethos of being "Tigrayan", it became increasingly apparent that the group of young urban men I spent time with in Mekelle, more frequently referred to the regions their fathers were born in. Like Che, other friends began saying things like "my family is actually from Adigrat [a Tigrayan town close to the Eritrean border] and I am Agame [referring the region's name], not from Mekelle". Other friends of Che and myself with whom I shared my research would often relate stories of their father or grandfather from Agame or the Enderta region. Growing up around the former salt caravan trade, Che and his family had many ʻAfar friends. His father formed some of these friendships, as Che explained. Che still speaks basic ʻAfar – mostly insults though – and used to tell me:

> Why do you always go there [to ʻAfar]. Why don't you stay here with us and I tell you everything you need to know for your research? Let me tell you how it is between the ʻAfar and us [referring to himself as Enderta again]: either the ʻAfar love you, or they hate you. If they love you, they really love you, but if they hate you, they really hate you.

Because of his father's relations, Che kept in contact with some of the relatives of his father's ʻAfar trading partners. I return to the specific trade and social relations between ʻAfar and groups from the Tigrayan highland plateau in Chapter 4.

Importance of the salt bars [amolé]

In Agula, ʻAfar traders would exchange the salt bars [*amolé*] for the highlanders' agricultural produce (especially food grains). The income generated from the salt bars further enabled rulers of this region to keep large armies. As Mordechai Abir wrote,

> with the growing importance of firearms in the 19th century, the rulers of Tegré [Tigray], taking advantage of their position in the highlands and using the income from the salt trade, were able to acquire the largest stock of firearms which any one ruler in Ethiopia possessed. … It is quite evident that the regular and continuous supply of amolé was vital to Ethiopia's economy and to the administration and government of the different provinces (1966, 4)

In the 1930s, the Italian colonial administration, which had occupied Eritrea since 1890, constructed an all-weather road from Asmara to Addis Ababa via Mekelle. Italy's plans for colonial imperialist expansion always foresaw the economic penetration and occupation of Ethiopia through concessionary and trading companies. The road led through Agula and sped up the caravan trade to the port of Massawa on the Red Sea Coast in Eritrea (R. Pankhurst 1964; 1968).

It was only in the early 1960s that the Governor of Tigray, Ras Mengesha Seyoum (r. 1960-1974), constructed a dry weather road linking Agula with Barhale along the principal caravan salt route. This road enhanced the caravan's mobility across to the 'Afar Depression and reduced a round-trek from Mekelle to Barhale from 13-14 days to 7-8 days. From the 1960s, this road provided conduits and opportunities for petty traders, who specialised in supplying necessary provisions (food, hay and grasses) to the Tigrayan *arhotot* as well as 'Afar salt traders and their pack animals.

However, today, there are no more caravans in Agula. If you do not know its history, the town appears as nothing more than a small roadside village. We leave Agula and continue the road eastwards along the open fields of the highland regions. Scattered in the distance, mud-mortared and stone-walled houses with flat earthen roofs reveal the presence of small villages. In the open fields, adolescent boys and girls are guarding herds of cows, flocks of sheep and tribes of goats. From time to time, I have to stop to let them cross the road. I exchange a friendly nod and smile with the children. They use sticks and stones, trying their best to keep their

animals away from the car. I do not mind these delays. Yusuf and I are not in a rush.

At the entrance and exit of some villages, control posts have spun a rope across the road, and I have to wait for someone to lower it. It is a checkpoint for trucks and minibuses. However, private cars like this white 1987 Toyota Corolla rarely get stopped or searched. Sometimes I have to wait for a few minutes until someone emerges out of the minor frontier post to lower the rope. I exchange greetings and gestures of gratitude before moving on. In the villages, men wrapped in big shawls holding long shepherd's crooks move in small groups or squat over tea and bread along the roadside. Women in long, sleeveless dresses, with scarfs around their necks carry dried wood on their backs. Their ornamented hair-braids and colourful clothing catch my attention, and I unconsciously decrease my speed. Most women wear black string necklaces bearing crosses around their necks. I politely reject the request of a group of six women to give them a lift. Pointing apologetically to Yusuf, who is still sound asleep in the passenger seat, I show that I do not have enough space for all of them.

I drive on towards the edge of the Rift Valley, towards the lowland of the 'Afar Depression. There are almost no cars on this road today. Only one convoy of three 4 x 4 Land Rover jeeps passes us, with tourists heading to the salt flats. Looking into the review mirror, in the far distance, I see a red truck approaching. Appearing initially small, the truck driving at high speed grows increasingly large. When only about 50 m behind us, I realize that it is almost three times the size of our Toyota Corolla, with its big, massive tires and steel loading bed. I try to make way and with two tires drift off the road into the gravel while the truck roars past our car. In Ethiopia, these big Chinese imported red trucks are known as Red Terror Truck [*qey shibbr truck*]. It is a wordplay referring to Ethiopia's most brutal history and the civil war period between 1974 and 1991.

Image 2: A Red Terror Truck startling a camel caravan in the salt basin of the ʻAfar Depression (from a deleted scene of *Arho*).

The Red Terror and the Liberation War (1974-1991)

The noise of the Red Terror Truck rampaging past us wakes Yusuf. "Let's stop in the next village to get some water and some bread", Yusuf says, opening the window to breathe in fresh air.

We stop in a small village, Desiʻa, to buy water bottles. As we are about to get back into the car, a middle-aged man dressed in a light blue shirt, dark blue pants and a bomber jacket bearing the emblem of Tigray police approaches us. He carries his police cap in his right hand. A Russian AK47 Kalashnikov machine gun hangs loosely from his left shoulder. His face is wide open, friendly and wrinkles draw deep lines into his forehead. He introduces himself in Tigrinya, shakes our hands and asks if we can give him a lift further down the road. Yusuf and I agree. His name is Kibrom, probably in his mid-50s, although it is difficult to tell.[21] We offer him the passenger seat, and Yusuf moves to the back seat of the car. Kibrom and Yusuf talk in Tigrinya while I focus on the road, keeping my ears on the conversation. Yusuf explains our

[21] The character Kibrom is along this road for the sake of the narrative. In fact, Kibrom is one of my interlocutors whom I often met during my research in different places along the road from Mekelle to Barhale. To protect the person's identity, I changed personal characteristics, and details about his age and appearance.

intentions to Kibrom and that we are on our way to Barhale to research salt caravans.

As our drive unfolds, Kibrom, increasingly interested in our stories and Yusuf's explanations, shares his story with us. He grew up in the mid-1960s in the northern parts of rural Tigray, close to today's Ethiopia-Eritrean border. His parents were farmers, and so were his relatives in Eritrea. As we drive past a group of farmers ploughing the land with oxen, Kibrom remembers his own childhood. "Working the field was hard", he says, "especially during years with less rain when the harvest often fell short". During his childhood, Kibrom and his brothers had to watch the family's few goats and sheep. They did not have cows. Kibrom remembered his father and uncles discussing politics. Kibrom's family had relatives in Eritrea, which Haile Selassie annexed in 1962, when it became the 14th province of Ethiopia. The decision was much against the will of the Eritrean people, who aspired to independence after the experience of Italian colonialism (1890-1941), British Military Administration (1941-1952) and a period of known as Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation (1952-1962) (Adam Hussein 1994; Negash 1997; Trevaskis 1960).

Kibrom's relatives often came to visit them. This period of time, he explained, was marked by resistance and the formation of liberation movements in Tigray and Eritrea. With the socialist revolution and the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974, things first seem to take a turn for the better. However, with the execution of sixty ministers and advisors of Haile Selassie on November 22, 1974, the new government sent a clear message to the Ethiopian people; the Derg would deal in a radical and merciless way with supporters of the former government. The brutal and violent period after they took power earned the Derg the name of Red Terror [*qey shibbr*] (Aalen, Pausewang, and Tronvoll 2002; Clapham 1990; Redie Bereketeab 2013).

Ethiopia under the Derg

It soon became clear that the Derg under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam would not bring the hoped-for change. In theory, the new government, led by Colonel Mengistu, promoted the cultural diversity of Ethiopia's different nationalities. In the *Program of the*

National Democratic Revolution (PNDR) in 1976, the *Derg* stated that:

> The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. The unity of Ethiopia's nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and all reactionary forces. … Given Ethiopia's existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-Government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders and administrators to head its own organs (c.f. Merera Gudina 2003, 82).

Even though the PNDR remained the official policy of the Derg government, it was never put into practice. The core idea of the policies implemented by the Derg was to eradicate the issue of national conflicts by eliminating class differences. The government believed that by redistributing land, they could end class exploitation and thereby remove the cause of nationality conflicts. The guiding ideological principle remained Marxism-Leninism. The attempts of the Derg to solve the question of nationalities by simply reducing questions of ethnic belonging to a mere class issue failed. Instead, the Derg unintentionally fomented the politicization of ethnicity (Aalen 2011). Although they distanced themselves from the imperial regime of Haile Selassie, the Derg failed to define the 'New Ethiopia' of after the revolution, and to give the country a new identity. As Donald Donham points out, it became unclear what the 'New Ethiopia' should look like:

> on the one hand, the revolution glorified and redeemed the nation. Now, at least, Ethiopia would be liberated, would come into her own. On the other hand, how the nation was to be defined was by no means clear. Just what was 'Ethiopia'? (Donham 1999, 129).

Instead of solving the problem of nationalities and ethnic-based conflicts in Ethiopia, an increasing number of ethnic-based rebel fronts emerged in the country to fight the Mengistu government.

Car radio and joining the TPLF

Kibrom, who had by now had taken off his jacket, receded into silence on the passenger seat. He looked absently out the window. He had a short and slender figure, with thin, dark, balding hair that exposed most of his forehead. On his left and right temples, Kibrom had two tiny scars, about 6 mm long and 3 mm wide, a common facial scarification for both men and women in rural areas of the Tigrayan highlands. The incisions are normally made at a young age to fight trachoma, a common eye disease among children.

We sat in silence for a good twenty minutes before turning on the car radio. The Tigrinya 10 am morning news was on. The voice from the radio broke Kibrom's reverie. As if triggered by the sound waves, he began telling us how he, as a young man, often listened to the radio programme of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Together with their brothers in arms in Eritrea, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), they fought against the central government in Addis Ababa. Then in his early twenties, Kibrom decided to join the liberation movement and to fight for the freedom of Tigray and Eritrea. He remembered,

> My fathers and uncles had fought in the *woyane* [*rebellion*] against Haile Selassie. We hoped that with the new government, things would change. However, everything remained the same. Or became worse. I was young and wanted the revolution to stop. My brothers and I listened to voices on the radio speaking about

> the freedom of Tigray, and we believed we could bring change by joining the struggle. That's what I did.

Kibrom served as a foot soldier in the TPLF for many years. The war against the Derg lasted 17 years and cost over one million lives. Kibrom recalled how some of his comrades sacrificed their lives by walking through minefields so that the tanks of the TPLF could move forwards. Kibrom said there were many 'Afar within the TPLF. Many were born in Tigray and had an 'Afar father and a Tigrayan mother. Kibrom remembered

> They were predominantly Muslim, but religion didn't matter for us. It was a war. So, it didn't matter. They [the 'Afar] spoke all languages, and it helped us when we met the other fighters of Ugogomo [an 'Afar liberation movement founded in the 1970s and still active today.

Changing landscapes

As we continue our journey, I notice the subtle changes in the geographic landscape. The green open pasture with its animals, people and villages gradually disappears and makes room for trees and forests. The terrain becomes bolder, rough. The road descends slightly. I focus my attention on it. Meanwhile, Yusuf and Kibrom keep on talking and exchanging information on people they know in the 'Afar region. For a few kilometres, we drive on a road between a line of trees and cliffs. I cannot see beyond the next curve and reduce the speed—there is a rock wall next to the car. Thick trees cover the sky. Only a few beams of sunlight make it through. As we emerge from the green tunnel, we are driving along mountainous cliffs that drop two thousand meters below the car's tyres. This seemingly idyllic landscape of the Tigrayan highlands almost made me forgot that we were at over 2000-metres of altitude, driving along the African Rift Valley. Before us, the last forest-covered headland points towards the endless horizon. The cold, fresh breeze of the mountain highlands has vanished, and a warmer, dryer, slightly salty whiff of air now streams into the car. Yusuf, Kibrom and I take off our

warm jackets and store them on the back seat. Ahead of us, an Ethiopian flag flutters in the wind on a small barb-wired compound with an abandoned hut. It indicates the regional boundary between the Tigray and ‘Afar regional states.

When we passed the Ethiopian flag that marked the regional boundary between the Tigray and ‘Afar states, I asked Kibrom: “Are we now entering the ‘Afar region?” Without pausing to think, Kibrom replied: “No, no, no. You see”, he stretched out his hand to point to the horizon that lay beyond the mountains of the highland, “the Tigray region reaches until down there. I’ll let you know when we leave Tigray. However, we’ll be driving for some time”. I then turned to Yusuf on the back seat, who had quietly listened to Kibrom’s explanation. “What do you think, Yusuf?” I asked, “Are we already in the ‘Afar land [*‘Afar bāḍo*]?” Yusuf turned from the window and met my eyes with a grin on his face: “Don’t worry Tillo. We entered the ‘Afar land about 20 minutes ago”.

The road ahead now winds and bends downwards and leads through rocky cliffs. Enormous stones have dropped and damaged the road, and I have to navigate carefully through this meandering terrain. Japanese ISUZU trucks, loaded with salt bars, are coming up the road. As I descend, I feel my jaw and ears block due to the rapid change in altitude. I yawn, stretch my jaw and pop my ears to relieve the pressure. It takes a few minutes to get acclimatised to this environment. It is still early in the day, but I already feel the heat on my skin. The landscape that opens up in front of us has completely altered. The trees, open fields and green pastures have disappeared. The land is arid, pebbly and gravelled, with scattered thorn bushes. Hills like camel humps symbolise this changed landscape.

I stop at a small coffeehouse in a roadside village. Kibrom says goodbye to Yusuf and me. We exchange numbers and promise to call him on our way back, to see if we can give him a lift back up to the highlands. Little do we know that our ways will cross several more times. This is, however, a story for another time.

Yusuf and I both take advantage of the break to stretch our legs. We take off our pullovers and grab our sunglasses. I change into my sandals, storing my sneakers and socks under the driver's seat. We take a big sip from a water bottle and wash our faces. It is 10:47 am now, and the sun is getting warmer. We decide to have coffee and breakfast.

Image 3: View from the car on the way to Barhale (photo: TJFT, February 2018).

11 The 'Afar land: clan and kinship identities

There are no tables at the coffee house. Green plastic and wooden stools are arranged in groups of four or five on a stone-flagged veranda. A white cloth stained with brown spots from the road dust covers the entrance to the coffee house. A group of five elderly 'Afar men sit outside drinking tea. As we approach, they greet Yusuf in Arabic "Salam Aleikum" [peace be with you]. "Wa aleikum salam" [and may peace be upon you] Yusuf replies, and exchanges information with the men. Yusuf is well-known in the districts of Dallol, Barhale and Konnaba and three 'Afar men also recognise him. Yusuf explains who I am and why we are here. "We are on our way to Barhale. He is doing research [*kusa'a aba faḍa*] about *arho* [the 'Afar salt

trade]. And I help him", Yusuf says. Having shared our intentions, Yusuf and I order two coffees and bread with honey for breakfast.

Yusuf and I first became close friends when Said introduced us in Logiya. Over the past weeks our friendship had grown stronger. Yusuf had introduced me to his wife and her extended family. In return he became close with some of my friends and contacts in Ethiopia. Yusuf was a few years older than me, in his mid-30s. At the turn of the millennium, he had attended a private boarding school in Addis Ababa. Fluent in five languages (‘Afar-Af, Amharic, Tigrinya, Arabic and English), Yusuf navigated through the cultural polyglot of Ethiopia effortlessly. Humble and composed when interacting with elders, women and children alike, he showed every person an equal amount of respect. "It is about opening your chest", as he once said.

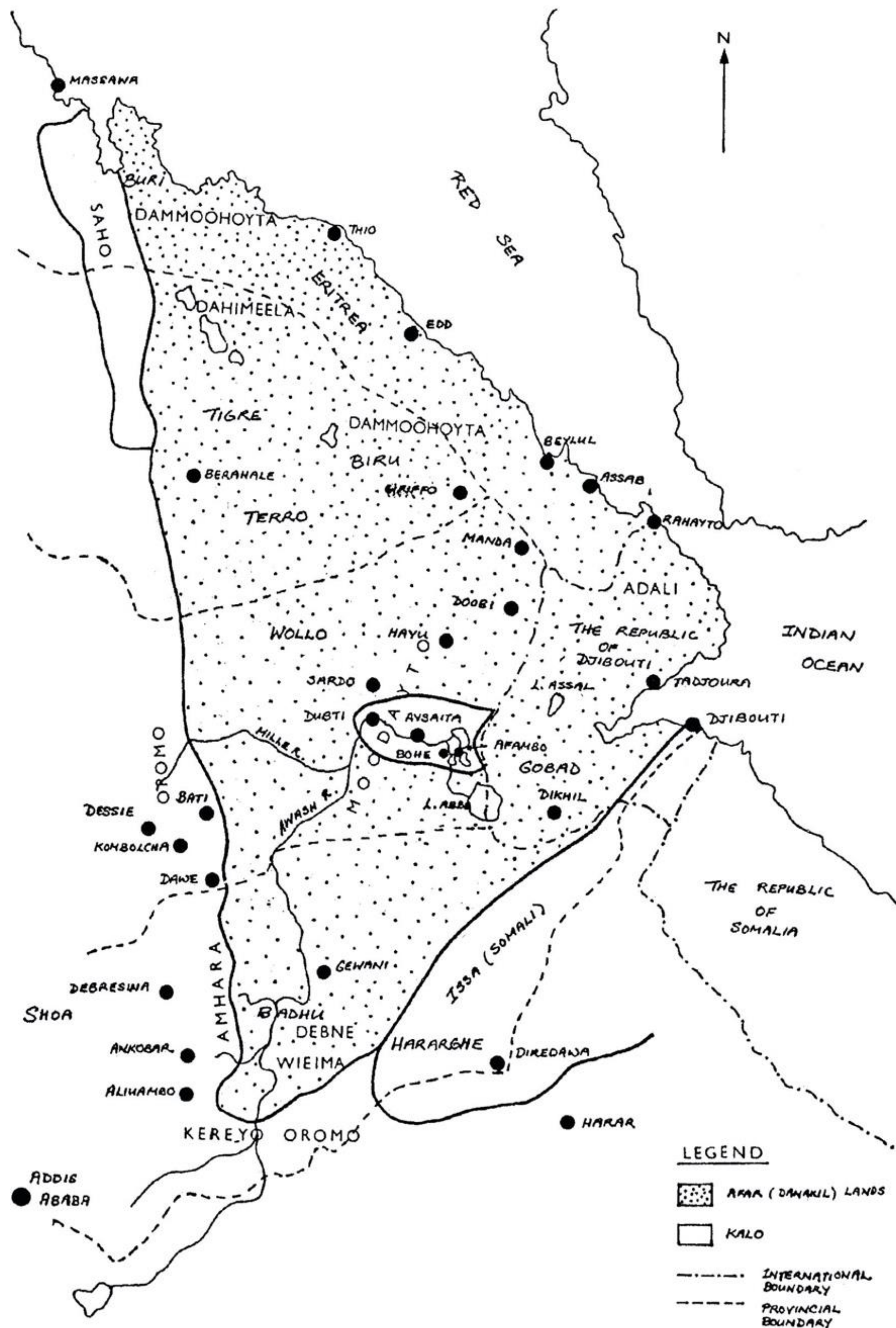
Yusuf grew up in the northern part of the Dallol region, close to the Eritrean border and about two day's march from where we were sitting at that moment. His father was an important clan leader [*derdar*] and customary judge / customary law leader [*meda'a abba*] of the region.[22] In northern ‘Afar and Djibouti, ‘Afar clan leaders are called *derdar*, while in the southern region the common name is *amoyta*, which also translates as sultan or king. Yusuf had explained to me that in the ‘Afar clan and kinship affiliation [*kedo*], sub-clans [*affa*], lineage

The ‘Afar triangle

During the conquest, division, and colonization of African territory by European powers in the mid-19th century, the French, British and Italian invaders divided the traditional land of the ‘Afar people into three territories. From north to south these were: the Italian colony of Eritrea, French Somaliland (Djibouti), and the eastern regions of Ethiopia. The ‘Afar refer to the three regions as the ‘Afar triangle. The political institutions and social structures of the different ‘Afar clans in the Horn of Africa are similar. Clan and kinship were the most salient features in the self-identification processes of the ‘Afar I worked with during my research. The

[22] *Abba* means father or leader; e.g. *yi abba = my father*; *meda'a abba = the father of the customary law*; *arho (t)abba = the leader of the camel caravan*.

‘Afar people consider themselves bound together by a common language (the ‘Afar-Af language, which is part of the Cushitic branch of the Afroasiatic family), an essentially nomadic pastoral culture as cattle herders [*laahi mari* or *daharsitu maru*], and a shared belief in Islam. Like Somali groups in the Horn of Africa, the ‘Afar nomadic pastoralists traditionally have a strong sense of cultural and linguistic unity, and do not necessarily form an ethnic unit (Bassi 2012; Lewis 2002; 2008). Some ‘Afar clans have more centralised, hierarchical forms of government, or federation, of clans or linages based on a defined territory under the rule of a clan leader or sultan [*derdar* or *amoyta*]. This is the case for the sultanates of Tadjoura and Raheita [Rahayta] (both in Djibouti), Aussa [Awsa], Biru, and Gobad [Gobhat] (all in Ethiopia) (Maknun Ashami [1986] 2019). The following map provides a simplified overview of the ‘Afar land in the Horn of Africa with the dominant clan names.



Map 3: Different ‘Afar clans in the Horn of Africa (Maknun Ashami [1986] 2019, 31).

Family trees (genealogies) and kinship further divide these clans throughout the ‘Afar triangle. The ‘Afar clans and their lineage divisions are led by ‘the elders’ — in principle, all senior men. Some clans have institutionalized positions of clan leaders, but in general elder assemblies, more akin to a republican society, guide the political and social decisions (Cossins 1972; Getachew Kassa 1997; 2002; Kelemework T. Reda 2011; 2014; Maknun Ashami [1986] 2019).

Dinkara bāḓo [the land of the golden drum]

Over breakfast, Yusuf explained that among the clans in Dakoba (referring to the three districts of Dallol, Konnaba and Barhale) there is not the same practice of cross-cousin marriage [*absumá*] that is common in southern ʻAfar:

> In these parts of ʻAfar [in Dakoba] you are allowed to marry whomever you want. There are also marriages between Tigray Muslims and ʻAfar Muslims. Sometimes the Tigray women even convert to Islam to get married.[23]

As the oldest son in his family, Yusuf would one day have to take over the political and social responsibilities inherent to the position of clan and customary law leader. Among the dominant clans in the Dakoba region are the Dahmmoohoyta, Damhimeela and Hadu [Hazu]. Yusuf explained while dipping his bread in honey

> The ʻAfar clans of this region believed that their ancestors came from Saudi Arabia and Yemen to Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia. They believe that before this migration there were no ʻAfar in Ethiopia. My clan and the clans of these regions [Dakoba] have the same customary law [*meda'a*]. We also have clan relations to ʻAfar in Djibouti. We were always independent from the Sultanate of Awsa and the family of Sultan Ali Mirah in the southern ʻAfar region.

Yusuf tells me that the *dinkara* [the golden drum] plays a role that is unique to clans in northern ʻAfar. It is a strong political and social symbol for the clans living there. There are two special kind of *dinkara*, one made of gold and one of silver. The drum, like the ones used by Amhara kings in central Ethiopia [*kebero*], can be heard for kilometres. "According to my father", Yusuf explains,

[23] Among ʻAfar it is common to have several wives as long as one can financially provide for them.

> the *dinkara* came in the possession of my clan during the time of the Ottomans in the Horn of Africa [starting from the mid-16th century]. Some ‘Afar clans in Djibouti have similar drums. In the past, Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes [r. 1872-1889] tried to take the *dinkara* from our clan leader, at that time Ona Ali Ibrahim Ismael. Ona Ali hid the *dinkara* and gave it to one of his soldiers and told him to run away with it. Ona Ali Ibrahim Ismael was killed by Emperor Yohannes’ soldiers. Since then, the *dinkara* had remained hidden.

Yusuf then pulls out his phone and shows me pictures of a gathering of people. “In 2010”, he explains,

> when our clan leader passed away, Mussa [a kin of Yusuf and part of the same age group [*fi’ima*]] and I organised the election of a new clan leader. We brought out the *dinkara* and members from different clans in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti came together to form a new alliance.[24]

The gathering united different clans from the Dakoba region, Eritrea and Djibouti to form new alliances. Clans agreed political and strategic marriages to strengthen these ties.

We finish our breakfast, pay, say goodbye to the group of ‘Afar men and get back into the car. The time on my mobile phone says 11:19 am. As I start the engine, *Gifta* Ibrahim, who is awaiting us in Barhale, calls. “*Ankel tanīh*? [where are you?]”, he wants to know. “*Arho geḍot tan*”, I reply jokingly, *the caravan is on its way*. Barhale is now only a fifteen-minute drive away.

Barhale: the desert-edge

We continue our drive along the asphalted road. The air is hot and dry. There is no wind. Left and right of the road are smaller settlements. Women, with headscarves and in long

[24] Mussa and Yusuf had paid a cameraman and videographer from Mekelle to document the ceremony. We are currently remastering and adding a new narration to the footage to release it as a short documentary in 2022.

garments concealing their arms and reaching down to their ankles, are moving between oval-shaped, round-roofed huts. In the shadow of trees and bushes, children are guarding grazing goats. Herds of camels range freely on the flat scrub-bush pasture lands.

Barhale is the administrative capital of zone 2 of the ‘Afar region. The town is divided into two parts: an upper (newer) part called *tajara boda* [flat land] and a lower part. During the Ethiopian civil war (1974-1991), the Derg military officials landed here with helicopters to meet and negotiate with the ‘Afar liberation fighters. Therefore, this part of town also bears the nickname *airport*. Today, along the wide, two-laned asphalted road in *tajara boda* are the police station, a military camp and an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The main road is further lined by one large hotel and a few restaurants. Residential houses sit behind this first row of restaurants, where tourist groups stop for lunch on their way visiting the salt basin and the ‘Afar Depression. Most of the restaurants in *tajara boda* are owned by non-’Afar from other parts of Ethiopia, mainly from the Tigray region.

The market area is located in the lower (old) part of Barhale. This old part was for centuries the economic and administrative centre of the region. Caravans arrived here from the highlands and other parts of the ‘Afar land. Barhale has grown substantially since the introduction of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia in 1994-95. Since 2010, the biggest buildings in the old town of Barhale are the office of the ‘*As ‘Ale Salt Association*, which was founded in 2010-11 and now holds a monopoly over buying and selling the salt from the caravans.

Barhale today is a transition between the highlands and the desert. The architecture is a combination of Tigrayan mud-mortared and stone-walled houses with flat earthen roofs and round ‘Afar huts. Barhale is therefore neither desert nor highland. It is the *in-between*. Like other commercial nodes in comparable studies of the trans-Saharan trade networks, Barhale developed a desert-edge economy (McDougall 1983; 1990) or desert-side sector (Lovejoy and Baier 1975) where sedentary farmers from the Tigrayan plateau exchanged commodities with

the ‘Afar pastoral groups.

At the end of the 1960s, the Irish missionary and priest (Father) Kevin O'Mahoney, who travelled with a camel caravan from Mekelle to the salt plains, described Barhale as follows:

> Eventually we came to Berahla, which is the customs post for the salt caravans. Each camel loaded with salt pays a tax of Eth. $3 (about 10/-), a mule Eth. $1.50, a donkey Eth. $0.50, and at any one time there may be as many as 3,000 camels, 6,000 mules, not to mention donkeys, on the trail. Obviously, Berahla is an important economic and administrative post. It is also a frontier post where the Christian Ethiopian culture of the highlands and the Islamic culture of the depression meet face to face: the Christian Tigreans and the Muslim Danakil stare at each other across a dried up river bed. There is as yet no Christian church is Berahla but each morning an Orthodox priest conducts an "open – air" sermon (O'Mahoney 1970, 148).

This quote is useful for two reasons. First, O'Mahoney provides important details about the number of caravans that came through Barhale in the 1970s and gives a detailed account of the taxation prices caravans had to pay. Today, one hardly sees any camels nor caravans in Barhale. Most caravans have stopped going to salt flats and the *‘As ‘Ale Salt Association* has started to use trucks to transport the salt to Barhale. The few remaining caravans that still engage in the trade sell the salt bars directly to the Association, who then sells it to merchants from other parts of Ethiopia. The motivation for this development will become clearer later in this dissertation.

What is further interesting about O'Mahoney's description of Barhale in the late 1960s, is the clear-cut division between the Christian Tigrayans and the Islamic "Danakil" – an old and rather derogative term for the ‘Afar. Religion is used here as the clear distinctive marker of an unbreachable barrier between the two groups that *stare at each across a dried-up riverbed*.

To some extent the religious divide is still palpable today.

In the 1970s, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, the then governor of the Tigray region started the construction of the church near the old market centre, on a small rise overlooking Barhale. What is astonishing, is that over the last forty years, the Church was never finished. Yusuf explained that for a long time people resisted the construction of the church and kept stealing stones for the construction site. After construction continued, people destroyed the foundation of the church. When I left Ethiopia in September 2018, the construction was still unfinished, and people are now using the compound of the church as a toilet – the last reservoir of their resistance.

As we arrive in Barhale, I park the white Toyota Corolla, which has a big cross on the rear window on the side of the street, opposite the main mosque next to the market. As Yusuf and I get out of the car, I want to lock the car. But Yusuf tells me with a grin on his face, "'*Afaral bāḏo gayān mayyu'* [there are no thieves in the 'Afar land]". I put the keys in my pocket and follow him to a small restaurant for lunch.

'Afar liberation movements in Northeast-Africa

Gifta Ibrahim has been expecting us for some time, but is now happy to see us. Now in his mid-50s, *Gifta* Ibrahim is the clan and customary leader of this region. Throughout my research, he had welcomed me to stay at his home, granting me access to interview members of his clan and extended family. We spent many days and nights together, shared meals, slept and prayed next to each other.

Gifta Ibrahim shared his life with me, and I mine with him. For hours we sat together with other members of his clan and his extended kin. We discussed the history of the salt trade and elements of the 'Afar customary social and political organisation. During these months, I watched and observed *Gifta* Ibrahim and developed great respect and admiration for him. There was an apodictic certainty to his pronouncements. *Gifta* Ibrahim was further gifted with a

determined, authentic and gracious composure. His authority as a clan leader and religious leader of this region was clear and unquestioned. However, it was a subtle, unobtrusive leadership.

Gifta Ibrahim leads Yusuf and me into a restaurant where we join a group of four senior 'Afar men for lunch. Aisha, an 'Afar women a few years older than *Gifta* Ibrahim, owns the restaurant and runs it together with her eldest son. Over lunch, Yusuf and I report everything from our journey, our conversation with Kibrom and our coffee break.

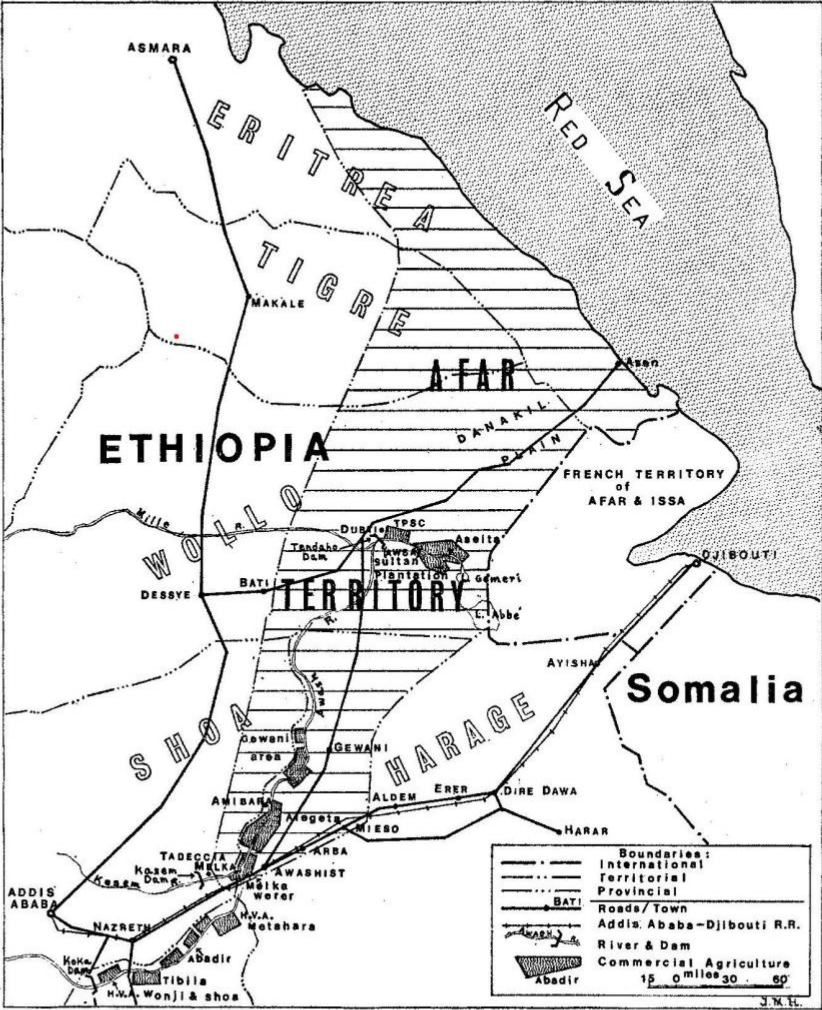
One of the senior men, Abubaker, a former guerrilla fighter of a 'Afar movement in the region, listens carefully while we describe our encounter with Kibrom, the former member of the TPLF. Abubaker, Yusuf and I knew each other from Mekelle and Barhale, where we had chewed čat together on different occasions. During the civil war period in Ethiopia 1974-1991, Abubaker fought for the 'Afar *Ugogomo* [revolution] movement, founded in the 1980s. *Ugogomo*, was one of the several 'Afar liberation movements in Ethiopia. Its origins have to be placed within the broader history of ethnic-based liberation movements in Ethiopia.

Origins of the 'Afar liberation movements in north-eastern Africa

Like the TPLF and other guerrilla groups in north-eastern Africa, the 'Afar liberation movements started in opposition to the continued policy of cultural and religious assimilation of Haile Selassie's government. To obtain a position at the royal courts one had to adopt Orthodox Christianity and speak Amharic. Even after the incorporation of territories and ethnic groups in east, south and west Ethiopia under Emperor Menelik II, who extend the Ethiopian state to its current size, the question of nationality and ethnicity become secondary, as Amhara was still considered to be the supreme culture (Asafa Jalata 2009; Baxter, Hultin, and Triulzi 1996; Adam Hussein 1994; Reid 2003; J. Young 1997).

Among the 'Afar, resistance against the imperial government grew in the late 1950s. Haile Selassie granted concessions for irrigation schemes for cotton and sugar plantations in the Awash Valley in central 'Afar region. Several smaller Ethiopian state farms as well as

Italian and Israeli companies operated along the Awash river. However, the British Company *Mitchell Cotts LTD* and the Dutch *Handelsvereeniging Amsterdam (H.V.A) United* held the largest concessions in the area. *Mitchell Cotts* and the Ethiopian Government formed the *Tendaho Plantations Share Company (TPSC)*. Together with the *H.V.A United* the Ethiopian government established the *H.V.A Ethiopia Sugar Industry*, which in turn created three subsidiary companies, the *H.V.A Wonji,* the *H.V.A Shoa and* the *H.V.A Metahara*, to exploit the land through sugar plantations. The land was owned by the Ethiopian Imperial Government of Haile Selassie, but governed by Sultan Ali Mirah, of the ‘Afar people (r. 1944-2011). The H.V.A used bulldozers (“Dutch Caterpillars”) to force indigenous ‘Afar groups from their land (Bondestam 1975; Kloos 1982a; 1982b; Maknun Ashami [1986] 2019).



Map 4: Companies and commercial agriculture in the Awash Valley, Late 1960s (Bondestam 1974b, 425).

In 1962 the Government formed the Awash Valley Authority (AVA) to administer and develop the natural resources of the Awash Valley. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provided the AVA with technical assistance composed of a team of Western-trained engineers and economists. The AVA was, however, responsible for managing the allocation of land and water rights. It thereby undermined the traditional authorities of the ‘Afar people and Sultan Ali Mirah. Only the personal friendship between the Emperor and the Sultan of Awash, Hanfare Ali Mirah, prevented the outbreak of a wider conflict. Certain ‘Afar nobles and members of the Sultan became extremely wealthy with these new cotton farms. The Emperor wanted to use the Sultan’s influence to incorporate into Ethiopia regions of French Djibouti, occupied by ‘Afar as well as Issa-Somali (Bahru Zewde 2012; Duri Mohammed 1969; Fantini and Puddu 2016; Puddu 2016a).

As a consequence, many ‘Afar and other pastoral groups in the Awash Valley and along the Awash river lost important dry-grazing lands and water sources for their livestock. The imposed development schemes of foreign concessionary companies were a “turning point in Afar-Ethiopian relations” (Ali Said 1998, 110) and the beginning of resentment against outsiders. This led to ethnic conflicts and aggressive competition between ‘Afar and non-’Afar groups throughout the ‘Afar region (Ali Said 1998; Yasin M. Yasin 2011).

The resistance against the central government came predominantly from young ‘Afar students in- and outside the country, who demanded regional self-rule for the ‘Afar. In 1972, students in Cairo founded the ‘Afar Koborih Angozza (AKA) [‘Afar Rallying Movement]. The AKA demanded autonomy from the imperial state. In Djibouti, students founded the Mouvement Rassemblement ‘Afar as an anti-colonial movement against the French occupation. Just before the revolution against Haile Selassie in 1974, ‘Afar students in Ethiopia formed the ‘Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM) that organised their political struggle for regional autonomy into a political party (Ali Said 1998; Yasin M. Yasin 2008).

Conflicts with the Derg

Under the new government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, the conflicts with the 'Afar intensified. The Derg issued a new land reform (*Proclamation to Provide for the Public Ownership of Rural Lands - No. 31/1975*). This proclamation ended, without compensation, all private land ownership. The privatisation of land was the cornerstone of the Derg's Policy Guidelines and their idea of an Ethiopian Socialism, called *Ethiopia Tikdem* (commonly translated as *Ethiopia First* or *Ethiopia above all*), the predominant slogan in the years after 1974.[25] The control of the state remained tightly in the hands of the Derg's undisputed leader, Mengistu Haile Maryam, who became president of Ethiopia and was elected chairperson of the newly installed Worker's Party of Ethiopia (WPE). The core idea of the policies implemented by the Derg was to eradicate issues of national conflict by eliminating class differences. The government believed that by redistributing land, they could end class exploitation and thereby remove the root cause of nationality conflicts. The guiding ideological principle remained Marxism-Leninism. The attempts of the Derg to solve the question of nationalities by reducing ethnicity to a class issue, as well as the promotion of free ethnic cultural expression, all failed. Instead, the Government of Mengistu Haile Maryam unwillingly fomented the politicisation of ethnicity (Aalen 2011; Abbink 2006; L. Smith 2013; J. Young 1996).

Under the new policies, all land became the property of the Government. In rural areas as well as in towns, peasant dwellers' associations [Amharic: *qebele*] were installed to redistribute properties. Banks, industries and insurances were nationalised, including the large private cotton land holdings of Sultan Ali Mirah in the Awash Valley. Ali Mirah, fearing imprisonment, fled with his family to Saudi Arabia and around 4000 'Afar sought refuge in Djibouti. After the departure of the Sultan, many 'Afar started a rebellion. They burned the

[25] Marina and David Ottaway have summarised the concepts as follows: "Ethiopia Tikdem meant in effect the rejection of a pluralistic parliamentary system in which various interest groups were represented in a struggle to determine national policy. It implied that only some higher body, namely the Därg, could interpret the common good and steer Ethiopia in the right direction" (1978, 63). Further, the Derg reformulated Ethiopia's economy and "reserved the important sectors of the economy for state control, with the private sector being allowed only limited participation" (Schwab 1985, 24).

Tendaho plantation and other concessionary farms and killed many non-'Afar. They attacked the Addis Ababa-Assab highway, linking Ethiopia to the Red Sea, which led to a shortage of fuel in the rest of the country (the only oil refinery was based in Assab). The Derg responded with an 'Afar genocide (Shehim 1985), destroyed the capital of the Sultanate, Asaita, and killed many 'Afar. In a meeting in Berlin, the son of Sultan of Awsa Ali Mirah, Hanfare Ali Mirah, founded the 'Afar Liberation Front (ALF) (Flood 2018; Maknun Ashami [1986] 2019; Shehim 1985; Yasin M. Yasin 2008).

As discussed, the Derg tried to promote the country's ethnic diversity as well as the right of self-determination for all nationalities. Among the 'Afar movements, the ANLM, as well as certain members of the ALF and AKA, did welcome this degree of autonomy for the regions and joined the Derg (Shehim 1985; Yasin M. Yasin 2008; 2011).

However, Mengistu Haile Maryam's Government gradually reinstalled a Pan-Ethiopian nationalist ideology, breaking the revolution's initial promise to grant all ethnic groups their freedom of cultural development, as well as ethnic self-determination for the regions. Inevitably, this "had the effect of strengthening the nascent ethnic resistance movements, as it increased discontent and disappointment among the peasantry and the culturally conscious parts of the non-Amhara ethnic groups" (Aalen, Pausewang, and Tronvoll 2002, 28).

Until the late 1980s, Ethiopia's administrative structure remained basically the same as during the Haile Selassie period. It was not until the promulgation of the 1987 Constitution that the country was proclaimed as a unitary state officially known as the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The country was newly divided into five autonomous regions 1. Eritrea, 2. Tigray, 3. Assab, 4. Dire Dawa and 5. Ogaden. Further, the Constitution founded 25 administrative regions while Addis Ababa remained the capital city. Instead of an autonomous 'Afar region as hoped, the Derg carved out the Assab Autonomous Administrative Region from Eritrea.

The Assab Autonomous Administrative Region did not aim to favour the 'Afar claim

for an autonomous region, but rather to counteract the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The decision was welcomed by the ALF, who saw it as positive step for their claim of autonomy. There was, however, a fraction of the ALF that did not welcome the Derg decision. This fraction formed the 'Afar National Liberation Front (ANLF), sometimes referred to as the Northern-ALF, composed of Tigray-speaking 'Afar in north-eastern Ethiopia. The ANLF fought together with the TPLF and EPLF against the Derg. During this fight, many TPLF and EPLF fighters would retreat into 'Afar region. This was not welcomed by all 'Afar and led to the formation of a movement called Ugogomo [meaning *revolution* or *rebellion* in the 'Afar language] that retreated into the 'Afar salt desert.

The Ugogomo movement

Abubaker, the former Ugogomo fighter who had joined us for lunch and has listened to Yusuf's and my encounter with the former TPLF fighter Kibrom, explains how the TPLF fighters would often retreat into the 'Afar land to seek refuge from their fight against the Derg government. The customary laws of the Tigray highlands [*ḥeg Enderta*] and *med'a* on the 'Afar side were used to mark group territorial boundaries. The areas occupied by the 'Afar liberation movements in the northern region were of strategic value, because it was close to the Eritrean border and the Red Sea that allowed quick retreat from the government military. Abubaker, who lived along the current 'Afar -Tigray regional boundary, recalled how a group of TPLF soldiers fled down from the mountains into the 'Afar land [*'Afar bāḏo*]. Struck by hunger, the soldiers slaughtered goats, sheep and camels found grazing. The cattle were from Abubaker's clan and as soon as the information about the intruders spread, a conflict arose between the TPLF soldiers and Abubaker's community. "We told them", so Abubaker said,

> that they had violated our *'adaa* [culture, custom]. They did not tell us they were in need of food. They came to our land without informing us and killed our animals.

Abubaker went on:

> We will have to fight you now' we told them, 'because you disrespected our *'adā* [custom]'. The TPLF soldiers argued they were in desperate need of food and above all that they had a common enemy, the Military Government. Rather than fighting each other, they should unite, is how the TPLF fighters justified their action. Said and his men told them that 'We will first have to defeat you for you have disrespected us! After we defeat you, we will join you in the fight against the Government'.

After 1991, many former Ugogomo fighters joined the 'Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF), formed by a former ANLM leader and Mohamed Ahmed Gaas, former member of the Derg in the Assaba Autonomous region. Today, the ARDUF *Ugogomo* remains active as a military group in the borderlands between the northern 'Afar region and Eritrea. Among certain fractions, the ambitious aim is to represent all 'Afar in the Horn of Africa and support the creation of a "Greater 'Afaria" meant to unite all 'Afar living in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti, a goal originally set by the ANLF in the 1970s. The ARDUF has remained hostile against outsiders, foreign companies as well as non-'Afar traveling or working in the northern 'Afar region. There is the issue of mistrust against the central state and over the past years, Ugogomo has been responsible for kidnappings and attacks on European tourists in the 'Afar Depression, the Erta Ale volcano and the Dallol region (L. Hammond 2011; Yasin M. Yasin 2008; 2011).

After lunch, Abubaker invited Yusuf, Gifta Ibrahim and me for yet another coffee before we headed into a local čat house where we spent the remainder of the afternoon. When we returned to the car in the evening, people had peeled the cross sticker off the rear window, without damaging the car or taking anything from the inside.

Days later, when I returned the car to my friend in Mekelle and apologized for the incident, offering to buy a new cross sticker, he simply replied, "Don't worry. This is what happens when you travel to them [meaning 'Afar]. What did you expect?".

Image 4: Parked. 1987, 5th generation white Toyota Corolla in Barhale. Central mosque in the background. Goat lying in the shade under the car (photo: TJFT, April 2018).

Image 5: View from the riverbed onto Barhale. Far left, the building of the *'As 'Ale Salt Association*, in the front centre the market area, in the background centre the Church and at right the central mosque (photo: TJFT, August 2018).

12 Conclusion: landscapes, identities, ethnicities and kinship

In this chapter, I used the journey between Mekelle and Barhale to examine how the salt caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia was related to particular social networks. I further identified the different communities of traders, the Tigrayan arhotot involved in the caravan trade. I discussed the communities within their regional and geographic landscapes, living along the mountain-desert divide between the Ethiopian highland plateau and the ‘Afar Depression. I described the variety of ways we can define these communities in social and cultural terms, such as geographic, ethno-linguistic, kinship, and/or religious groups.

As revealed along the journey, the histories of this part of north-eastern Ethiopia, and the history of the Horn of Africa at large, are linked to the different political and productive landscapes along the Great Rift Valley. Historically, as Christopher Clapham has argued, the “physical fissures” between the highland and lowlands “have helped to sustain regional identities” (Clapham 2017, 12). According to this line of thinking, there exists a geographic, religious and cultural boundary along the Great Ethiopia Rift Valley that divides Ethiopia and Eritrea into a highland and lowland area. The centre of the Ethiopian Christian Empire lay in the highland areas while lowlands laying east and west of these centres, which the ruling Ethiopian nobility of the centre marginalised and exploited, made up the peripheries. According to other scholars, this has influenced the power structures, imposed by the centre on the peripheries. To understand the histories of this region, so the common argument goes, the landscape of this part of the continent is inevitably the starting point for any analysis (Clapham 2017; James et al. 2002; Markakis 2011).

The problem with the centre-periphery and highland-lowland dichotomy

Moving forward, I want to distance myself from the centre-periphery perspective and the highland-lowland dichotomy as it often relies on presumed identity markers, prejudices and cultural clichés. These terms do not reflect the complexity of diverse social meshworks, degrees

of power structures and socio-economic dynamics encompassed in my research experience, or that of the people I worked with during my research. Yusuf, for example, grew up in the ‘Afar lowlands, in Dallol to be precise, but lived and went to school in Addis Ababa and Mekelle. Throughout his life, he moved freely between different regions. He communicates fluently in five languages. Referring to him as an ‘Afar lowlander would be highly misconceiving. I therefore avoid the terms “highlands” and “lowlands” as a denomination for ethnic groups and people living in these areas, like the Tigrayan highlanders or ‘Afar lowlanders.

The centre-periphery model is a useful framework for understanding historical and political developments as well as processes of state formation in the Horn of Africa. However, it has its own shortcomings, as Jonathan Miran remarks:

> Writing from the centre (and from the highlands) – physically or mentally – has produced an often biased, limited, and rather rigid understanding of the fluid political, social, economic, and cultural dynamics at play among the various societies that inhabit the wider region, especially in the peripheries (2009, 33).

The entangled narratives embedded along the road from Mekelle to Barhale have shown that different elites exerting power influenced the geographic and social settings in north-eastern Ethiopia. As Ethiopia was never formally colonized, however, local political culture produced specific patterns of power and prestige relations between different regional groups. There is no denying that the Ethiopian imperial state model, based on notions of personalized power, tributary loyalty, as well as on the territorial conceptions of control, gave rise to a hierarchical structure. This was largely based on a Christian tradition of authority (Abbink 1997; 2006; Markakis 1974; 1996). On the other hand, however, as the history of Islam, the mosque of Negash, Yusuf’s upbringing and the land of the golden drum [*dinkara bāḏo*] have shown, the different ‘Afar clans and the different Islamic states and sultanates emerged from the 10th

century onwards along the coastal areas of the Red Sea. Among the ‘Afar, this led to a particular blend of Islamic faith and indigenous beliefs that still (co-) exist today.

Current regional boundaries

Along the regional boundary between Tigray and ‘Afar, however, the different indigenous traditions of state formation, migration and inter-group relations are interwoven with the groups of neighbouring countries in northeast Africa (especially Eritrea and Djibouti). Before the centralization and unification processes brought about by Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros (r. 1855-1868), and colonial expansionism in Northeast Africa in the mid-19th century, long-distance trade, migration, bond-friendships and inter-group marriages, often to endorse political status and power between groups, resulted in an “ethnic permeability with loose borders between the respective groups” in the region (Poluha 1998, 31).

Since 1994-95, however, the idea of ethnicity has become entangled with Ethiopian state policies. Ethiopia has adapted a definition of group identity and ethnicity that is presented as rather static and naturalistic and does not take into account people’s capacity to assume and switch between various identities according to the situation or context. Art 39(5) of the FDRE constitution defines ‘nation, nationalities, and people’ as

> a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory (Art 39(5) of the FDRE Constitution).

While acknowledging the historic, economic and political aspects affecting the manifestation of group (ethnic) identity, the definition of the constitution fails to explain the changeability of identity and its potential for manipulation. I have shown that Ethiopia’s ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity living along the Tigray and ‘Afar regional boundary has its own historical complexity.

Challenging the centre-periphery approach: borders, borderlands and frontiers

The concept of borderlands that contested the centre-periphery perspective might be more useful to develop my thinking about landscapes as productive (Asiwaju 1993; Baud and Van Schendel 1997; Nugent 2002; Nugent and Asiwaju 1996).

The term borderlands is associated with the creation of certain *border culture* (Baud and Van Schendel 1997). Baud and van Schendel argue that borderlands develop a "creole" or "syncretic" "border culture" that exists on both sides of the border, which is defined through "cross border (and often interethnic) networks of friendship, courtship, and kinship [that] are as much part of the border culture as cross-border economic and political partnerships" (Baud and Van Schendel 1997, 234).

In north-east Africa and the Ethiopian context, Dereje Feyissa and Markus Hoehne have argued against the marginalizing view of the peripheries and proposed a "view from the 'periphery', which sometimes is not peripheral at all", but on the contrary has "huge potential for local agency" (Dereje Feyissa and Hoehne 2010, 9). From this perspective, the peripheries are seen as fields of conduits and opportunities that focus on human agency and what the people "have made out of living in the borderlands" (Dereje Feyissa and Hoehne 2010, 11).

This perspective is supported by the frontier-model that has also been applied to north-east Africa (Guazzini 2002; Kopytoff 1987; Korf, Hagmann, and Doevenspeck 2013; Markakis 2011; Puddu 2016b; Reid 2011a; Triulzi 1994). The frontier model, like the centre-periphery perspective, however, argues that during the state-formation process in Ethiopia "both the internal and external frontiers gradually became the cultural and political divide between civilization and barbarism" (Triulzi 1994, 237), but at the same time differentiates itself clearly from the centre-periphery dichotomy by stressing the "production of historical knowledge" as "each frontier has always at least two histories being narrated or written which spectacularly correspond to its two sides" (Triulzi 1994, 240).

Richard Reid's work *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of*

Conflict since c. 1800 has become central in studying the broader region of north-east Africa. Reid builds his analysis on militarization and the "vitality of violence" for understanding the modern history of North-East Africa. Reid argues that "societies have grown up *within* and *because of* the violent frontiers" (Reid 2011b, 21) and that the experience of a *violent frontier* has further shaped the construction of the modern-nation states in North-East Africa. Nation-states, so says Reid,

> are ultimately defined by their turbulent borderlands, which are thus not 'peripheral' but are seedbeds, zones of interaction which are as constructive, creative and fertile as they are destructive and violent (Reid 2011b, 21).[26]

For my approach, the borderland and frontier framework is more fruitful. The violent decades of the civil war (1974-1991) and the Ethiopian-Eritrean war have further politicized and shaped the experiences of group identification processes, ethnicity and culture in Ethiopia and the region at large. As exemplified through Kibrom's and Abubaker's life histories, the violent ruptures of the Ethiopian Civil War (1974-1991) are still very much alive today. Most of the senior 'Afar men, like *Gifta* Ibrahim or Abubaker, were either actively engaged in the war or had relatives who were. Throughout my research and my travels along the 'Afar-Tigray regional boundary, I talked to many former liberation fighters from the TPLF or especially from the 'Afar Ugogomo, which is still active in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Conceptualizing the productive landscapes

Both the borderland and frontier model further imply the creation of spaces of social interaction and inter-ethnic contact that provide useful economic, cultural, political and social opportunities for human agency when thinking about landscapes as productive. Here, Frederik Barth makes an important observation. Barth writes that throughout history

[26] The frontier model has become very important for the study Western Ethiopia, especially the areas of Gambella and Benishangul now bordering South Sudan (Dereje Feyissa 2010; Meckelburg 2017; J. Young 1999).

> Political boundaries have been rich in affordances, offering opportunities for army careers, customs-duty collecting agencies, defence construction contracts and all manner of work and enterprise. They have provided a facility of retreat and escape for bandits and freedom fighters eluding the control of states on both sides; and they are a constant field of opportunities for mediators, traders and middlepersons of all kinds (2000, 27–28).

To further develop my approach for the productive landscape, I follow Marshall Sahlins, who has argued that states cannot "simply impose the boundary or the nation on a local level", but that is the people, who define "their own social and territorial boundaries" and that people are making use of "the national state and its boundaries" (1989, 276).

I have shown that the dynamics between the various groups along the highland-lowland dichotomy, especially in my research on the Tigray and 'Afar regional boundary, are more complex and require more research. The political and economic history of the various 'Afar clans inhabiting the areas is still especially understudied. In studying the different group dynamics, it might be more fruitful to moved away from primordial ethnic state politics and to foreground the trade relations that were constructed around different notions of business ethics, as well as trust and reciprocity imbedded within the landscape.

This framing allows us to understand the dynamics and social interactions between the different groups along this boundary as more dynamic, fertile, and fluid. Viewing social interactions this way allows us further to explain how communities and individuals create landscapes along regional boundaries that provide various economic, cultural, political and social opportunities for human agency (Barth 2000; Sahlins 1989; Tilley 1994).

The productive landscape further helps us go beyond the limitations of explaining community formation processes in terms of ethnic and religious boundaries and guides our attention to how they can be a vehicle for political and economic interests while maintaining certain degrees of symbolic identity construction. This is the focus of the next chapter, *Being a*

guest among ‘Afar pastoralists: camels, trust and honesty, where I explore specific aspects of the ‘Afar culture.

Chapter III:
Being a guest among 'Afar pastoralists: camels, trust and honesty

Someone who cannot give hospitality despite having camels, and someone who cannot defend themselves despite having a gun, will not make it far in life.

'Afar Proverb

Whoever believes in the Last Day, let him honor his guest, and grant him reward for a day and a night. And it is not permissible for him to stay so long that he causes annoyance to his host. Hospitality is for three days, and whatever he spends on him after three days is charity.

The Prophet Mohammed

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Crossing a dry riverbed, Yusuf, Gifta Ibrahim and I forged ahead into the gulfs of the mountains. Pure, comforting silence surrounded us. Dusk drew deep wrinkles on the rock faces as we entered their mews. It felt good to be away from the noise pollution of Mekelle. "I enjoy this quietness", I said to Yusuf, who looked back at me and replied: "I think this is how it was when the world was created!"

Gifta Ibrahim was leading us into the gorges just a few kilometres outside of Barhale where we had spent the last few days together. He grew up in this landscape. "When I was young", he said, pointing to the top of one canyon and added with a slight grin,

> I was herding the cattle of my family up there. All the young boys and girls from the area came together. I had long, beautiful hair that time and the girls liked to braid them.

I could tell that *Gifta* Ibrahim was in a pleasant mood on this particular evening in April 2018. Before we left his compound in Barhale, he had promised to show me something few people know about the 'Afar communities living in this region. "It will be good for your research", he

replied when I asked where we were heading.

After fifteen minutes of walking through gorges on gravel and sandy ground, we emerged into a narrow canyon. At its maw, a group of men had just begun *maghrib* [the Islamic sunset prayer] and their voices resonated from the deaf rocks. The canyon walls confined a savoury scent of burning meat captive in the air. A small campfire shed light on pots, plates and mats on the stony ground. We passed by the praying men and moved towards a rivulet running to the end of the gorge where two adolescent boys performed *wuḍū* [Islamic procedure for washing before prayer]. We joined them, washed our hands, arms, feet and face in the running stream and Yusuf led the prayer for *Gifta* Ibrahim and me.

On our way back to the group of men, I noticed a blue tarp on the ground. Spread on it were piles of cooked and uncooked meat—the source of the savoury smell in the air. "*From goats?",* I wondered as we sat down on the mats. Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim introduced me to the group of men.

> His name is Tillo. He came as a guest in the ʻAfar country. He comes from a white people's country [*ʻado marih bāḏol*] called Germany. He came to Ethiopia to conduct research and studied ʻAfar-Af at Samara University. His knowledge is limited, but he is trying to speak. For his research, he is interested in arho (the salt caravan trade) and aspects of the ʻAfar culture [*ʻAfar ʻada*].

"Arḥib"! *"Dafey"*! "You are welcome"! "Sit down and make yourself comfortable", the men greeted and welcomed us.

There was only the shimmer from the campfire and the light of the full moon above us. The men did not mind our presence and continued chatting and chewing čat. While *Gifta* Ibrahim talked to the men providing more information about who I was and why we had come here, Yusuf stretched out next to me. Two younger boys cut fried meat of ribs of what must have been an enormous animal. "It is camel meat", Yusuf said, passing me a slice.

Gifta Ibrahim, Yusuf and the men told me in the course of the evening that it is common in this area for men to gather once or twice a year as a break from work. They slaughter a camel and do not return to their villages until they have consumed all the meat. This ritual, called *dasiga* in the ‘Afar-Af language, is practised among men of the nomadic and pastoralist groups in this region. During this camel meat sharing feast of *dasiga*, visitors, or unexpected guests are welcome. The ‘Afar will provide them with food. However, guests and visitors are not allowed to stay and have to leave after eating. It is a rare occasion that only happens once or twice a year. *Gifta* Ibrahim considered this an essential event for me to see and understand for my research.

Conceptualising ‘Afar hospitality

In this chapter, *Being a guest among ‘Afar pastoralists: camels, trust and honesty*, I foreground my positionality as a researcher and guest among the communities I worked with. What I am particularly interested in are the different notions of hospitalities among these communities along the former salt caravan trails. Using concrete examples from my research, I want to show that the concepts of welcoming and notions of hospitalities in north-eastern ‘Afar region are 1) connected to nomadic life and the landscape of this area, 2) rooted and regulated through the ‘Afar customary laws [*meda’a*] that manage all social, political and other aspects of ‘Afar communities, and 3) based on the teachings of Islam.

By foregrounding my positionality as guest, researcher and foreigner, I seek to contribute to anthropological theory and the regional ethnography of north-eastern Ethiopia in two ways. First, for anthropological thinking, the study of hospitality offers opportunities to develop much more sophisticated understandings of culture, morality and local ethics. Recently anthropologists revived hospitality as a concept. It became a popular means to explore various forms of political mobility, tourism and migration studies or discourses on travelling, dwelling and mooring (Lashley 2016; Molz and Gibson 2007).

Hospitality, “with its ambivalence and equivocations, its heartfelt generosities and

subtle power-plays", as Matei Candea and Giovani da Col write (Candea and Col 2012, 3), not only "inhabited the very texture of ethnographic text", but is, in fact, the "all-encompassing and ambivalent dwelling space of anthropology since its inception" and "the *elemental* structure of the anthropological enterprise". Undoubtedly, forms of welcoming and concepts of hospitality are present in all ethnographic accounts. They offer "rich potentials for anthropologists to think about the complexities of their relationship to "the field" and to challenge through fieldwork 'well-worn generalisations' about the cultural regions in which they work" (Marsden 2012, 127).

More importantly, however, is the idea that every cultural region has its own distinctive set of rules for hosting and welcoming the Other. Commonly these notions are embedded in particular understandings of local morals and ethics. This is the central point of my argument in this chapter. For guests, these unwritten rules of behaviour cannot be understood beforehand, but have to be learned. Pierre Bourdieu calls these unwritten rules of the game, or *doxa*, "the ordinary acceptance of the usual order which goes without saying and therefore usually goes unsaid" (Bourdieu 1996, 424). He further writes that doxa is

> the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between a *habitus* and the field to which it is attuned, the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense (Bourdieu 1990b, 68).

For Bourdieu, these are the underlying practices within a specific field. It is important to bring this up here because it shows that the concept of habitus is not only relevant as a conceptual frame. The habitus concept, e.g. dispositions embodied through socialisation, upbringing and our experiences during adulthood, becomes further useful as an empirical tool to explore the concrete realities of ethnographic research. As researchers, we do not enter the field with the full knowledge of rules, dispositions and belief of the communities we are working with during my research. We have little understanding of local concepts of morality and ethics, nor are we

fully conscious of the consequences of our actions. Instead, we bring our habitus to the field. The habitus organises our actions. We then have to be willing to “learn the tempo, rhythms and unwritten rules of the game through time and experience” (Maton 2008, 54). The assumptions of how to behave in a particular social situation, often determine the limits of the doable and the thinkable.

By engaging with the different notions of hospitalities and welcoming of the ‘Afar communities, I hope to open up novel ways of conceptualising, theorising and developing more sophisticated understandings of culture, morality and local ethics in my research area. By foregrounding the notions of hospitality that are entangled with specific culturally distinctive traits of the ‘Afar communities in the region, I deliberately move away from Ethiopian “identity politics”, and the construction of ethnic, cultural or religious boundaries in the self-identification processes. Such an approach would contain the ‘Afar communities in Dakoba I worked with as an enclosed group. Instead, I take this ethnographically informed and normative account in my analysis, focusing on local ethics to contribute in a different way to existing research on identity formation in the Ethiopian and North-East African context. This is the second concern of this chapter. Specifically, I use the history and the different relationships of the salt trade between ‘Afar and non-’Afar salt traders to show that these dynamics have created different interactions that were built on trust, reliability and reciprocity. While this may seem like a minor shift in thinking, the context of the empirical examples I provide in the following sub-sections point to its potential magnitude for better understanding self-identification processes along and beyond the regional boundary of ‘Afar and Tigray (and potentially other parts of the Horn of Africa).

Ethnographically, this chapter focuses then on how hospitality is expressed in lived experience and in social interactions of daily life with Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and among the ‘Afar salt traders I conducted my research with. This reflection includes my positionality as a guest and researcher. However, it also includes observations I made when new guests arrived

and when I was put into the position of hosting foreigners from Europe at *Gifta* Ibrahim's compound.

Theoretically, I move away from the concept of hospitality in western philosophical thought and the central ideas of Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Kant.[27] Even though I regard central aspects of their universal principles about hospitality as good thinking tools, in this chapter I shift the focus from a discussion about hospitality to an anthropological discourse (Candea and Col 2012; Herzfeld 1987; Marsden 2012; Molz and Gibson 2007; Pitt-Rivers [1977] 2012). I focus on the guest-host relationships in ethnographic research. Reflecting on the concrete experience of my role as researcher and guest in Ethiopia led me to reconsider my positionality in the field and question my role as researcher, guest and friend *vis-à-vis* my hosts and the 'Afar communities I worked with during my time in Ethiopia. Using ethnographic accounts, I am particularly interested in the reciprocal dynamics and changing roles between guest and host and how this influenced my overall research projects. I understand this dynamic as a "process of inversion" (Pitt-Rivers [1977] 2012) and "rite of incorporation" (W. C. Young 2007). In the discussion, I let my ethnographic data lead me and I treat the role of hosts and guests as cultural categories rather than personal identities.

I conclude this chapter by arguing that the concepts of trust and honesty are all central to understanding the self-identification processes and notions of being and becoming 'Afar. Together these notions serve as a moral codex for constructing a sense of self and ethical behaviour towards "others" (guests, strangers, visitors), including animals. This understanding

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[27] Central in the study of hospitality are the works of the Algerian-French philosopher Jacque-Derrida. For Derrida, hospitality is an innate human characteristic that can be found in every culture or social bond. He writes: "doubtless, all ethics of hospitality are not the same, but there is no culture or social bond without a principle of hospitality. This principle demands, it even creates the desire for, a welcome without reserve and without calculation, an exposure without limit to whoever arrives [l'arrivant]. Yet a cultural or linguistic community, a family, a nation, can not not suspend, at the least, even betray this principle of absolute hospitality: to protect a 'home', without doubt, by guaranteeing property and what is 'proper' to itself against the unlimited arrival of the other; but also to attempt to render the welcome effective, determined, concrete, to put it into practice [le mettre en oeuvre]" (Derrida 2005, 6). Derrida formulated a law of an "absolute" or "unconditional" hospitality. The logic behind his hospitality, which he like Kant and other philosophers of the Enlightenment builds on examples of Classical Antiquity and stories from the Bible, is governed by an aporia or "non-dialectizable antinomy" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 77).

also allows me to develop further the core argument of this dissertation, e.g. an *ethic of correspondence* which offers new ways of practising anthropology, especially for ethnographic filmmaking. This is the field my dissertation seeks to contribute to.

To illustrate my arguments, let me bring us back to an example from the beginning of this chapter, on the *dasiga* ritual in the canyons outside of Barhale. I use the example to launch a discussion into the unique concepts and dynamics of ‘Afar notions of hospitality, in particular to the treatment of guests.

13 Sharing meat and information with guests

The purpose of the described *dasiga* ritual, as I learned once Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and I had returned to *Gifta* Ibrahim’s compound, is to take a break from work, regain energy for future tasks or overcome a longing for meat. *Dasiga* can also be seen as a meat sharing feast. During *dasiga*, the camel meat is neither mixed with other food nor seasoned. Drinking water is prohibited, and the presence of women during the ceremony is forbidden (to abstain from all temptations). Travellers, wayfarers, guests and visitors like Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and I are welcomed during the *dasiga*. The men offer them meat and allow them to stay for a certain amount of time. However, people cannot stay overnight and have to leave after they have finished the offered meat.[28]

‘Afar-livestock relations: branding camels

The ‘Afar salt traders I worked with during my research place a high value on livestock, especially goats and camels. Camels fulfil an essential social function and are an integral part of the ‘Afar communities in the Dakoba region.

For the *dasiga*, only old or non-productive camels are therefore slaughtered. The relation between men and camel is regulated through a strict set of customary laws (*med’a*).

[28] There is a similar feast called *sola al-ḥado* that is offered to guests. Here a small male goat is slaughtered, and the meat prepared on hot stones in a campfire. Depending on the location, rice and spicy sauces are offered together with the goat meat.

The ‘Afar people use their customary law(s) to solve their daily criminal, social, political and other problems. This varies from clan to clan and region to region. It is transmitted orally and known by specific members of the ‘Afar community, the fathers of the customary law (called *med’a tabba*). While I will return to the specifics of the *med’a* later in this chapter, I want to point out something particularly interesting for the treatment of camels.

Gāli bedu – branding camels

‘Afar brand their camels with a clan mark on the leg or neck, called *gāli bedu* (literally meaning “camel mark”). I was first made aware of this when I showed a rough cut of my documentary to an ‘Afar woman, Almas, whose family engaged in the salt trade for many centuries. At one point, Almas asked me to stop the video and said, “Wait! This is my father’s camel. I recognise it”! I was puzzled by the observation – since for me it was difficult to tell one camel from another – and Almas explained to me how the ‘Afar brand their camels.

Communities use hot iron sticks to make the camel brandings. ‘Afar brand their camels when they are still young and before they can carry loads. Next to the *gāli bedu*, camels can have a personal branding of the owner. The clan marks are from the father’s clan. Camels, however, can also have a second mark from the mother’s clan, if someone wants to express love to their mothers. According to the ‘Afar customary laws of the Dakoba, a camel without a mark can be taken by anyone. A person in need can take a free-ranging camel with a mark for transporting goods from one village to another [this is known as *dabba kora*]. The camel has to be returned to the clan afterwards. If someone is using a camel without telling the truth, or lying about it, the customary laws of this region require this person to pay three additional camels to the clan or the camel’s owner. Further, if the camel has suffered [*hawel*; a word used to express the inflicted pain or suffering on a camel] through the use of a tied rope to bind its mouth [*aftita* is the name of this rope] or other injury, the punishment can be increased. In times of extreme situations, hunger or famine, camels and other livestock found in the wilderness can be killed and eaten. Here, the *gāli bedu* [the camel mark] has to be preserved and presented to the clan

leader. If this is not done, the punishment can be up to twelve camels.

Image 6: Still from *Arho*. The camel branding (*gāli bedu*) is seen here on the neck of the camel in the foreground. The *gāli bedu* [camel mark] helps to identify free-ranging camels among the ‘Afar (timecode: 04:47).

The ‘Afar communities in the Barhale districts in fact always provide water, food and sometimes shelter to travellers and wayfarers in the ‘Afar land, much as they do during the *dasiga* ritual. ‘Afar caravans used to carry extra bread (called *gogoyata* or *daḥita*), water and tea with them to share with other caravaners. “The camel caravans”, so an ‘Afar saying goes, “are like a village where guests and unexpected visitors are welcome”. I now turn the focus to the specific notions of guests.

14 Guests, visitors and wayfarers

There are no direct translations for the terms foreigner or stranger in the ‘Afar language. The communities in this part of the ‘Afar region treat people travelling through the ‘Afar land as guests [*‘ibïna*; *‘ibnaytu* (sg.)]. Various terms express welcoming or hospitality in the ‘Afar language. The two terms, which best render the concept of hospitality are *‘ibnaytïno* or *‘ibincadà*, a compound noun from *‘ibïna* (guests) and *konnabà* or *konnabnà*. A third common term is *arḥibà*, which is derived from the imperative *arḥib* that means “welcome” or “make

yourself comfortable".[29]

Nomadism is still the primary way of life for many 'Afar in northern communities and their movement depends on rainfall and water for the cattle. Among the 'Afar, information about available pasture, rainfall, the price of salt at different markets, safe travelling routes, conflict in certain regions, or else news about specific communities (such as births or deaths), the arrival of non-'Afar groups or visitors in the 'Afar land, and any other news is shared through a culturally distinct form of reciprocal information meshwork[30], called *ḏāgu*.

In the next section, I show how the concept of *ḏāgu* is one of the central aspects of 'Afar people in all regions of north-eastern Africa, which explains its importance for the context of my research. More specifically, my particular interest is that a shared *ḏāgu* is embedded with specific understandings of trust, honesty, reliability and reciprocity. As my research progressed, I became increasingly entangled within this meshwork of information, as news about myself, my research project and my intentions often preceded me. In many instances, this was of benefit to my research. In other cases, it put me in a highly uncomfortable situation in which I felt as though my privacy and personal life were being violated.

Đāgu – an information-sharing meshwork

The 'Afar *ḏāgu* involves a rhetoric that follows specific rules, that may vary from region to region, but shares the same characteristics. *Đāgu* includes information on rainfall and available pasture for cattle, but also news of death or conflict or of the arrival of non-'Afar. It also applies to guests who travel through 'Afar land. Đāgu is passed between men and women alike. Respect is given to the older person, who typically starts giving information. Children under the age of 15 are not required to provide more information than their father's name and

[29] When somebody says *arḥib*, the answer is: *aràc ma cabin*. In Djibouti there is a town named *arḥib a*. The name *arḥib a* was given by the then prime minister of 'Afar, Ali Arif Bourhan. While building the Djibouti state, the prime minister made a call to all 'Afar to come to Djibouti, settle there and take part in state-building. Nevertheless, *'ibnaytiino* is the original 'Afar word that stands for hospitality.

[30] I here refer to Tim Ingold's meshwork theory that defines a meshwork as an entanglement of lines along which live is lived (Ingold [2007] 2016, 83; 2011, 63–94).

the region they are from. Information exchange was and is crucial for the survival for the ‘Afar pastoralists and nomadic groups. To survive in this harsh environment, ‘Afar depend on information and often seek out specific information and then act accordingly. This is probably best expressed in the following ‘Afar proverb

Either you live by information or you sleep on your eardrum (implying you die if you get no information).	*Đāguh ḑīne kē ḑāgah ḑīne.*

In modern days and with mobile technology, information crosses international boundaries and a common ‘Afar saying is that *ḑāgu* “travels faster than the news on the internet”. During my research, which took place in different zones in the ‘Afar region, I could observe and listen to the interaction. There is a differentiation between ‘Afar, who know each other and who are relatives or friends, and ‘Afar who do not know each other but recognize one another by speaking the ‘Afar language.

A conversation between ‘Afar who have never met before might go something like this:

Atu anni rakāyih/rashih numuuy? – From which region are you?

Atu annih da’arih numuuy? – From which district are you?

Atu annih auda nummuy? – From which qebelle (qebelle)[31] *are you?*

Ku miga’a? – What is your name?

Ku abba miga’a? – What is your father’s name?

Ku kada miga’a? – What is your grandfather’s name?

Atu makēdoy? – What is the name of your clan?

Atu ah bāḑo maḥa temēte? – Why did you come to this land?

There are two different ways of exchanging *ḑāgu*: (1) when people meet in the countryside, on

[31] The *qebelle* (*kebelle*) is the lowest level of administration in Ethiopia. It is similar to a municipality.

the road, in town, or on a bus as a spontaneous, unexpected interaction and (2) when someone enters a compound, house, room or dwelling place, where other people are already present.

During interactions between a non-'Afar and 'Afar, the guest is first offered a place to sit and make themself comfortable and is then provided with water, tea, coffee and food, before having to state their intentions. In the first case of *ḍāgu* exchange outlined in the previous paragraph, people may just stop for some time, sit down and exchange information.

As previously described, the 'Afar make the guest or stranger known through *ḍāgu*. Yusuf once told me that for the 'Afar 'it is important to know if there are guests traveling in the 'Afar land. We want to know who they are and what intentions they have. This is to make sure that someone can provide for them and make them feel welcome.

At the beginning of this chapter, I showed how *Gifta* Ibrahim introduced me as his guest to the men who offered us their hospitality during the dasiga ritual. He stated my intention, where I was from and why I was with him and Yusuf. By that time, I had already become close to *Gifta* Ibrahim, his family, his eldest son and his extended kin. *Gifta* Ibrahim had offered to host me during my research, and we had had many conversations about my life, my family, my research and my intentions. On our first encounter, in January 2018, when Yusuf introduced me to *Gifta* Ibrahim, we spent the entire evening and night discussing my personal life, research plans, my knowledge about 'Afar, my previous role in Ethiopia and if and how my research plans would or would not benefit the involved communities. Yusuf acted as a translator and after midnight *Gifta* Ibrahim offered us his room to sleep, while he went to sleep at a relative's house. Over the coming weeks and months, we all spent days and nights together in that same room. Through the conversations with *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf, I also learned how to introduce myself to other 'Afar, or for interviews. This would usually include the following information.

> Annu inni sin barsek, yi miqaq Tillo Jakob Frederik Trojer migaq liyo. Kak emētem, yiirobah qaran gubat raqta bāḍooy, Jarman deqsittak emēte. Anu 'Afar bāḍo l kah emētem, 'Afar bāḍo l kusaq aba gida. Axcihīy kusaq elle abam faxam

> ‘Afar affay, qādā kē ‘Afar ak aydādu. Muxxi muxxi yi kusaq angāraw edde leh yanimmīy qasboh arhoh badāqata.
>
> I want to introduce myself to you [pl.], my name is Till Jakob Frederik Trojer [this is the name I have]. I come from the European continent, from a country that is called Germany. I came to the ‘Afar land to conduct research in the ‘Afar country. The research I am doing is about aspects of the ‘Afar language, culture and history. Especially my research is concerned with the salt caravan trade.

The ‘Afar *ḏāgu* implies that there are no secrets and that all information has to be shared. This means that news and information about your actions are passed on quickly through the *ḏāgu*. Not telling the truth or providing false information can have negative consequences for the individual, their family, and their clan. Potential consequences are again negotiated through a set of oral laws manifested in the ‘Afar customary law (*med’a*). In the worst case, an individual may be excluded from their clan and community.

Information must always be cross-checked. This is best expressed in the sentence *kok iyye kok iye numuy kok iye* [repeated as who told you the information, who told the person the information, who told you the information]. This can go on indefinitely to make sure that the original source of information can be trusted. The exchange of *ḏāgu* is linked to truthfulness and honesty expressed according to the ethics of Islam, in which lying is regarded as *haram*.[32]

‘Afar notions of welcoming and treating guests, and hosting strangers, are not bound by the ethics and teachings of Islam although they are highly influenced by them. As discussed, the ‘Afar people look toward the Arab world culturally, in their strong commitment to Islam. However, their notions of welcoming and hospitality seem to be rooted in an ethical imperative regulated through the ‘Afar customary laws and the *dāgu*. Nevertheless, the ‘Afar in the district

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[32] The Qur’an and hadith literature are filled with quotes about forbidden matters within Islam. A discussion of this would go beyond the scope of this dissertation (Lumbard 2011; Rababah and Rababah 2016).

of north-eastern Ethiopia fuse inherited aspects of Islam and elements from pre-Islamic nomadic civilisations with their own distinct notions of welcoming. What interests me is the convergence of these different notions, especially ideas about welcoming and hosting in Islam. During my research, my own beliefs and dispositions about religion changed. My shift in thinking influenced my positionality among the salt traders I worked with. It allowed me to gain access to information and observations that would have otherwise remained hidden.

Hospitality in Islam: changing positionality

Like almost all Muslim men, *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf attended Koran school from a young age. Islam played an essential role in their lives, as it did for most of the ‘Afar I met during my research. However, I would also find that the relation to Islam of many of my interlocutors was fluid, dynamic and ambiguous. During my research period, for example, I shared both halal and non-halal meals with my Muslim-‘Afar interlocutors. Went I spent several stretches of time, day and night, with interlocutors like Yusuf or *Gifta* Ibrahim, I observed that they might not pray for weeks on end. On some days, however, they kept all five prayer times. Before I joined them in prayer, I sometimes watched Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim pray and felt a pinch of longing at the ease with which they opened up their communication with Allah. The sincerity of their meditation made me feel much more lost in my disconnected mind. “We get our religion from our fathers and follow them”, Yusuf once said to me. “I grew up praying, and this is the life I know”.

Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim were aware of my views on religion. We had discussed it many times. Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim respected my beliefs. They were interested in my Catholic upbringing but surprised that my parents had baptised neither my brother nor me. Often, during our čat sessions, we discussed spirituality, belief and our views on religion. Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim understood that I disagreed with the idiosyncrasies of the major monotheistic doctrines. I never had the feeling that Yusuf or *Gifta* Ibrahim pushed any religious agenda on me. They did not mind me being present during their prayer times.

My perception of life and religion partly changed when I had a heat stroke and collapsed in the salt desert while making the documentary *Arho*. I was unconscious for about one hour, and I had to be treated by a nurse from a military camp. My collapse happened about halfway through my research period. I was physically exhausted and mentally drained. The tolls of fieldwork had left their mark. Being away for such a long time from my partner, my family and friends had made me vulnerable. The notes in my fieldwork diary speak volumes about my feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and moments of despair.

After we completed filming the documentary and once I had recovered from my heat stroke, Yusuf offered to teach me more about Islam and invited me to spend Ramadan, which was only a week away, with him at his house in Mekelle. Ramadan became a suitable opportunity for me to slow things down a notch and to regain some strength and confidence.[33]

Are you a Muslim Tillo?

Yusuf and *Gifta* Nur, an ‘Afar elder with a business in Mekelle, helped me gain permission from the local sharia court in Mekelle so I could accompany them to the mosque for Ramadan. I knew that non-believers and people of any faith were permitted to visit, pray or meditate in mosques in Ethiopia. But Yusuf and *Gifta* Nur wanted to do things properly. They also introduced me to the Imam of the mosque, who agreed to support me in my Arabic studies and further introduced me to the Islamic teachings. At the sharia court in Mekelle, I had to sign a document stating that no one was forcing me to accept Allah in my life. The general assumption was that I – as a white foreigner – was Christian by default. The people at the sharia court were welcoming but they too were surprised and puzzled that my parents had not baptised

[33] In 2016, I spent Ramadan in a small community in the Gambia with the extended family of my fiancé’s mother. I remembered the peaceful atmosphere. Everything slowed down. I fasted during the day with the relatives and friends on the compound where we were staying. In the evening we would break fast together, drink green tea and sit the whole night to chat. It was here where I came in closer contact and learned more about Islam. I had studied Arabic during my undergraduate degree at the University of Bayreuth (2009-2013) had a solid knowledge of the Arabic script. I had also undertaken travels to Sudan (2009) and Egypt (2009 and 2013).

me. They had never encountered a foreigner with “no religion”. For bureaucratic reasons, I still had to sign the document. The documented stated that I had converted from Orthodox Christianity to Islam as there was no other form available – especially none for an unbaptised foreigner.

While in Mekelle, I frequented the mosque in the Muslim quarter. I met up with the Imam, who further taught me the surah (the holy verses) of the Koran. I spent many nights at Yusuf’s house, but only when his wife or maid were present. It is uncommon for a man in Ethiopia to invite people to his house when his mother, a sister or a maid are not present. In the urban context, it is common to have maids for cooking and cleaning. Men living in the city usually do not know how to cook, and it is rare to be invited into a house without a woman present. In restaurants and coffee houses, men invite one another and show their generosity by paying for meals or drinks.

Yusuf said to me one evening at his house after we broke our fast:

> Prayer is the way we communicate with Allah. It is through our spirit we connect with him. During Ramadan, we must withstand temptations like drinking, eating and sexual intercourse during the day. You also may not swear and must stick to all prayer times. We withstand food to understand the suffering of starving people. It makes us aware of their feelings, their struggle, and it reminds us to share what we have.

Yusuf was patient with me and explained that giving charity and alms to the poor or less fortunate is one of the five pillars of Islam. *Zakāt* (the compulsory part of your wealth that must be given to charity) and *sadaqah* (a voluntary contribution) depend on a person’s ability to pay.

In her book *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God’s Name*, Mona Siddiqui comments that in the Islamic context “rich and poor are not defined in any categories, and wealth and poverty are not measured in any systematic way” (Siddiqui 2015, 56). Instead,

giving is a moral obligation that should not be mistaken for hospitality. The open conversations on Islam I had with Yusuf informed my perception of moral actions and living in the world. The teachings of Islam as I learned them during my research and their implication for moral actions seemed closer to my understanding of life and the universe than Catholicism. Yusuf was patient with me and taught me the prayer movements and surah of the Koran. We read passages from the Koran (he in Arabic and I in the English translation). Almost every night we watched the Iranian drama series about the Prophet Yusuf dubbed in English which was running on Ethiopian television.

Hospitality in Islam and among ʻAfar: goats and prayers

It was the third week of Ramadan in June 2018, when *Gifta* Ibrahim invited Yusuf and me back to his homestead in Barhale. Fasting, re-adjusting my body-clock and abstaining from food and water during the day in this hot environment, took another toll on my body and mind, however. In the summer months temperatures in the Barhale district can reach 45-55 degrees Celsius and fasting was more challenging than in Mekelle. I had a slight headache during the day, which got worse as the evening approached. During the day, we slept in, resting in a compact room. On my first night at *Gifta* Ibrahim's homestead, he gave Yusuf and me his room to spend the night in, while he went to sleep in the second set of huts with the junior men. Over the months, having spent more time together, there was no distinction between us anymore and without discussing or mentioning it we all shared the same room or slept outside next to each other.

During the day Amina, *Gifta* Ibrahim's first wife, remained with the other women in a small hut, next to the water well. The senior men slaughtered the meat in a small stall on an open fire. Women prepare the food, even though ʻAfar men know how to prepare tea and coffee, and on the caravans they also slaughter and prepare goat meat. For larger celebrations or festivities like weddings, the *dasiga* or the *sola al-ḥado*, men prepare the meat. Preparing food for guests is done by women and overseen by the senior women of the homestead. ʻAfar men

depend heavily on their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. Although ‘Afar women are not always present in the different stages of offering “hospitality”, women take on the responsibilities of providing for guests. In the ‘Afar communities of Barhale women play an important role in offering hospitality, even if they are not always noticeably or physically present. Andrew Shryock notes in his studies on the role of Arab women in offering hospitality that they are “always partially unseen” and “as a social performance, many of its most important elements are time-delayed or acted out elsewhere. The bulk of food, preparation, for instance, is seldom witnessed by male guests” (Shryock 2004, 59).[34]

On one Saturday evening in the first week of June, neighbours, relatives and members of Amina’s and *Gifta* Ibrahim’s clan gathered together. It was *Gifta* Ibrahim’s obligation as a clan leader to host and provide for his extended family on market days (or at least once a week). I recognised some familiar faces of salt traders I had interviewed a few months ago, Imran, and Zeynu, who came from their villages when they heard Yusuf and I had returned. We greeted each other and exchanged *ḍāgu*.

> *‘Salam Aleikum my friends’*
>
> *‘How are you?’*
>
> *‘How is the land? How are the people?’*
>
> *‘How is your health? How is your family?’*
>
> *‘What news did you bring?’*
>
> *‘What did you see? Whom did you meet?’*

They heard about my interest in Islam, and that Yusuf had taught me the Islamic prayer. I caught Imran’s eye when Yusuf further explained why I decided to do this. “It is his way of showing

[34] When Amina was not present, *Gifta* Ibrahim would send his son to get food from a neighbour or small restaurant. In the next chapter, I write in more detail about the role the ‘Afar women in ‘Afar society and the role they played in the political ecology of the salt trade.

respect to the life of the ‘Afar people living in this area”, Yusuf explained. “Tillo wants to learn more about the teachings and ethics of Islam. If you allow him, he would like to pray with us”. The look of joy in Imran’s eyes more than made up for the headaches. He had covered his close-cropped hair with a white turban. The lines of the silvery ornaments on the collar of his shimmering blue *thwab* seemed to extend into the ends of his long dark beard. The serene and graceful elegance of his eyes were momentarily suspended by concern when he said:

> We were worried when you had the heatstroke and collapsed in Hamad Ela [the last village before the salt flats] last month. We worried, even though you were from a different religion at the time. However, now we are brothers, and we will meet again after our death’

Imran had for many years been the leader of the caravans (the *arho tabba*) until he had taken on a different job in the community because of the decline of the salt trade. For almost two decades he led the camel caravans to the salt flats and back to the market. He was a firm believer and highly respected within his community.

The sun was about to set, and we gathered for prayer. We were a group of 15-20 men, the youngest in his late teens and the oldest in his mid-50s, standing on colourful chequered mats covering the hard, dry ground of the open compound. Imran led the prayer. The younger men served juice and water; no women were present during the meals. I picked up the glass with my left hand to drink. Zeynu, sitting next to me, reminded me with an expression of warm sincerity to use my right hand.

On this evening in June, Zeynu wore a black and white scarf and plain patterned *shiret*. The beauty of this gentle and ennobling wrap of fabric commonly worn by all ‘Afar men lies in its simplicity. The *shiret* follows the human contours, while moving or sitting. In this hostile environment, it captures every breeze and protects from the dawn chill. Together with a scarf used as a turban, towel or cloth, the two pieces of fabric are multi-purpose and all you need.

Zeynu wore both with self-assurance.

The goat meat was cut in pieces and distributed among us—starting with the liver. As guests, they served Yusuf and me first before the senior men. *Gifta* Ibrahim ensured that all his guests had enough to eat. With his subtle authority, he controlled the different stages involved in the breaking of the fast. After we finished the goat meat, large silver plates with rice, spicy sauce and more goat meat were served. They moved the plate into Yusuf's and my reach, and people gathered around to join us. There were now four groups of five to six men eating from one plate. I listened to the conversations and let my mind wander.

Zeynu and Yusuf prompted me to eat "*akum*"! Zeynu said. "*Anu a mā'ó inkih akmem madūda*", I replied, expressing my appreciation for the generosity and the abundance of food while also stating that I had had enough. My reply (*I cannot possibly eat all this food*) put a smile on Zeynu's face and entertained the rest of the people. After the food, people relaxed and stretched out on the mattresses, pillows and metal camp beds. Abubaker, Imran' son, brought the brass coffee pot from the kitchen and poured the coffee into the small cups. Again, Yusuf and I were served first. Before we drank the coffee, Yusuf asked me if I wanted to say the prayer. He saw the hesitation in my eyes. He must have remembered that I was frightfully tongue-tied when speaking in 'Afar-Af to a larger group, "Do not worry, just say it in your language", he added. While I expressed my gratitude in my mother-tongue German, we all held our hands out openly, palms facing the sky. No-one asked what I had said and everyone joined in my "amen" at the end of my prayer.

The air had cooled down, and there was a slight breeze now. My headache had vanished, and Yusuf and I leaned against the wall of the second set of rooms where the younger men spend their nights and keep their belongings. From where we were sitting, Yusuf and I overlooked the compound. Sheep and goats – men, conversed, laughed and teased each other. As with the nights at Yusuf's house, we engaged in a discussion about the teachings of Islam.

Yusuf was patient with me and took the time to answer my questions. Since we prayed together, our friendship had grown more intimate. “The ‘Afar use Islam as a reference and fuse it with their own culture”. I did not quite understand what he meant by reference and asked him whether he could explain. He fell silent for a moment. Then Yusuf raised his eyebrow, and the corners of his mouth drew into a smile. I knew he liked our conversations and the fact that I showed such a keen interest in the different aspects of the ‘Afar culture. “Let me tell you the story of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of our Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him”, he said.

> ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was digging a well and came into conflict with the Quraysh, a ruling Arab tribe in Mecca at that time. To avoid further confrontation, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib offered to sacrifice one of his sons if Allah gave more sons upon him for protection from the Quraysh. After he and his wife had nine more sons, he felt obliged to make the promised sacrifice. He gathered his sons and cast a lot to select which son to sacrifice. The lot chose his favourite son Abdullah, the father of our Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was upset and asked his wife for advice on how to avoid sacrificing Abdullah. His wife advised him to go to Ka’ba and pray to Allah. This is what he did. Allah told him to cast a lot between Abdullah and a camel and offer the camel instead of his son. Ninety-nine times he repeated the “lottery”, but it always chose Abdullah’s name. On the one hundredth time, however, the lottery fell on the camel.

Yusuf had gazed into the air during his narration. After he finished, he turned his attention back to me said:

> Until today, according to the ‘Afar customary law, the punishment for intended murder is the payment of one hundred camels (or the equivalent in money) to the family of the victim.

Friends, guests and hosts

As I grew closer into the meshwork of social relations of my hosts, in particular *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf, I overcame the "gust-of-wind stage" as Clifford Geertz calls it. Geertz writes in his essay *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* about his research experience in Bali when he and his wife transgressed this stage of "nonpersons, spectres, invisible men" (Geertz [1973] 1993, 412) to "a sudden and unusual complete acceptance into a society extremely difficult for outsiders to penetrate" (Geertz [1973] 1993, 416). Geertz seems to capture my own experience during my research among pastoral groups in 'Afar when he writes

> you have crossed, somehow, some moral or metaphysical shadow line. Though you are not exactly taken as a Balinese (one has to be born to that), you are at least regarded as a human being rather than a cloud or a gust of wind. The whole complexion of your relationship dramatically changes to, in the majority of cases, a gentle, almost affectionate one – a low keyed, rather playful, rather mannered, rather bemused geniality (Geertz [1973] 1993, 413).

What I have further shown in the above description of 'Afar *'ibnaytïno* or *'ibincadà* (hospitality), is close to the understanding of "hospitality" in Germany and the Netherlands. In my native language, German, hospitality is translated as *Gastfreundschaft* (former also *Hospitalität*), literally meaning "guest-friendship". It implies a friendship between the host and the guests. Henri Nouwen says about German *Gastfreundschaft* that it is "primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend" (Nouwen 1998, 48). *Gastfreundschaft*, in this sense, allows the guest to physically and emotionally experience spirituality. This form of genuine hospitality is not concerned with reciprocity. Hosting, Nouwen writes, is about listening, about allowing people to be themselves and about giving them room to "sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances … not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance to find their own"; it is "about inviting guests into our world on their terms" (Nouwen 1998, 78).

Hospitality and welcoming among ‘Afar in Dakoba

Concepts of welcoming and hospitality (*‘ibnaytïno* or *‘ibincadà*) in northern ‘Afar seem to be mediated around the host-traveller, host-wayfarer and host-guest rather than host-stranger relationship. As Mona Siddiqui writes about the notions of hospitality in Islam, there is not one “but several concepts involving various kinds of people and various kinds of relationships” (Siddiqui 2015, 35). Like Islamic but also other nomadic societies, among the ‘Afar, there also does not seem to be one “particular narrative about hospitality” that would define “the concept feature in any singular way” (2015, ibid). This goes beyond providing food, shelter and generosity.

The ‘Afar place a high value on generosity when providing for guests. The word for hospitality in Arabic, *karam* or *karam al’arab*, implies different concepts such as “nobility”, “grace” and “refinement” (Shryock 2004, 36), as Andre Shryock points out in his study of hospitality among the Balga of Jordan (Shryock 2004; 2008). Shryock notes that *karam* is a “virtue, … a genealogical endowment… and a moral obligation akin to piety” (Shryock 2008, 406). The word for honour, respect and generosity can be expressed through various forms, including either of the Arabic words for generosity, *saràf* or *karam*. In ‘Afar-Af these notions of honour, respect and generosity can be expressed respectively with *càddi*, *cismàt*, or *naamus*.

It is important to note that hospitality refers not only to the “provision of food, shelter, and security to guests but a noble character that makes generosity possible” (Shryock 2008, 406). “To count as *karam*”, so Shryock’s interlocutors confessed to him, “hospitality must be given freely, without design or calculation” (Shryock 2004, 49). Similarly Young (W. C. Young 1996; 2007) reminds us that a focus on “generosity” in the “explanation of a guest’s transformation into a member of the host’s household does not take cultural variation … into account”.

My ethnographic data seems to suggest that in line with Young’s and Shryock analysis, hospitality and generosity are visible traits of the ‘Afar culture. The people involved in the

different stages of offering hospitality, host, guest, senior woman, senior men and junior men and women are better described as “cultural categories” rather than as “personal identities” (W. C. Young 2007, 51), because they change over time. The hospitality I experienced during Ramadan as well as at other moments seemed to follow a particular structure, an inherent inner logic along three sets of cultural categories that Young calls *Giver* (host; senior man or woman of the homestead), *Mediator* (junior men and women) and *Receiver* (guest) (W. C. Young 2007, 51).

Notions of welcoming and hospitality, treating others and respecting others among ‘Afar seem however to be deeper rooted in an ethical imperative and moral behaviour towards others. These values can be traced back to the ‘Afar customary laws. As I have tried to show in my analysis, the ‘Afar customary law serves as a moral codex of behaviour towards others, including animals. Criminal punishment has broad ramifications for the entire family and clan, and not just the individual. This makes people act more consciously, as I also experienced myself. The discussion of the ‘Afar *ḍāgu* showed that much of ‘Afar communication is based on speaking truthfully and honestly. This expressed through various sayings and proverbs

Koh iyi warsēh koh warse numuh iyi warsēh’	*Who told you and who told to the person who told you*

This is to confirm the origin/initial provider of the *ḍāgu*. If a person transmits wrong *ḍāgu* no one trusts his *ḍāgu* anymore and becomes a liar among the society and receives a punishment act for doing so.

My observations seem to support the argument that it is the ethical self rather than any other self (social, personal or political) that is salient in ‘Afar culture. The moral codex of customary laws includes punishment for transgressions by individual members. At the same time, the ‘Afar way of communicating indicates a high degree of social control. Considered as such, the social group is of great importance in both the conception and the enforcement of acceptable/ethical behaviour within the ‘Afar community.

15 Conclusion: what information and for whom? Trust, mistrust and ethics in the ethnographic encounter

In this chapter, I deliberately took a normative and idealised account, using empirical data from my fieldwork. to explore the role of the ‘Afar customary law as a guide for ethical behaviour and individual accountability. One of the aims was to contest current research on ‘Afar culture and identity construction. The problem with using such a lens for analysis is that it excludes a more critical engagement with the functioning of the ‘Afar customary laws and the interaction between the ‘Afar *meda’a*, the Ethiopian statuary law, Muslim courts and *shari’a* law. My remarks have focused on isolated observations and remain limited to perspectives of ‘Afar involved in my research, like Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim.

I weaved together theory, analysis and ethnographic accounts. I wanted to foreground different ways of understanding notions of welcoming and hospitality from three interrelated perspectives: western philosophical notions, anthropological discourse and ethnographic reflections. Therefore, I discuss Islamic hospitality in teachings of the Quran (Achrati 2006; Rosenthal 1997; Siddiqui 2015) and referred to other ethnographic research among nomadic Muslim societies (Shryock 2008; W. C. Young 2007) to embed my arguments in a broader context. I am not an Arabic scholar and did not engage in theological discourses of the Quran nor of *ḥadīth* literature. As there are no existing studies on ‘Afar hospitality and welcoming, I used these approaches as a comparison. A discussion of “Islamic hospitality” was nonetheless important for my further argument about self-identification processes in the ‘Afar, because, as I have laid out, the ‘Afar people look toward the Arab World culturally, in their strong commitment to Islam.

By no means did I intend to romanticize customary laws, or any form of indigenous socio-cultural systems of conflict resolution as producing fairer, more equal forms of ‘justice’

(Chopra 2009; Mac Ginty 2008; Schlee 2004). As Günther Schlee observed in a comparative study about the Somali customary law, *xeer*, the negotiation of retaliation or its avoidance, compensation or collective payments in customary courts "tend to favour the stronger party in a variety of ways, one of them maybe simply that the weaker party want to avoid further beating" (Schlee 2013, 268). During my research, I neither observed nor witnessed concrete customary court negotiations and my accounts therefore remain normative, partly idealized, and restricted to personal observation of how the 'Afar *meda'a* functions primarily to steer individual behaviour. The 'Afar customary law lends itself to more critical informed research on how the existing power inequalities between different clans influence the outcome of customary courts. Such an approach can help overcome this normative and idealized account. This can include a historical and contemporary analysis of co-options of clan leaders and the exchange of favours between clan leaders and the central state, along the lines of Marco Bassi's work in Borana in southern Ethiopia (Bassi 2012).

There is furthermore research potential to explore the role of 'Afar women in these customary law negotiations and to ask the extent to which 'Afar women are involved in customary court negotiations? Are there differences in how crimes committed by or involving women are negotiated? Are there female customary judges among the 'Afar?

Guests and hospitality

Further, in this chapter, I have looked at my role as a guest, researcher and friend among the 'Afar communities I worked with. My account showed that there are different degrees of guests, and my spiritual journey with Islam certainly had an influence on my positionality in the field. It is pertinent to note, however, that I took this decision after being in the field for over nine months and had already collected over two-thirds of my data and completed filming the documentary *Arho – The 'Afar Salt Trade of North-Eastern Ethiopia*.

As I have shown, not all guests have the same makeup. By the same token, not all guests are entrusted with the same information and same degree of honesty. As I laid out in Chapter

II, there is still suspicion and mistrust among ‘Afar towards the central state and non-’Afar, including foreigners and groups from other parts of Ethiopia (L. Hammond 2011).

Trust and honesty are not established in three days of offering hospitality to guests or strangers according to Islam. Both honesty and trust are built over a more extended period of time. During the initial phase of my research, it took time until I understood the web of culturally appropriate behaviour I was weaved into. On December 6, 2017, I made the following entry in my diary that captures rather well my initial role in Logiya

> even after months here in this small town, people still treat me as a guest and invite me for coffee, food, juice or čat. Never am I allowed to pay. I learned not to refuse, have stopped asking what I am being handed for consumption and follow the person who says “I know you”, then grabs me by the hand, drags me to some other café, restaurant or juice house. Here, I am introduced to friends, relatives or acquaintances. Becoming more confident within the ‘Afar-Af language, I understand the question you have to ask and the information you have to share. Soon a web of social relations reveals itself in front of my inner eye, and I can link people from various districts of the ‘Afar region. This often results in comments like: “oh, you know him? he is my cousin!” or “our clans are related!” By knowing more and more people, a web of trust spun on truthfulness and honesty seems to emerge. I understand how the ḏāgu (a form of sharing information found among the ‘Afar people) works and how information about me travels. There are few researchers in the area, and they appreciate my presence and the intention of my research. Often, however, I feel that my presence is also met with suspicion and some of my questions about specific clans living in certain areas remain unanswered.

As I noted down in my notebook, even after four months, I was still treated as a “guest” and

could never pay for drinks or food. I even got free rides in taxis or lifts from people who recognised me on the street. I remember feeling a need to repay. However, people often said "ah, you pay the next time, today we invite you", or "do not worry, when we come to your country, you will invite us". Reflecting upon my notes from a physical and emotional distance, I think I was intentionally kept in the role of a guest until people could find out whether I could be trusted or not.

When returned a last time to meet *Gifta* Ibrahim before my departure to London in September 2018, he greeted me in Arabic and 'Afar-Af. To my surprise, he took my hand and kissed at the back of it, a gesture normally only exchanged among Muslim 'Afar. Yusuf started to greet me this way soon after we met, but *Gifta* Ibrahim had not done this until this particular day in September. I exchange the gesture and kiss the back of his hand. Leading me by the arm he tells me "*Atu 'Afar bāḍol qibinyatu kinnito*" [You are no longer a guest in the 'Afar land].

Welcoming has limitations. Individuals from other parts of Ethiopia, Muslim or Christian, who settle for business in the 'Afar region are often kept at a certain distance and in a state of suspension. On one occasion, while I was sitting in a small hotel room with a group of senior 'Afar men chewing *čat*, the waitress, a non-'Afar Muslim, came to take our orders in Tigrinya. After she left, a man commented,

> We would like to have more guests like you. At least you try to speak our language. Many people came here for business, live here for many years, but not even their children speak our tongue.

While Anthropological studies on host-guest relationships assume the role of guest as the final part of the inversion process, my experience suggests that a guest can become an extended host. This was the case when a British couple and close friends of mine came to visit me during my research, and I took them to stay at *Gifta* Ibrahim's homestead. It became my responsibility to welcome and make my friends feel welcome at *Gifta* Ibrahim's house. *Gifta* Ibrahim told me

"You know them best. And you have stayed with me for many months now. Make them feel at home".

There is, of course, a flipside to my analysis. I wrote my account as researcher and ethnographer with a particular interest in 'Afar culture. During ethnographic research, "the anthropologist", so Michael Herzfeld argues, "is a guest in both the local and national senses" (Herzfeld 1987, 75), with a "distinguished visitor status" (Geertz [1973] 1993, 416), operating with special research permissions, ID cards and research clearances. My personal bonds with Yusuf, an established member of the 'Afar communities in north-eastern Ethiopia, together with my research clearances from both Addis Ababa and Samara University, certainly put me in a privileged position.

I did, however, not set out to study hospitality or notions of welcoming among 'Afar pastoral groups. Reviewing my data from afar, e.g. after leaving the field, it became apparent that much 'Afar culture is constructed around welcoming the Other. While my analysis remains therefore incomplete, I believe it offers much potential for future research. It is my conviction that the study of local customary laws among the 'Afar, as well as other groups living along the 'Afar-Tigray regional boundary, like the Saho or the Enderta, can further help understand and diffuse conflicts between groups. However, this is a story for another time.

In the following part, *Salt, trade and corresponding landscapes in north-eastern Ethiopia*, I invite the reader on the journey along the caravan trails to the salt basin of the 'Afar Depression.

Chapter IV: Salt, trade and corresponding landscapes in north-eastern Ethiopia

Having your children at a young age and making a journey during the coldest moment (avoiding the heat of the sun) enables you to reach at a good destination (in life).

‘Afar proverb

The Boundary between the Kingdoms of *Dancali* [‘Afar] and *Tygre* [Tigray], is a Plain four Days Journey in Length, and one in Breadth, which they call the Country of Salt, for there is found all that they use in *Ethiopia* instead of Mony ; being Bricks, almost a Span long, and four fingers thick and broad, wonderful white fine, and hard, and there is never any miss of it, tho they carry away never so much ; and this Quantity is so great, that we met a Caravan of it, wherein we believed there could be no less than 600 Beast of Burden, Camels, Mules, and Asses, of which the Camels carry 600 of thole Bricks, and the Asses 140, or 150, and these continually going, and coming.

Emmanuel de Almeida,
Portuguese travel describing the caravan trade in north-eastern Ethiopia in 1628

***

Yusuf and I are talking to Abdu, a former caravan trader, who was for many decades the leader of salt caravans [*arho tabba*], a prestigious position within the communities in northern ‘Afar. Abdu joined the caravans as a young man when the caravans still travelled for months from the salt basin of the ‘Afar Depression to other parts of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Now in his mid-40s, Abdu tells us about the responsibilities and obligations he had as *arho tabba*. His main task was to organise the journey to the salt basin. His responsibilities included renting camels from other community members, hiring camel scouts and ensuring they packed enough provisions for the journey to and from the salt basin. The people elected the *arho tabba* based on his knowledge of the environment, as well as his reputation, and standing within the community. Abdu explains:

> I was accountable for the lives of other caravaners travelling with me. I had to select the safest and most efficient route, [and] arrange departure and resting times to avoid travelling during the hot midday sun.

Abdallah Lee, the most ‘Afar musician, honours *arho tabba* in his song *Arho Tabba* from the 1970s. Abdu recalls the chorus which in English translates as follows

> *I am a son of the ‘Afar /*
>
> *my homeland is the Red Sea /*
>
> *the Red Sea unites all ‘Afar people in a triangle /*
>
> *I am the arho tabba / the guardian of the ‘Afar natural wealth and culture /*
>
> *which is our livelihood /*
>
> *Let us praise the arho tabba /*
>
> *Who preserves the ‘Afar history /*
>
> *I am the arho tabba /*
>
> *the guardian of the ‘Afar natural wealth and culture /*
>
> *which is our livelihood /*
>
> *Let us praise the arho tabba /*
>
> *who preserves the ‘Afar history and /*
>
> *who travels to protect the great history and names of the ‘Afar…*

Several of my interlocutors pointed out Abdallah Lee’s song to me during my research. The ‘Afar salt traders involved in making the documentary film wanted Abdallah Lee’s music to be included in it. As the lyrics above show, the *arho tabba* is seen as a guardian of the ‘Afar knowledge, culture and history. His role is to protect, guard and spread this knowledge by travelling, by moving to other places.[35]

[35] There is a similar account on the caravan leader’s role in the travel accounts from Ferret and Galinier from the first half of the 19th century (Ferret and Galinier 1847, 407–11) that Richard Pankhurst reproduced (R. Pankhurst 1968, 378).

Our conversation with Abdu took place at the end of February 2018. We had met Abdu earlier that year to talk to him about the decline of the salt caravan trade. From our exchanges, that also included *Gifta* Ibrahim and other former caravaners, it became apparent the salt caravans would disappear soon. The *'As 'Ale Salt Association*, founded in 2010-11, had introduced trucks to transport the salt from the salt basins to the storage facilities of the Association. The Association has a monopoly over buying and selling the salt.

Arho – the journey of the caravans

In this dissertation chapter, *Salt, trade and corresponding landscapes in north-eastern Ethiopia*, my interest is to explore how recent developments, the use of trucks, and new actors in the salt business affect the daily life of individual 'Afar salt traders like Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, whom I have worked with during my research. Equally important is the discussion about the different historical actors still involved in the production, exchange and transport of salt along and beyond the regional boundary of the 'Afar and Tigray state. Understanding these questions is essential in order to explore the ways in which the decline in the salt trade relates to the broader topics raised in this dissertation, about trade, exchange, and the perception of the environment. Specifically, I am interested in how Abdu, Ibrahim and Idriss conceptualized these exchange relationships. How did they understand concepts of trust, business ethics, reciprocity and hospitality in these interactions? And how are these understandings and perceptions embedded within the geographic and social landscape along the caravan trails? Moreover, how have these conceptions changed during the political and economic transformations in the Horn of Africa since 1991?

As a theoretical frame for this chapter, I use value and commodity exchange theory (Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1977; Gregory [1982] 2014; Munn 1986; Strathern 1987) and discourses on landscapes and environmental perception as a guiding path (Fumagalli 1994; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Ingold 2000; Tilley 1994). Inspired by some of these frameworks,

the chapter seeks to investigate a broader application of these approaches. To make sense of the concrete experiences of my research, I call my approach in this dissertation *corresponding landscapes* (see introduction). The idea of *corresponding landscapes* is twofold. First, it is an analytical tool to understand the interwoven historical, political and socio-economic threads of the caravan trade. Second, it provides a theoretical framework applicable to other research on nomadic and pastoral communities.

From Barhale to the salt basin

I structure this chapter along the three-day caravan journey from Barhale to the salt basin of the ‘Afar Depression.

We begin our journey in Barhale where we acquire the required permissions from the local police station and administration. Obtaining permissions is a standard procedure for all foreigners intending to visit the salt basin or travel along the caravan trails. My research permissions and Ethiopian resident permits from Addis Ababa facilitate the process.

Aisha hosts us for lunch. Aisha is an ‘Afar woman, who, from a young age, engaged with her sister and mother in the salt business. In the late afternoon, we set off by car to meet up with Abdu, Idriss and Hussein in the village of Đer Gera [the long camel tail], about an hour’s drive from Barhale. We commence the journey to the salt basin from Đer Gera. Fatuma, an elderly ‘Afar women and kin relative of Abdu, hosts us in in Đer Gera for the night,

On the first day, the journey takes us from Đer Gera through the Sabba Canyon along the caravan trails to ‘Asa Bolo [the place of the mountain]. On our journey, we pass the ruins of an old Italian frontier post. We learn how different European powers (Italian, French, British) and Ethiopian Emperors tried to control the salt trade and implemented taxation on the caravans. To avoid the midday heat, we rest, eat lunch and have tea and coffee under a boulder. After our break, we continue our journey further along the Sabba Canyon trails until we reach ‘Asa Bolo just before dusk. We sleep on mats under the star-scattered sky, protected by the mountain and encircled by fifteen camels.

On the morning of day two, we cook bread [*gogoyta*] made from flour and water on an open fire and make other preparations for the remaining journey. Idriss and Hussein tell us more about their life as caravaners, and we learn about the risk, hardships and dangers of moving along the caravan trails. We leave ‘Asa Bolo after midday and travel further through the Sabba Canyon. The vast ‘Afar Depression appears before us as we emerge out of the gorges of the canyon. The environment changes drastically. There is no more vegetation, trees or boulders to hide from the sun. We travel further to Hamed Ela, where we spend our second night. The last village before the salt flats, Hamed Ela, is 30 km away from the Ethiopian-Eritrean border and has a large military camp with stationed soldiers. Tourist groups visiting the ‘Afar Depression, Dallol or the active volcano of Erta Ale, about five hours’ drive from Hamed Ela, usually spend the night here. Mussa, a relative and kin of Yusuf, welcomes us in Hamed Ela for the night.

On day three, we take off early in the morning for the journey to the salt basin. We see the salt workers lift and shape the salt into bars [*amolé*]. In the afternoon, we load the salt bars onto the camels’ backs and return to Hamed Ela, where we spend another night. On the morning of day four, Yusuf and I travel back to Barhale by car while Abdu, Idriss and Hussein journey back through the Sabba Canyon, where they spend another night. We meet up with Abdu, Idriss and Hussein in Barhale. They unload the salt bars at the magazine of the local *‘As ‘Ale Salt Association in Barhale*. We speak to the salt association members about the history, and current and future developments of salt mining in the region.

At the end of the chapter, I bring together the different voices and descriptions of all those involved in the salt trade, including the salt workers, tax collectors, traders, and caravaners to show how recent developments have changed the structures of the value chain.

16 Aisha’s restaurant

Before driving to Ɖer Gera to meet with Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and I have lunch at Aisha’s restaurant. Aisha is an ‘Afar women in her mid-60s, whose family

engaged in the salt trade since she was a child. She now owns a small restaurant in Barhale, where she welcomes and hosts people for lunch and dinner. Over time, Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and I eat here several times. Aisha is well respected within the community. Her small restaurant, located in a compound near the main mosque and market of the old town of Barhale, is a common meeting place for lunch, especially on Fridays [the day of the congregation in Islam].

After our spicy lunch of spaghetti with goat meat, Aisha joins Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and me for tea and coffee in the main room. During my stays in Barhale, I became closely acquainted with Aisha's son and extended kin family. Aisha is very keen to talk about her past and the experiences she had with the caravans. When I showed her a rough cut of the documentary we made about the journey of the caravans, she said: "You have to come with your camera, and I show you the equipment 'Afar women use in preparing *gogoyta* [bread] and making *sarr* [water containers made from goat skins]".[36]

When Aisha was young, she and her sister helped their mother get wheat flour to make bread that people carried with the camels down from the highlands on their journey to the salt basin. Aisha remembers that they exchanged the *amolé* [the salt slabs] for food and other products with the caravans coming from the highlands. Aisha and her family profited directly from their engagement with the passing camel trains. Still, most of the transaction was conducted in barter, and her family rented or exchanged bread, water containers made from goatskins, and camel milk with passing caravans.

According to Aisha, they could, when needed, sell big goat for 5 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) and a small goat for ETB 1. For ETB 3, they could buy 100 kg of wheat flour to make a special kind of bread called *gogoyata* or *daḥita*. To compare, during my research in 2017-2018, a cup of Ethiopian coffee in Barhale costs 5 ETB (U$ 0,14), and a goat would sell for about ETB 2000 (U$ 55).

[36] Unfortunately, this never materialized during my PhD research, as in July, August and September, a conflict broke out in Barhale and the salt flats. Gifta Ibrahim, Yusuf and other members said that it would not be the best time to come down here with a camera and film.

Today, Aisha owns a big compound with several huts, a kitchen, and a restaurant where Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and I hold our conversation with her. The room is approximately 6 x 6 m with pillows and cushions spread alongside the two walls on the west and north. The middle of the room is left empty to place the food and drinks trays. Opposite the seating area is a cupboard with glassware, plates, cups and other equipment. During our conversation, Aisha sat comfortably on a small stool in the middle of the room facing the three of us. Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and I spread leisurely on the cushions on the ground, leaning against the wall drinking our coffee.

Aisha wore a long black and red *abaya* [a dress commonly worn by Muslim women]. She had a brown *hijab* [head scarf] covering her head and neck, leaving her face showing. Aisha's eyes spoke with the confidence and serenity of an independent woman, while her face had the kind and welcoming warmth of a grandmother. Listening to Aisha, my thoughts flicked between the graceful woman sitting in front of me and her youthful self, working with her mother and sister. Aisha was attentive to my questions which Yusuf translated. She took her time responding to them. *Gifta* Ibrahim, lying lazily on a mattress next to me, kept interrupting Aisha in her narration. He tried to gain attention and to tell his own story. It became disruptive and at one point Aisha shushed *Gifta* Ibrahim unapologetically: "Be quiet! I'm talking now! I also know this better! I'm older than you!"

It had the desired effected and *Gifta* Ibrahim kept quiet for the rest of our conversation. When Aisha spoke about the relationship between 'Afar and non-'Afar who engaged in the caravan trade, she never mentioned people's religion. She did not say "the Christian traders" or "we the 'Afar Muslims". In her memories, religion was not defining for the social relation between the different groups. Thinking back, she described the relation between the *arhotay* [non-'Afar Christian caravaners from the highlands of Tigray] and the 'Afar as reliable and positive. She spoke about the existing kindness [*ita luk alia*], support and positive exchange between groups coming down from the highlands and the 'Afar communities. At the same time,

and as Aisha also said, people were often worried when they travelled to the ‘Afar Depression. As she explained,

> Then [speaking about the past], there were no telephones [like now] and people, especially from the highlands, were worried about their relatives. The highlanders thought they would die when they go to *arho* [the salt basin] and to the ‘Afar land. My father’s friend from the highlands lost seven camels in our land [*‘Afar bāḏo*]. He was too afraid to look for himself and so ask my family to look for them. The highlanders don’t have the experience in this environment, and they were afraid to look around.

The risks and fears that Aisha addresses refer to the harsh environment and heat in the ‘Afar Depression. Not knowing how to navigate this landscape, where to find waterholes or grazing grounds for camels, can quickly lead to dehydration, heat strokes, or the death of animals. At the same time, so Aisha tells us, during times of conflict, especially during the war with the Derg [1974-1991]:

> We [women] led the caravans up the mountains [towards the highlands] to the markets. It was during the war. They [speaking about the TPLF and Derg troops] did not attack us women, and we could continue the trade for our husbands.

After finishing our coffee, we said goodbye to Aisha and started towards Đer Gera to meet with Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, who were already expecting us. We took the road leading out of Barhale across the bridge over the dried-up riverbed. After the bridge, we took a sharp left turn and passed the ‘*As ‘Ale Salt Association’s* salt storage and parked trucks. We drove down into the arid stream that serves as a road to the surrounding villages during the dry season.

We cannot drive fast and have to stop from time to time to give people a lift and drop them off. About halfway to Đer Gera, we encountered a group of young ‘Afar men equipped with metal detectors and large headphones. This is an image I am only too familiar with from

summer vacations on UK beaches where treasure-seekers hunt for antique valuables, rings and coins. *Gifta* Ibrahim, sitting in the passenger seat, pulls down the window, introduces us and inquires what they were doing. “We are looking for gold” was their reply. It was the last thing Yusuf and I had expected, and we were both equally puzzled. Then *Gifta* Ibrahim explained that since the decline of the caravans, many people were looking for new sources of income. There had been recent discoveries of gold in this ‘Afar area and along the former caravan trails. *Gifta* Ibrahim himself, so he said, had found gold on one of his compounds in the home village of his mother. “I call it the gold mountain”, he added with a smile.

As the sun is about to set, we arrive at Đer Gera, where Abdu and his kin Fatuma are expecting us for the night. In the morning, we will embark on the salt basin’s journey in the ‘Afar Depression.

17 Day 1: Along the Sabba canyon trail: *Đer Gera* to *‘Asa Bolo*

We have spent the night sleeping at the compound of Abdu’s relative, Fatuma, in Đer Gera. For breakfast Fatuma offers us coffee, tea, bread and honey [*maleb*] from Abdu’s beehive. When Yusuf and I first meet Abdu, he has to leave during our conversation when a second queen hatched in his hive – a rare and special occasion. The new queen will leave the hive with about half the bees to form a new colony, and Abdu had to ensure not to lose track of them. Since the decline of the caravan trade, Abdu has shifted part of his economic activity to apiculture and sells part of his honey to generate income.

Over breakfast, Abdu explains that there are two ‘Afar caravans starting the journey from Đer Gera through the Sabba Canyon to the salt basin: the *indaḥ arho* [the delayed caravan] and *kalaaḥ arho* [the fast caravan].[37] The latter travels fast because of the risk of rain or to make quick money. *Kalaaḥ* caravans go on to Hamed Ela without an overnight stop. The *indaḥ*

[37] The term *indaḥ* means delay, and aa common expression is *indaḥte* (they are delayed).

caravans, on the other hand, spend one night at a place called *'Asa Bolo* [the place of the mountain], about halfway through the Sabba Canyon. The *indaḥ arho* travel slower. There can be several reasons for moving slower, e.g. the camels need grass, or an accident has occurred, or someone is sick, or again due to rain or to avoid extreme heat. "For our journey", so Abdu explains, "we travel the way of the *indaḥ* caravans, and we will spend one night at 'Asa Bolo [the place of the mountain]".

Đer Gera is also the last village before the Sabba Canyon. Caravans coming from other parts of the 'Afar region and Ethiopia's highland plateau make their final arrangements here. Final provisions include hiring camel scouts, trading grain for salt, buying the last essentials and renting water containers made from goatskin for the journey. One of the primary reasons Abdu and his family settled here was to profit from this direct engagement with caravans. He told us that,

> The reason why we [our community] came to settle from the top of the mountain [a mountain about a good day's journey from *Đer Gera* close to the Ethiopian-Eritrean border] here in the valley is to benefit from the caravan trade and caravan trail [the road]. In the valley, the community benefits from renting the goat-skin water containers [called: *sarr*] or by selling goats to the passing salt caravans. The people who work on the salt flats also benefit directly from the contacts with the caravans.

Abdu said that the workers on the salt flats contact caravans here in *Đer Gera*. Workers agree on the number of salt bars needed, estimated by the number of camels, and the price of the work. The workers will then start their journey to the salt basin and wait for the caravans in Hamed Ela, the last village before the salt flats, to agree on the final price for their work.

Renting goat skins

As Aisha told us in her restaurant in Barhale, renting goat skins used as water containers [called: *sarr*] to caravans provided a good income source. Fatuma, a senior 'Afar women in her

70s, who gave us tea and coffee in the morning, remembered how caravans passed directly in front of her house. Her family had engaged in the salt trade since she was a child. Fatuma's mother, sister and she rented out the goat skins [*sarr*] to passing caravans. It requires a specific skill not to damage the goatskin when slaughtering the animal, so the skin may be used later on. 'Afar women sew the skin together at all four legs, only leaving a hole where the neck used to be, for filling with water.

Image 7: Still from *Arho*. Hussein filling a goatskin [sarr] with water (timecode: 18:41).

Because caravans would pass through the same village twice (on their way to and back from the salt flats), Fatuma explained that they gave the goat skins as "loans" based on agreed conditions. "They [the caravaners] would give us *amolé* [salt bars], when they returned, which we could then keep for our animals or sell on the market".

Fatuma further explained that to avoid misfortune during the journey, 'Afar caravans paid extra salt bars or left other commodities in exchange for renting the *sarr* before they left on their journeys. If caravans were, for example, to rent three goat skins, two small ones [called *dalbi* or *kuddi*] and one big one [*kadassar* or *hayleyta*], the 'Afar caravaners would always give "something extra", as Fatuma put it.

"They were maybe superstitious", Fatuma said and added with a smile, "no one else did this, only the 'Afar".

During our conversation with Abdu and Fatuma, Abdu's younger brother Idriss and their kin Hussein had joined us to prepare for the journey. We shared coffee and the remaining honey and bread. Listening to Fatuma's narration, Idriss tried to explain the reasoning behind this *act of giving more*. For him, it was to protect the caravans from suffering negative consequences during the journey to the salt basin. The environment of the 'Afar Depression can be hostile and rough. Not bringing enough supplies or careless planning can lead to heat exhaustion, dehydration and death.

"The reason 'Afar caravans gave more was to avoid danger, risks or difficulties during the journey", Idriss tried to explain, "we want to protect ourselves".

To better understand this, I asked if it was related to the Islamic faith, or to concepts of generosity.[38] This interpretation was, however, denied by everyone present. This puzzled me. I had never heard about superstitions among the 'Afar communities, and it had not come up with Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim. Fate, destiny and one's lot were always put in Allah's hands, which in Arabic is expressed through the phrase *Insha Allah* [If God wills, it will happen; "Tomorrow we'll go to arho, Insha Allah"; "We will spend one night at 'Asa Bolo, Insha Allah" etc.]). Let us suppose this act of "giving more" or "leaving something extra" was not connected to Islam's beliefs. In that case, there might be something more inherent in these acts of unequal exchange. From a purely economic standpoint, it made little sense. If it was not about Islamic belief systems, why would 'Afar caravans engage in this unequal relation? Neither Fatuma, Idriss, Abdu nor Hussein could further explain this to me.

[38] As explained in the previous chapter, giving charity and alms to the poor or less fortunate is one of Islam's five pillars. *Zakāt* (the obligatory part of your wealth that has to be given to charity) and *sadaqah* (a voluntary contribution) depend on a person's ability to pay.

The gift of intersubjective spacetime

Trying to understand this form of exchange, and reflecting upon this concrete example from my fieldwork after I had returned to the United Kingdom, I found that Nancy Munn's study of symbolic value, food-giving and witchcraft in Gawa society in the Trobriand Islands was useful in solving part of my puzzlement.

Munn writes that in Gawa society, acts of food giving "have the capacity to create a particular mode and value level of intersubjective spacetime" (Munn 1986, 55). Munn states that people's agency cannot be solely explained by their actions, e.g. providing hospitality to overseas guests, or exchanging one commodity for another of lesser economic value. Agency, according to Munn, has to be expanded into the realm of an "act's various culturally defined capacities … that specify what an actor can expect from performing it" (Munn 1986, 9). In her study of food-giving, the kula exchange and witchcraft, Munn writes that the act of giving is connected to a subjective conversion and remembering "a subjective potential or conversion power of an act – its capacity for affecting actors' attitudes or intentions."

> These subjective potentials are necessary mediating aspects of any transformation cycle, marking the fact that the process is intersubjective in the primary sense of forming or attempting to form a specific kind of relation between the minds (*nano-*) of actors. … Through the hoped-for subjective outcomes of his acts, the donor in effect reconstitutes himself in the mind of the other, thus transforming his own level of control beyond himself (Munn 1986, 60–61).[39]

Munn's concept may partly explain the act of providing more for the goatskins [*sarr*] on the part of 'Afar salt caravaners as a deliberate form of agency to protect oneself from harm by

[39] In her chapter on witchcraft, Munn shows later in her work that the negative effect of such exchange is also possible. A witch's anger can stay with someone for an extended period, and any adverse effects (illness or even death) could occur years later. Munn writes that "acts of giving" may also "be remembered by a recipient, moving him or her to make positive returns to the donor in the future … , so it is assumed that acts that a person feels place him or her in an unequal position vis à vis another, or by which someone feels deprived relative to what another has, may also be remembered, and a negative outcome produced later" (Munn 1986, 223).

embedding oneself in the mind of someone else. Although it does not explain the full complexities of the inherent subjective actions explained by Fatuma, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, it at least gives an idea of the symbolic and cultural capital embedded in trade and exchange relations that often seem to contradict pure economic logic—one of the core arguments of this dissertation. At the same time, it shows that even though most ‘Afar trust in Allah for their protection in life, many salt traders resort to other social practices in dealing with matters. This is expressed through the proverb “*Kibal yalal haysitāy isi gala deber”* [Trust in Allah but tie your camel].

Abdu, Idriss, Hussein, Yusuf, and I finish our breakfast, say goodbye to Fatuma, and leave Đer Gera to embark on our journey, accompanied by fifteen camels.

Along the Sabba Canyon

The first two camels of any ‘Afar caravan always carry the heavier equipment and materials. The first camel is the pacemaker of the whole camel train.

Idriss and Hussein take turns leading the first camel while Abdu walks with Yusuf and me behind the last camel. On our way, we talk to Abdu about his family and the livelihood of his community.

After about one hour of walking, we enter the gorge of the Sabba Canyon. The trail is marked by a river that flows down from the highland plateau. Abdu asks Yusuf and me to follow him up a path leading to a small mountain overlooking the trail.

“Let me show you something”, Abdu says while Idriss and Ibrahim move ahead. As we climb above the trail, we have a clear view of the flat landscape. A few hundred meters before us, we see stone ruins in the shape of a small settlement.

“They are the remains of an Italian military camp from when the Italians occupied Ethiopia”, Abdu explained.

Controlling the caravans: taxation and tributes in the 19th and early 20th centuries

Ethiopia remains the only African country that was never formally colonised by European imperialist expansion. Foreign traders, and trading and concession companies played an important role in Ethiopia's economic development. For many centuries and until the mid-20 century, most economic exchange in Ethiopia was based on barter. People accepted the salt bars [*amolé*] from the 'Afar Depression as currency and as a valuable exchange commodity throughout the country.

During European expansionism on the African continent in the 19th and 20th centuries, Britain, France and Italy systematically tried to control the salt caravan trade in north-eastern Africa. Mordechai Abir comments on the relation between the 'Afar, who had control over the salt flats, and the Ethiopian state and foreign powers. He writes that,

> As the history of Ethiopia in the second half of the 19th century shows, the conquest of the salt mines became one of the first goals in any imperialistic plan directed against Ethiopia (1966, 9–10).

Massawa, a city on the Red Sea coast of today's Eritrea, was the most important harbour for Ethiopia's import and export trade. During the nineteenth century, foreign powers controlled the city, first the Ottoman Empire until 1868, then Egypt, and finally Italy after 1885. Until the late nineteenth century, Indian traders controlled commerce in Massawa, supported by merchant houses in Aden and Bombay. Through Massawa, foreign merchants handled most of Abyssinia's trade. Exported commodities included gold, ivory, hides, salt and animal skins (Mesfin Araya 1991; R. Pankhurst 1968).

In the mid-nineteenth century, Italy saw colonial expansion as the most effective way to increase its national wealth, rebuild its maritime fleet and restore its trading status. After the Suez Canal opened in 1869, Italy set out to monopolise the trade in cotton, tobacco, and foodstuffs in the Horn of Africa (Yemane Mesghenna 1988).

In 1870, the Italian parliament commissioned the *Rubattino Shipping Company* to buy

land on the Red Sea coast and establish a coaling station for Italian steamers on their way to India. In March 1870, the company purchased the port of Assab and the surrounding coastal territories from two ‘Afar sultans. ‘Afar clans inhabited this area and considered it part of the ‘Afar triangle that stretched from the Red Sea into Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea. From that point onwards, various private geographic and colonial societies in Italy pushed for colonial expansion into the hinterlands of the Abyssinian Empire. These societies carried out research expeditions on the topography and climate of Eritrea and Ethiopia.[40] In January 1883, based on this research, Italy signed a treaty of peace and friendship with Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of the ‘Afar in Asaita (in the central ‘Afar region). The treaty guaranteed the safety and freedom of Italian caravans transporting commodities from the hinterland of the ‘Afar territory to the port of Assab on the Red Sea Coast. A new treaty followed in April 1883 with King Menelik II of Shoa (later King of Ethiopia, r. 1890-1916). The treaty established trade relations between Italy’s territory at Assab and Shoa, which was part of the Abyssinian kingdom. The treaty guaranteed free commerce at Assab, a maximum ad valorem duty of 5% on all Italian imports and exports, and the protection of Italian caravans transporting commodities from the Shoa hinterlands to the coast (Serels 2018; Yemane Mesghenna 1988).

Italy’s principal aim was to strengthen commerce in the region and support the Italian domestic economy. Italy planned to use Eritrea’s harbours, Massawa, under Italian control since 1855, and Assab, to facilitate exports and imports from and towards the Horn of Africa. Eritrea’s small size and the location at the crossway between Sudan (north), Ethiopia (south), and Saudi Arabia (across the Red Sea) made Eritrea an excellent transfer hub. Traders brought hides, salt, ivory, and gold from Ethiopia and Eritrea to the ports of Massawa and Assab, where they were assembled, packed in factories and exported. A significant portion of the colony’s

[40] These included the *Italian Geographic Society*, founded by Cristoforo Negri, Chairman of the Commission of Colonies; the *Italian Society of Commercial Exploration*, founded in 1879 and later known as the *Society of Geographical and Commercial Exploration in Africa*; and the *African Society of Italy* founded in 1882. All societies/companies emphasised Italy’s need to access new trade markets to boost its economy (Yemane Mesghenna 1988, 56).

imports of manufactured European goods was re-exported in the opposite direction to the surrounding regions. The Italian colonisation of Eritrea in 1890 led to a steady rise in Italian trade in the region. In 1891 there were 13 Italian and eight Indian traders in Massawa. In 1898, out of 3,764 vessels entering Massawa, 68% were Italian. The colonial administration exempted Italian imports from customs duties. To attract the caravan trade from Ethiopia, the Italian administration did not impose duties at the Eritrean–Ethiopian border (R. Pankhurst 1968; Strangio 2010).

Italy's attempt to control the salt mines

During the period of hostilities against Ethiopia (1890-1896), the Italian administration in Eritrea planned to occupy the 'Afar Depression' salt mines to raise revenues for the administration. However, its defeat by the Ethiopian army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 marked a historical breaking point for Italy's imperialist plans, forcing it to reconsider its strategy.[41] Instead of conquering territory, Italy supported concession and trading companies operating from Eritrea, aiming to transform Ethiopia into an economic dependency and eventually into a protectorate. However, with the arrival of fascism under Benito Mussolini in the mid-1930s, the aggressive Italian imperialist and territorial ambitions resurrected. In 1936, Italy occupied Ethiopia and established the Italian East Africa Empire, combining the territories of Italian Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. The Italian East Africa Empire only lasted until 1941 (Haile M. Larebo 1994; Prunier 2015; Tekeste Negash 1987). The ruins pointed out to us by Abdu were a witness of this violent occupation of Ethiopia.

Similarly, the French, who established the French Somaliland colony in 1884 (today's Djibouti), competed for Ethiopia's economic resources. The French established concessionary

[41] In the Battle of Adwa, also known as the First Italo-Ethiopian War, the troops of Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II (r. 1890 – 1913) defeated the Italian colonial army, thereby sparing Ethiopia from colonialism (Bahru Zewde 1990, 370–71).

companies around Djibouti city to mine salt primarily for export Ethiopia. Compared salt bars [*amolé*] minded in ‘Afar Depression, the French built large salt works in Djibouti using the effects of wind, sun and evaporation to produce iodized salts. From 1912 to 1929, the only outlet for Djibouti saltworks remained the Ethiopian market. Taking advantage of new port facilities, built after World War I, the French started to export salt to Mauritius, Reunion and Madagascar, Kenya, India and to Japan. The image below shows the salt works of the biggest concessionary company in Djibouti, the *Société des Salines de Djibouti* (founded in 1886). In 1929, the *Société des salines de Djibouti* became the *Société des Salines de Djibouti, Sfax et de Madagascar* (Dubois 2001).[42]

Source gallica.bnf.fr / CIRAD

Image 8: Salt works of the *Société des Salines de Djibouti* around 1920 (https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10102721j)

Because the French monopoly privileges over the salt plains in Djibouti threatened the

[42] During the 1930s and 1940s there was a significant increase in the production of the quantity of salt. The French restructured Djibouti Saltworks and continued exporting salt until the 1960s when extracted stopped. Robert Tholomier notes that “the most obvious reason for the cessation of what was formerly a prosperous activity was the loss of the Ethiopian market (adequately supplied by the Assab salt-works) and the decline in exports to Japan” (Tholomier 1981, 107). The history of the salt mines in Djibouti are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Ethiopian market's salt production, in May 1930, Haile Selassie founded the Franco-Ethiopian company, known as *Franco-Ethiopiens pour le commerce du sel*. The company had exclusive monopoly rights for exporting and wholesale of salt in Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974) secured about 40% of the company. When the Italians occupied Ethiopia in 1935, the French signed a new accord with Mussolini and the company was renamed *Société italo-française pour le commerce du sel* (Dubois 2001; Tsegay B. Gebrelibanos 2011).

Controlling and monopolising the salt trade

Gaining control over the salt mines, however, was also at the centre of Ethiopian domestic politics. Up to the 20th century, Ethiopian lords, traders and merchants accepted the salt bars as currency in Ethiopia. They often preferred the salt bars over the Maria Theresia thaler, which became the principal currency for paying taxes and tributes in Ethiopia in the 19th and 20th centuries. The thaler was also used as a weight measure and source of silver (R. Pankhurst 1963).

In the mid-17th century, the Portuguese traveller Emmanuel de Almeida wrote already about the importance of salt for trade, greater than gold, iron and other commodities:

> Salt is their [Ethiopian] most general Commodity, and they have almost brought it to serve instead of Money, all other Goods being commonly sold for it at Fairs. This Salt is not like that we have in *Europe*, made of Sea-Water; but Providence has furnished them with in exhaustible Mines of it, being as it were Rocks of Salt on the Borders of the Kingdoms of *Tigre* [Tigray] and *Angot* [an Ethiopian province of medieval times] from which they hew out Pieces like Bricks (Telles 1710, 34)

The income from the salt trade was essential for the governors of the highland regions of modern-day Tigray. This applied especially to the rulers of the *Agame* and *Enderta* regions, located at the edge of the Great African Rift Valley that formed the natural boundary between the highland and lowland regions (as discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation). The income

generated from the salt trade enabled rulers to keep large armies (Mordechai Abir 1966).

The tax records of Emperor Tewodros (r. 1855-1868), who initiated Ethiopia's unification process in the mid-19th century, show that the salt from the 'Afar desert was already a significant source of income. At the turn of the 20th century, salt bars were among the most important revenue sources for the Ethiopian Emperors (R. Pankhurst 1968, 460–64; 1978, 71).[43]

Ann McDougall shows in her studies of the economic history of salt in Western Sahara in the 19th and century (McDougall 1983; 1990) that in Ethiopia, as in other African countries, "access to salt (and better still, the ability to monopolise this access) became a means of controlling people and thereby of exercising some form of political power" (McDougall 1983, 267). In a similar vein, Charles Good, in his work on the importance of salt in the Great Lake region of Eastern Africa, further remarks that "control over sources of salt and its distribution was of primary importance in the articulation of economic, social, and political life" (Good 1972, 544).

The salt mines of the 'Afar Depression were always under the control of different 'Afar clans. The 'Afar' monopoly position only changed in the late 19th century under Emperor Yohannes (r. 1868-1889). Emperor Yohannes broke the 'Afar' monopolistic position by demanding that Christian traders should also be allowed to travel from the highlands down to the salt basin. Until the mid-19th century, salt traders had bought the salt from the 'Afar caravans coming up the highlands (R. Pankhurst 1968, 241).

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[43] For this PhD's objective, I focus on the past two decades (roughly since 2000) up to today. Based on travel accounts, Richard Pankhurst provides detailed historical data about import and export prices for commodities from Italian administration and the harbours of Eritrea starting from the 1830s (R. Pankhurst 1962; 1964; 1968; 1978). Other historical data and detailed information about the salt trade can be found in the writing of the Swiss administrator and explorer Werner Munzinger (Munzinger 1869). Tsegay Gebrelibanos has written the caravan history from the perspective of the arhotot, meaning the Tigrayan, non-'Afar side (Tsegay B. Gebrelibanos 2009; 2011).

Image 9: Ruins of the Italian frontier post in the Sabba Canyon (photo: TJFT, May 2018)

Cliffs, bread and tea

We move past the Italian trading post's ruins as the sun approaches its zenith in the cloudless sky. The temperature is rising. We are continuing our journey along the river, which provides some cooling. Continually monitoring the sun and the rising temperature, Abdu decides that we should rest to protect ourselves from the midday heat. A boulder, creating a small cave, provides the perfect resting spot to take tea and coffee and have lunch. Idriss, Hussein and Abdu unpack the camels and let them drink from the water of the river. Two 'Afar men, kin of Idriss and Abdu, join us from a village nearby. We exchange *ḍāgu*, and Yusuf and I provide information about ourselves and our purpose for being here.

After the mid-day heat passes, we continued our journey along the river towards *'Asa Bolo* [the place of the mountain], our resting place for the night. On our journey, we encounter a few other caravans. Most of them are non-'Afar. Abdu, Idriss and Hussein have a particular aversion towards the non-'Afar caravans, which is noticeable through the difference in the interaction. When we meet other 'Afar caravans, we usually stop, and take between 10 to 15 minutes to exchange *ḍāgu* before moving on. Often, so as not to lose time on the journey, either

Abdu or Hussein stays behind and catches up with us and the camel train after a few minutes. With non-'Afar caravans, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein rarely interact. Often there is not even a nod of acknowledgement or greeting. This mistrust might have historical reasons.

Who controls the salt mines?

Until the mid-19th century, the caravan trade was entirely in the hands of different 'Afar clans of the region. It was only Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889) who slowly broke the 'Afar monopolistic access to the salt mines. Emperor Yohannes was the first Tigrinya-speaker to become Emperor of Ethiopia. He granted groups from the highlands the right to travel down to salt mines. Yohannes IV was strongly in favour of the Christian religion and gave generous amounts of land and treasures to the church and its followers. He also demanded that all Muslims be baptised or leave Ethiopia. During his reign, he destroyed various mosques in the country, which intensified conflicts between Christian and Muslim groups.

Emperor Yohannes IV further tried to unite the different Tigrinya-speaking groups living in Ethiopia and Eritrea.[44] Yohannes IV especially tried to further strengthen the ties between the people living on each side of the Märäb by promoting marriage between women from north of the river Mareb (in Amharic *märäb məllaš* [*beyond the Märäb*]), and Ethiopian soldiers from the south (Taddia 2009). However, recognizing the strategic, geopolitical and economic position of the 'Afar along the Red Sea coast and especially their control over the salt flats, Emperor Yohannes also sought a political alliance with the 'Afar by marrying the daughter of Yakumi Sere Ali, an influential 'Afar clan leader in 'Ab 'Ala. Emperor Yohannes baptized the 'Afar woman. She took the Christian name Tebea Selassie [meaning *The Work of the Holy Trinity*]. Emperor Yohannes and Tebea Selassie had a son together, Araya Selassie Yohannes. Araya married Zewditu, the daughter of Emperor Menelik, who succeeded Emperor

[44] The Italian historian Irma Taddia writes that, "the reigns of Tewodros (1855-68) and Yoḥannəs (1872-89) restored royal control over the northern border, before colonialism definitely divided the two Tigrigna speaking areas. In particular, a new era began with Yoḥannəs to whom control of the northern border was of particular importance" (Taddia 2009, 63).

Yohannes. Araya died before his father Yohannes in 1888. The story is relevant because the arranged marriage could have led to a strong alliance between Tigray and ‘Afar in north-eastern Ethiopia, potentially changing the course of history in the entire region.[45] All of these efforts were shunned after Yohannes’ death in 1889. One year later (1890), Eritrea became part of the Italian colony.

The ‘Afar clans resisted Emperor Yohannes’ decision to grant non-’Afar access to the salt mines and attacked caravans coming from the highlands. By the end of the 19th century, Christian traders’ participation from other parts of Ethiopia led to conflicts between different ‘Afar and non-’Afar groups. After Yohannes’ death and under the reign of Menelik (r. 1890-1916), the highland salt traders and the ‘Afar clans settled their disputes. From the turn of the 20th century, Christian traders could access the salt mines between the Christian Orthodox celebration of *masqal* [The Finding of the True Cross (of Jesus Christ)] and Easter, for a length of eight days. The remainder of the year was reserved for ‘Afar salt traders (R. Pankhurst 1968). The Italian traveller and mining engineer Ludovico Nesbitt, who traversed the ‘Afar Depression in 1927, wrote that,

> In spite of this abundance [of salt], the ferocious ‘Afars are for ever fighting the Indertas [highland group of traders], and fighting among themselves, for possession of the place to which we had now come. At the time of our arrival, they had come to terms, whereby the ‘Afars were to have the sole right to take the salt for twenty-seven days in the month and the Indertas were to have the right for the remaining three (Nesbitt 1935, 377)

While Nesbitt’s account of the access to salt flats seems to be historically accurate, his depiction of the ‘Afar throughout his writings as *ferocious*, *criminal*, *faithless*, *untrustworthy* has to be

[45] Based on an interview and notes from conversations with ethno-historian Wolbert Smidt in Mekelle.

carefully examined. At one point, Nesbitt writes in his book *Hell-Hole of Creation: The Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil* that

> there is no more slothful race of men than the Danakil. They are, indeed, more like wild animals than men, sleeping on the ground, living almost exclusively on raw meat and milk (Nesbitt 1935, 164).

While the description of people falls within the problematics of travel writings in general, explorers through the 'Afar region like Werner Munzinger (Munzinger 1869), Ludovico Nesbitt (Nesbitt 1929; 1935) or Wilfred Thesiger (Thesiger 1935; 1996) had long-lasting effects on Ethiopian historiography and perceptions of 'Afar as *violent, wild*, *dangerous* and *fierce*. These accounts have further contributed to the distortion of the social dynamics and relations between the various groups living *along* the Ethiopian highlands and 'Afar lowlands. They have also influenced the clear-cut cultural and religious distinction between these two geographic regions (as discussed in the previous two chapters).

From the sources quoted above and the discussion Yusuf and I had with Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, it became apparent that around the turn of the 20th century, the participation of Christian traders gradually led to a decline of the 'Afar caravans. Today, with the trucks transporting the salt from salt mines to Barhale, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein estimated that only about 5% of all caravans are led by 'Afar. The remaining 95% come from the highlands.

Abdu's younger brother Idriss further said that when he started going to *arho* as a young adolescent in the 1970s, there were about 50% 'Afar and 50% non-'Afar caravans from the highland region. The 'Afar caravans came from four different districts, Dallol, Konnaba, Barhale and 'Ab 'Ala. However, they all joined the same the trail that goes along Barhale, the Sabba Canyon and Hamed Ela to the salt flats.[46]

[46] In a recent study Helina Woldekiros, based on interviews with former caravan traders and archaeological surveys, has mapped out the different historical routes from highland and 'Afar caravan routes (Helina S. Woldekiros 2019).

Returning from the salt flats, caravans moved into to Tigrayan markets, or else further south to other regions of Ethiopia. A round trip from the highland could take up to 10 days, while the journey from the ʻAfar districts, given their proximity to the salt flats, was usually shorter. Journeys further south to markets in the Amhara region could, however, take longer. Abdu, Idriss and Hussein all remembered that sometimes they would travel for up to five or six weeks.

We reach ʻAsa Bolo [the place of the mountain] right before dusk to set up our night camp at the foot of the mountain, which glows a rusty red. A few huts sit at the top of the mountain. Abdu and Yusuf buy a goat (ETB 2000) from the nearby village. Within thirty minutes, Idriss and Abdu have slaughtered it. They prepare the intestines in broth and leave the meat for the next day. Sitting together over a small campfire, we drink the broth [*ḥan lee*] and eat the intestines. The meat is rich in salts and nutrients, and restores the energy we lost during the journey. As we prepare for the night, Idriss and Abdu move the camels in a circle around our bivouac, with their heads facing inwards. It is both comforting and unsettling to fall asleep with fifteen camels watching over your dreams.

Image 10: Still from *Arho*. ʻAsa Bolo [the place of the mountain] (timecode: 08:40).

18 Day 2: From ‘Asa Bolo to Hamed Ela

Camels grumble, grunt and snore at night. They have a deep bass voice, and their conversations kept on long into the night, disrupting our sleep.

At dawn, Idriss and Hussein led the camels down to a small river. Idriss has his own way of communicating with the camels. When he approaches them, he imitates their “grumbles” and “grunts” as if to say “*It is me. Do not worry”*. I witnessed this intimacy between Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, and the camels, on many occasions throughout our journey. There was a palpable mutual respect between them and their animals.

Conversations in the shadow of the mountain

As pointed out in the previous part, camels play an essential role in the ‘Afar society, and the relationship between men and animals is regulated through specific sets of customary law. For the journey to the salt flats, the ‘Afar only use male camels. Female camels are not used for transport and are not sold unless economic circumstances are dire. Female camels are primarily used for their milk. Owning female camels further reflects political, social and economic status within a community.

Pernille Gooch, in her study on the Van Gujjars (Indian) and their relationship with their buffaloes in the Himalaya, writes that “crucial to Van Gujjar pastoralism are the strong, personal relationships that develop between particular animals and their human guardians, and which are evident from the ways the animals are treated” (Gooch 2011, 72). Even though the ‘Afar eat camel meat and are not, like the Van Gujjars, vegetarians, there is a strong relationship between the ‘Afar and their camels. Similar to the buffaloes and yak in the Himalaya, on the journey to the salt flats, the ‘Afar camels are “agents and companions in the walk, not objects to be moved” (Gooch 2011, 72).

The ‘Afar communities in this region measure wealth and prestige by the number of camels a person owns. Further, there is a strong relation between ‘Afar and their camels. Two common ‘Afar sayings express this relationship:

Gāli num-malitkedo cēlāh-num lit-lac cēla.	*For a man who does not have a kin, the camel is his kin.*
Labhak elle abānam gāla.	*Men's perslity is judged by the number of camels they own.*

After having tea and meat left over from the night before, Idriss and Hussein lead the camels from the river to grazing pastures beyond the rocky outcrop. Meanwhile, Yusuf, Abdu and I remain at the campsite. From here, it is a six to eight-hour walk to Hamed Ela, the last village before the salt basin. Abdu, therefore, decides to wait until the afternoon in the shade of the mountain. He explains

> Once we leave the Sabba Canyon there are no more places to hide from the sun. Therefore, we will walk in the late afternoon and arrive in Hamed Ela in the evening.

As we wait for Idriss and Hussein to return, I point out that I am surprised not to see more caravans passing by. In previous conversations with salt traders, I had heard that this month and the weeks before the Holy Ramadan were usually the busiest time for 'Afar caravans. During Ramadan, 'Afar caravans do not go to *arho*, and in the following months until September, the weather is so hot that most people do not travel. The weeks leading up to Ramadan is a good time to generate extra income for the month of fasting and resting. Abdu remembered that

> Especially during this month [the month before the Holy Ramadan], this valley was crowded with many 'Afar caravans… now, you see, the area is deserted. People don't want to go to *arho* because there is no profit from selling the salt from the camel caravans anymore. There were many caravans from the highlands… but the 'Afar were also many. Even in the last three months, many ['Afar caravans] went to arho. They thought the price of the salt was fair, and they came. Then they realised that the price is low, they would not make a profit, and they sold their camels on the road.

It was devastating to hear that many ‘Afar had to sell their camels. As Abdu, Idriss and Hussein repeatedly said, they did not have alternatives for a livelihood beyond the salt trade. They could not compete with the faster and more efficient motor-trucks. Selling camels was the only way to generate income. However, it was only a one-time solution as there were no opportunities to invest the money elsewhere.

Moving towards Hamed Ela

As we approach midday, Yusuf, Hussein, and I walk down to the small stream that runs alongside the caravan trail to refresh ourselves and get water for making bread. We have been following the small stream since we entered the Sabba Canyon. The stream runs all year round. The water provides an essential source for refilling the goat-skin water containers, wash utensils, and freshen up and cool down. At the same time, however, the river constitutes one of the significant risks to the caravan trains as they travel through the Sabba Canyon. During the rainy season in the highlands [March/April and July to September], the water rushing down from the mountains can turn the stream into a large gushing river. On specific passages, the Sabba Canyon is very narrow and difficult to navigate. Hussein, a kin relative of Abdu and Idriss, is the oldest of the three. He has been engaged in the salt trade since the early 1970s, except for a three-year break after the socialist revolution in Ethiopia in 1974. When we asked Hussein about the biggest challenge the caravans face during the journey, he replied without much hesitation, “the water from the river”. An answer that surprised both Yusuf and me. Hussein then explained

> When we travel with the salt loaded camels through the canyon, the flood that can come from the highlands and can be an enormous challenge. There is no space to protect the camels from the flood. Sometimes we send someone ahead, to get *dāgu* [information] about the rain. The water is our major challenge.

It seems bizarre that floods constitute one of the significant threats to caravans in this harsh environment. Being unprepared, miscalculating the flood season, or not having the correct information about the weather can be fatal. During our journey, I noticed that Abdu, Idriss and Hussein were continually observing the sun's movement and glancing at their watches. As the saying at the beginning of this chapter says, 'Afar pastoralist try to make their journey to to avoid the scorch of the sun. The entire second day was orchestrated around specific tasks corresponding to the sun's journey across the sky: leading the camels to pastureland, preparing the goat meat for the remainder of the journey, refilling the goatskins with water, baking bread. For Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, all of this went without saying. Their movements seemed choreographed and also in sync with the movement of the sun.

Preparing gogoyta and moving on

Over the next hours, we cut the remaining goat meat into thin strips and hung these up to dry in the sun. Then Idriss and Hussein prepared bread. To make the dough, Hussein mixed flour with water from the river, without adding any leaven. Meanwhile, Idriss collected big, round rocks and heated them in a small campfire before joining Hussein in preparing the dough. Kneeling and squatting on the rocky ground, Idriss and Hussein put their entire body weight into kneading the dough. After about twenty minutes, the dough sprung back automatically after Hussein had dabbed it, and it did not tear when Idriss pulled at it. Idriss then shaped the dough into a deep, half-open bowl while Hussein, using two longer shaped stones as gripping pliers, pulled the heated rocks from the campfire. Blowing off the dust from the fiery stone, Hussein dropped red-hot rock inside the dough that Idriss was holding in his hand. Carefully juggling the dough with the hot stone inside, and without burning himself, Idriss skilfully moulded the dough around the scorching hot stone before placing the lot back into the campfire. Hussein and Idriss repeated this procedure until they had six stone-breads baking in the fire. In this way, the dough was simultaneously baked from the in- and outside. They turned the stone-breads several times, and after about 25 minutes, the dough was baked sufficiently and left to

cool down. Once it had cooled off, Idriss broke the dough and removed it from the stone. This kind of bread, known as *gogoyata* or *daḥita* in this ‘Afar area, is the most common foodstuff for the caravans. It is relatively easy to prepare and can keep for several weeks. The *gogoyata* or *daḥita* was also typical food for liberation fighters during Ethiopia’s civil war period, in 1974-1991.

The midday heat has now reached its peak and Idriss and Hussein gather the camels from the pasturelands. The shadow of the mountain is slowly disappearing, and we are preparing to move on. Hussein refills the goatskins with water to bring onto the salt flats. We follow the path along the river through narrow canyon gorges. From time to time we have to wade knee-deep through water, and I understand the risk that floods represent in this environment. There are few other caravans, most of them from the highland areas. While the majority of caravaners use camels, donkeys are also seen. In the past, Abdu explains, the ‘Afar never used donkeys for transporting salt; “it was only the *arhotay* [groups from the highlands] who used them [donkeys] to bring the salt back to the highlands”.

After about an hour of walking, we emerge out of the Sabba Canyon. Here the path connects to the asphalted road running between Barhale and Hamed Ela. Abdu, Idriss and Hussein continue the journey across the few open fields to Hamed Ela. Meanwhile, Yusuf and I travel by car. A car with extra water supplies followed us along the road for safety and security reasons. Around midday the heat of the salt flats can reach 50 degrees. By the time we leave the Sabba Canyon, the journey has left its mark on my body. I feel exhausted and dehydrated. I do not want to take any further risks. By car Yusuf and I reach Hamed Ela within forty minutes, while it takes Abdu, Idriss and Hussein another four to six hours to get there.

Hamad Ela: military camp and caravans of tourists

Over the past decades, Hamad Ela has grown from being the last stop for the caravan

trains to a small town. At the turn of the 20th century, the Italian administration in Eritrea started to extract the mineral sylvite, a potassium chloride, in the surrounding area, known as the Dallol Basin or Dallol Depression.

In the mid-1920s, an Italian company built a small settlement and railway line leading to Mersa Fatuma on the Red Sea Coast, from where they transported the sylvite via dhows to Massawa (Nesbitt 1935; Wrong 2005). When the British administration took over Eritrea (and Somaliland) during World War II, they dismantled the railway leading to Mersa Fatuma, and many other industrial and port facilities belonging to Italian plantations, and transferred them to their colony in India (S. Pankhurst 1951; Trevaskis 1960). The ruins of the Italian settlement, however, are still visible today. Several international mining companies have settled in Hamed Ela over the past decades and continue to mine potassium chloride.[47]

Image 11: Potassium fields in the ‘Afar Depression. On the horizon lie the remains of the Italian mine operations dating from the 1920s (photo: Ivy Amarh, December 2017).

[47] Currently, the German *K + S Kali* and the United States of America *Andritz Separation* companies hold a 20-year mining license from the Council of Ministers of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (https://www.mining-technology.com/projects/danakil-potash-project/)

Image 12: The sulphur fields of Dallol with the mountain chains of the Sabba Canyon in the background (photo: Ivy Amarh, December 2017).

Tourists and caravans

Hamed Ela is not reachable with public transport. You either need your own vehicle or else come with an organised tour. Both require special permission. In Barhale and Hamad Ela, security forces check your permits. They will not let you pass without the proper paperwork from the Bureau of Culture and Tourism in Samara. Tourists pay about US$250 for a two-day, one-night trip from Mekelle to the ‘Afar Depression and back. This price includes transportation, a guide, an overnight stay in Hamad Ela, all permits from the Bureau of Culture and Tourism in Samara (currently US$14 per person), the fees for the scouts, security and the meals.

Today, Hamed Ela hosts up to several thousand tourists per year. The salt desert and the Dallol Depression have become a prominent tourist destination in Ethiopia. For 2025, the Ethiopian Government has proclaimed the ambitious goal of becoming one of Africa’s top five tourist destinations. There is currently (2020) no hotel, lodge or guesthouse in Hamad Ela and tourists sleep outside on camp beds owned by ‘Afar. There are no electric lines, and only a few smaller shops operate with a generator. The camp beds are owned by a few local community members, who draw a good income from the tourists.

Every tour group has to hire a local scout from Hamed Ela to accompany them onto the sulphur flats. Most of the scouts are former liberation fighters who fought during the civil war period against the Socialist Government (1974-1991) and for an independent ‘Afar region. Because of the proximity to Eritrea (40 km) and regular conflicts along that international border, the Ethiopian Government has established a military presence in this area. On the eastern part of Hamed Ela is large a military camp with a hospital. As outlined in chapter two, the Ethiopian-Eritrean border led to a “no war, no peace” situation. The international border between the two countries runs directly through the ‘Afar land. The ‘Afar *Ugogomo*, fought in the past to unite all ‘Afar into one state. Clashes in this area are rare, but there are recurring incidents. In November 2018, for example, as mentioned in the first chapter, a German tourist was killed by a stray bullet during a shooting at the Erta Ale volcano. Over the years, tourists have been kidnapped in this area. As laid out in chapter one, the ‘Afar relationship with the Ethiopian government has been one of distrust and hostility. The Ugogomo’s position highlights the lack of cooperation and trust between many ‘Afar in the region and the Ethiopian state. It is a distrust of tourists and other people who are seen to profit from ‘Afar’s natural resources.

Musa, a kin of *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf, is expecting us in Hamed Ela. He has prepared camp beds for our overnight stay and invites us to dinner in a small restaurant. Abubaker used to work on the salt flats, shaping the salt into its final form. Originally from a community situated about half a day on foot from Hamed Ela, Musa made contact with the caravans as they passed through his village. He would then come down to Hamed Ela to sit and wait for the caravan to arrive.

> The caravans arrived in the evening in Hamed Ela and gathered their camels in the dried riverbed’, Musa explains. ‘We [the workers] then negotiated the price for our labour for the next day.

This system has remained intact until today, and caravans still pay workers directly. In the past, caravans paid workers in salt bars. Over the past years, however, the caravans have begun paying workers in cash. According to a local worker in Hamed Ela, workers can earn up to ETB 1000 per day. The income depends, however, on the number of caravans they are serving. Thinking back to the past, Musa tells us that Hamed Ela used to be crowded with camels.

> People were waiting in Hamed Ela for three days, to wait for their turn to go to the salt flats. Because the workers on the salt flats were too busy, the caravans that arrived on Sunday in Hamed Ela had to wait until Tuesday to go to the salt flats. Now, there are almost no camels left and many tourists come to Hamed Ela.

Musa is one of the few ‘Afar in the region who profits from the tourism industry. About ten years ago, he invested money to construct a few buildings and buy camp beds. Now he runs a small shop and restaurant and rents his beds out to tour agencies from Mekelle or Addis Ababa.

Just before sunset, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein arrive with their camels. After leaving the Sabba Canyon, they travelled for about six hours on foot through the open and vast landscape of the ‘Afar Depression. Hussein and Abdu move the camels in two rows over to the dry riverbed on the west flank of Hamed Ela. There are few other caravans, and compared to the stories Musa has told us, the riverbed is far from being crowded. Abdu, Hussein and Idriss spend the night with their camels and the other caravans in the riverbed. Meanwhile, Yusuf and I sleep on the camp bed Musa provided for us.

19 Day 3: the salt flats of the ‘Afar Depression

Early in the morning, we embark for the salt basin. The sun is about to rise. The first sunbeams turn the sky a light blue colour while the horizon shimmers in the sunrise’s orange twilight. There is one last waterhole in Hamed Ela for the camels to drink at. Abdu, Idriss and

Hussein lead the first caravan, followed by about ten to fifteen other caravans that travelled to the salt flats last evening. From Hamed Ela, the journey on foot to the salt basin takes four to five hours.

The salt basin

The Swiss traveller Werner Munzinger, who passed through Ethiopia in 1867, described the size of the salt basin as follows, as he arrived at the Red Sea Coast of today's Eritrea:

> The length of the basin from north to south is 45 miles, and from east to west about 20 miles… The basin is surrounded on all sides by a high wall of gypsum [mineral composed of calcium sulphate], which is often penetrated by the torrents which fall into the basin; it is only to the north that the wall is continuous, and forms a separation for the waters. The south part of the Salt Basin is formed by the volcanic mountains of Artali [Erta Ale], which have a peak from which smoke continually issues. The Salt Basin is not of the same nature all over; it is divided into an outer and inner circle: the latter is altogether influenced by the salt, and barren; the outer circle is separated from the inner by a ring of palms, and has vegetation. Everywhere water is to be found at very little depth, but the east side is quite dry, while the west side in its whole length forms a morass, and at its south end has a lake which is much exaggerated in the maps. It is 6 miles long, the same width, and 1 to 4 feet deep (Munzinger 1869, 203).

Munzinger's description of the area is still accurate today. The salt basin size, meaning the surface covered with salt, is estimated between 900 and 1200 km^2 –roughly the size of 2 million football fields. Munzinger also rightfully speaks of a salt basin (not a salt plain) as the entire region lies below sea level (between -120 m and -160 m).

The outer ring of the salt basin, as Munzinger also writes, consists of rock salts with rough anhydrite and clay layers. The upper crusts of the surface consist of clay sediments mixed

with gravel. Over the past decade, trucks and 4 x 4 Jeeps have carved cross-country ski-like tracks into this surface. These tracks have now become the main road leading onto the salt basin.

From Hamed Ela, it takes about three to four hours on foot and about 25 minutes by car to reach the boundary between the outer and inner rings of the salt basin. The salt surface of the inner ring forms a crystalline, white desert resembling a sheet of ice or snow. The seasonal freshwater from the highlands contributed, and still does, to the formation of the salt deposits. The entire surface is floating on salt water connected to the Red Sea.

In 1929, 70 years after Munzinger, Ludovico Nesbitt wrote the following about the salt basin, after crossing it from south to north, like his fellow traveller.

> There is enough salt here to supply a large population for thousands of centuries, for it covers an area, probably, of two thousand square miles… The salt is compact, almost like marble. It looks like a frozen sea, which has been cut into in a few absolutely insignificant places at its edges (Nesbitt 1935, 377).

Nesbitt further observed:

> On approaching closer to the Abyssinian mountains, we encountered extensive beds of gravel, brought down by ancient rains. Ahead of us, a small hill rose in solitude on the Salt Plain. It was called Assale Hill [‘As ‘Ale]. Mollie [amolé] bars were being chopped by squads of the Indertas, close to it. They had some tiny huts, built with blocks of salt, close to their quarry. The roof of each circular hut was constructed of large slabs of the salt, stretching entirely across its diameter. All these blocks and slabs were well squared, for the men used serviceable hatchets in their hewing. These refuges were probably very similar in appearance to the ice huts which the Esquimaux [Eskimos/Inuit] build to defend themselves from the

severest cold, as these were a protection from the fiercest heat on earth (Nesbitt 1935, 378–79).

Nesbitt's observations are worth taking a closer look at. The mention of huts and the comparison between the salt desert and ice desert stand out in his account. However, the "salt huts" seem to be a product of Nesbitt's imagination. No other travel account mentions settlements built from salt in the salt basins of the 'Afar Depression, and neither do any of my 'Afar interlocutors remember such a thing. Workers lived in Hamed Ela and went early in the morning to the salt flats, returning in the evening.[48] Further, Nesbitt only writes about the *Indertas*, referring to non-'Afar salt workers from the highland regions, who supposedly both hew and chop the salt using hatchets. However, there has always been a clear division of labour on the salt flats, one that survives today.

Image 13: A train of camels on their way from Hamad Ela to the salt basin. On the led (photo: Ivy Amarh, December 2017).

[48] Compared to Little Rann of Kutch's salt desert in the state of Gujarat, India, where migrant families go after the monsoon seasons to live and harvest the salt. See the excellent documentary by Farida Pacha *My Name Is Salt* (2013), Leafbird Films.

Salt workers

There are two kinds of workers: the *fokola* and the *hadele*. The *fokola* are *the ones who lift the salt out of the ground* [the literal translation of *fokola*]. They use long wooden sticks [*fokkolō ḥōḏu*] to break off large pieces of salt from the surface. The *hadele* are *the ones who shape the salt* into uniform-sized blocks, known as *amolé*. The *hadele* use hatchets [*hadali godma*] to shape the salt into rectangular prisms. The size and width of the amolé bars measure between 40-45cm x 15-20cm x 10-15cm and weighs up to 5kg. The uniformly-sized blocks guaranteed the role played by the *amolé* in trade in Ethiopia (Smidt 2017). According to interviews with salt workers in Hamed Ela, it required a specific skill to produce the same shape, size, and weight. ‘Afar salt workers testify that shaping the salt into the *amolé* bars requires a specific skill that the ‘Afar alone had. The name *amolé*, in the ‘Afar-Af language, means “he/it has a head” [*amo* “head”; *lé* “he/it has/exists]. The name derives from a stone tool used to lift the salt out of the ground.

Image 14: The hatch [hadali godma] used until today to shape the salt into the amolé salt bars (see image 8) (photo: TJFT, September 2018).

Image 15: The stone tool that was used to hew the salt out of the ground. Because of its shape the 'Afar called it amolé [it has a head] (photo: TJFT, September 2018)

Image 16: *Fokolo* and *hadele* salt workers. (photo: Ivy Amarh, December 2017).

Image 17: Amolé salt bars bound together, ready to be loaded onto the camels for transportation (photo: Ivy Amarh, December 2017).

On his travels to the salt basin in 1969, forty years after Nesbitt and one hundred years after Munzinger, the Irish priest Kevin O'Mahoney describes the situation of the workers as follows:

> At any one time as many as 600 men may be working on the salt-plain. First of all they hack out the shape of the slab of salt to be removed. Four men then lever out the whole slab which may be three or four feet square [the *fokola*]. Other squads are then ready to cut the large slab into tablets [the *hadele*] for loading on to the waiting camels. The hole left by the slab quickly fills up with intensely salty water; under the radiation of the sun the water evaporates and new salt crystals congeal. In this way the whole plain is self-perpetuating; - many countries would be delighted to possess self-perpetuating mineral resource (O′Mahoney 1970, 151).

Three elements stand out in this quote. First, since the 1970s and presumably even long before the accounts of Munzinger, up until the present day, no technical advances were made regarding the hewing and shaping of the salt into amolé bars. Workers on the salt flats still use the long wooden sticks and hatches to remove the salt. Second, the number of workers on the salt plains mentioned by O'Mahoney in his description. He speaks of six hundred workers, a realistic estimate confirmed by Abdu, Idriss and Hussein when they describe the situation in the past. However, the number of workers decreased steadily over the past two decades mirroring the decline of the caravans due to the introduction of trucks. Third, like Nesbitt before him, who wrote that there is enough salt "to supply a large population for thousands of centuries" (Nesbitt 1935, 377), O'Mahoney also describes the salt plains as a self-perpetuating resource that many countries would be thrilled to possess.

Returning to Barhale

It is midday as Idriss, Abdu and Hussein reach the workers in the salt basin. The temperature at this time of year can reach 50 degrees. In the salt basin, there is no shade. Idriss, Abdu and Hussein now endure the next four to five hours here with their camels. Walking in

this heat would be too much. As the workers finish shaping the agreed amount of salt bars, Idriss and Abdu use nylon rope to bind packages of three to four salt bars together. Then they load them onto the back of the camels for the return journey. In the past, ‘Afar women sold rope made of the endemic plant *yiiay* [a plant resembling Aloe Vera]. Kevin O’Mahoney noted on his journey that the caravans would buy the rope from the ‘Afar women when they descended from the highlands into the lowlands:

> Towards noon we made contact with the first Islamic nomads on the fringe the Danakil Depression, these were half-naked women selling bartering lengths of rope at the side of the trail. A length of rope was measured by the buyer from the middle of his chest to the tip fingers and was either purchased for money or exchanged for sugar. Most of the men, in fact, bought ropes as they would be needed for strapping together the blocks of salt (O′Mahoney 1970, 147)

An ‘Afar woman in Barhale, explained that they buried the leaves of the *yiiay* in the soil for seven days until these were soft. Afterwards, they beat the leaves with a stone to remove the plant secretions, then washed and dried the leaves. She explained

> The ropes generated a good income for the women in the communities before they introduced the plastic [nylon] ropes. All the caravans used to buy the rope from us. Now the shops sell the imported [plastic] ones and we rarely make the rope ourselves.

Abdu, Hussein and Idriss tie and pack about 270 salt bars together on their camels. Depending on its age, size and strength, one camel can carry 12 and 22 salt bars. Loading the salt bars onto the camels is a delicate task. Abdu carefully measures every salt bar and sees which ones fit best together. Losing salt bars on the way would mean losing income. A few hundred metres far from Abdu, Hussein and Idriss stands one of the two IZUZU trucks from the salt

association. Compared to their camels, one truck can load 2000 salt bars. The workers handle the salt less carefully when loading it onto the trucks.

After the midday heat has passed and the camels are all loaded, the three travel back to Hamed Ela. For the sunset, caravans of tourists have positioned themselves along the path from the salt works to Hamed Ela to take pictures of the passing camel trains. It is an uncomfortable spectacle to watch. Tourists run in front of and in between camels to snap better pictures. From the 4 x 4 Jeeps, you hear music blaring on car radios, and tour guides distribute cheap bottles of red wine served in disposable plastic cups. When the tourists leave, their trash remains strewn over the ever-self generating natural resources.

Closer to Hamed Ela and shortly before nightfall, the truck of the *'As 'Ale Salt Association* overtakes us. The trucks loaded with salt bars will arrive in about one hour in Barhale. Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, on the other hand, will spend the evening in Hamed Ela. Around midnight they will start off with other caravans through the Sabba Canyon to get food for the camels. They will rest the whole day in the shade of the mountain [*'Asa Bolo*] and travel through the night to reach Barhale early the next morning.

20 Conclusion: ethnographic present of the caravan trade

In the past, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein often travelled for more than four weeks to sell salt bars at the markets in the Ethiopian plateau. Over the past decades, however, their journey has become increasingly short, between four and seven days. Since 2010-11 caravans are no longer allowed to trade the salt bars freely on markets but have to sell them to *'As 'Ale Salt Association*. The Association was founded in 2010-11, by a former salt trader and liberation fighter of an 'Afar liberation movement [called Ugugomo], to regain the former monopoly over the salt trade. The Salt Association owns two trucks that can load up to 2000 salt blocks per trip. That is 4000 salt blocks for both trucks. Often the trucks leave the Salt Association early

in the morning and drive the asphalted road twice a day. That is 8000 salt blocks per day.

In comparison, it takes the caravans at least five days for the same journey through the Sabba Canyon. Depending on the animal's size and age, once camel can carry between 12 and 20 blocks of salt. The size of a camel train may vary substantially but is usually between 15 and 30 camels. On our journey, we have fifteen camels. With an average of 15 salt blocks per camel, salt traders can transport about 225-450 salt blocks per trip.

At the time I conducted interviews with members of the Association (April 2018), its capital was estimated at around ETB 20 million birr (about US$540,000). The name of the association in 'Afar-Af is *'As 'Ale 'Asboh Egglá*, literally the *Red Mountain Salt Community*, although they opted for the English translation '*As 'Ale Salt Production and Distribution Association* for marketing reasons, as a member of the salt association once explained to me.

In 'Afar-Af the term *egglá* also refers to a discussion by a group of people. It implies that members of the group came together willingly. When the association was founded in 2010-11, they decided to share their profits equally among the nine districts of Barhale zone to support the people who have lost income through the trade. They did this every three month during their first year, then every six months and now every year.

Image 18: Overview of the nine districts of the Barhale zone (photo TJFT, August 2018).

There used to be one association for miners and one for buyers. Now they are united. Before the foundation of the new association, caravans went straight to the market towns. There were no regulations in terms of price, especially regarding the sale to highlanders. There used to be a women's association aimed at creating jobs for women, but their salt magazine was destroyed in the rain.

Individual members can buy into the salt association. There was no maximum for the buy-in, but the minimum amount in April 2018 was ETB 50,000 (US$ 1,300). Each year, members receive 30 % of the association's profit according to their shares. The association has approximately 2200 members from all five zones. The majority, however, are from the Barhale

woreda.

In 2010-11 the association started to use trucks, which it rented for ETB 900,000 each for a period of three months. It was only in March 2018 that the association acquired its own two trucks from Addis Ababa for a total of ETB 6.7 million. Now, the Association buys the salt blocks on the salt fields for 16.50 birr each, including ETB 1.50 in transportation tax, and sells them in Barhale for ETB 40 to merchants from the highlands, who transport them to Mekelle, from where they are sold to other parts of Ethiopia.

In comparison, from their journey to the salt basin and back Abdu, Idriss and Hussein earned about US$ 15 from selling the salt bars to the local salt association. US$15 for the three of them. Kevin O'Mahoney, the Irish priest who travelled along the caravan paths in 1969, already remarked that the use of lorries would create social inequality. He wrote

> To enforce the use of the lorries, however, would create a social problem in the province similar to that posed by the Industrial Revolution in Northern England ; a few would become wealthier and the small man would lose his pittance (O'Mahoney 1970, 153)

In 2018, the association was seeking new technologies for mining and had begun building a larger salt fabric in Barhale, which they completed in 2020-2021. At the moment the market is still small, and they only sell to buyers from the highlands, who then sell it to other parts of Ethiopia and export it to Sudan. In Mekelle, Tigrayan traders divide the salt into smaller blocks and sell them for ETB 70. Currently, the salt from the 'Afar Depression is only used for animal consumption, the aim of the Salt Association being to produce salt for human consumption as well as for industrial purposes [as in Afdera], and to expand sales to all of Ethiopia and even the global market beyond.

When I asked Abdu to reflect on the future of the caravan trade and on the *'As 'Ale Salt Association*, he said:

> The Salt Association is an independent association, and their trucks will transport salt to the factory in Barhale, and this salt will be exported abroad. We think that the salt from the caravan will be distributed to the Ethiopian market. I don't think that caravans will disappear. They are our only means of survival. We don't think they will disappear because of the trucks.

However, Abdu was wrong and in August of 2018, three months after our journey, the caravans came to a stop when salt workers started a strike. An investor from Tigray acquired a large portion of land and started to build salt works similar to those in former French Djibouti and around Lake Afdera. It was, however, unclear how and who granted the land to the investor and many 'Afar salt workers refused to continue their work as these new forms of salt mining directly threatened their income. Without the *hadele* and *fokola* lifting and shaping the amolé bars, most 'Afar caravans stopped.

As of 2020-2021, there are now only a few 'Afar caravans still making their way to *Arho.* Abdu, Idriss and Hussein have all stopped traveling to the caravans. The last I heard from them when speaking to their sons on Telegram (a social messenger), was that they currently looking for other means of income.

Image 19: Construction site to establish large salt works in the ‘Afar Depression the salt flats (photo: TJFT, August 2018)

Image 20: Wooden aqueduct like construction to bring fresh water onto the salt flats (photo: TJFT, August 2018)

Corresponding landscapes

In this chapter, I have knitted together my ethnographic data, the different histories embedded in the landscape along the caravan trails of north-eastern ‘Afar, and theories of

ecological, economic or political anthropology.

I showed that former colonial powers, Ethiopian Emperors and since 2010-11 the *'As 'Ale Salt Association* have made decisions and policies over movement and the apprehension of spaces that directly affect salt traders and specific communities living along the former caravan trails. I have explored the history of the salt caravan trade in Northern Ethiopia and showed how different European powers and Ethiopian Emperors tried to control, tax and monopolise the salt trade. While historically, 'Afar clans held a monopoly over the salt basin, the control shifted at the turn of the 20th century when first Emperor Yoahnnes (r. 1872-1889) and later Emperor Menelik (r. 1890-1916) pushed for non-'Afar salt traders to move to the salt basin. In 2018, the decision to grant a large plot of land to an investor has essentially led to the decline of the caravan trade.

As became clear from the conversation with Fatuma and Aisha, the salt bars were more than just a "commodity" sold on a "market" for "profit" or to satisfy human "wants". In the chapters of this dissertation, it became clear that the different specific dynamics of the "social arenas" in which the exchange of salt bars, and other commodities took place cannot be reduced to religious and cultural traits between 'Afar and non-'Afar traders. Even though the history of the region was shaped by violence between different groups, the relation between 'Afar and non-'Afar in the context of the salt trade, has led to friendship bonds based on trust and reciprocity.

As I showed further in this chapter, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein's knowledge of the environment is deeply imbedded along and within the trails of the Sabba Canyon. During our journey and my walks with Abdu, the Italian ruins was just one example (another was the cliff shared in the introduction) of many elements that triggered Abdu's memory. Specific boulders,

crossroads or the remains of the Italian military camp often let him explain past events. Abdu had moved along these trails for several decades. In the course of this, his memories and knowledge became deeply imbedded in this particular landscape. Like other caravaners, nomads, members of pastoral societies and wayfarers who move along trails and paths and inhabit certain landscapes, Abdu, Hussein and Idriss formed a connection with this specific environment of the Sabba Canyon. In contrast to the new modes of transportations and heavy trucks that rampage along asphalted roads, carving their ways into the salt flats, the orientation and pace of Abdu, to use Tim Ingold, is "continually responsive to his perceptual monitoring of the environment that is revealed along the way" (Ingold [2007] 2016, 80). Wayfaring, Ingold then writes, "is the most fundamental mode by which living beings, both human and non-human, inhabit the earth" (Ingold [2007] 2016, 83).

Abdu, Hussein and Idriss not only moved along the caravan trails for more than 20 years, but he also acted in it. Their agency happened through engaging and corresponding with the environments along the Sabba Canyon. Ingold notes that "as we [humans] move around in and explore the environment, we actively seek and pick up information that specifies invariant properties and qualities of the objects we encounter" (Ingold 1992, 45). Comparing wayfaring to traveling further Ingold writes:

> Wayfaring, in short, is neither placeless nor place-bound but place-making…the wayfarer who moves with time, the transported traveller races against it, seeing in its passage not an organic potential for growth but the mechanical limitations of his equipment (Ingold [2007] 2016, 104–5).

This is what I have termed the *productive landscapes*. It allowed me to explore the concrete experience, imagination and perception of individuals on the ever-changing economic, political and cultural trajectories of specific phenomena. Thus, *productive landscapes* are best understood through knowledge derived from ethnographic research. I define a *productive*

landscape as “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them” (Ingold 2000, 193). This idea seems to correspond well with my research, as traveling, wayfaring and nomadic wanderings are a central part of the life of the ‘Afar caravaners, pastoralist and nomads. As shown in the previous two parts, the ‘Afar camel and cattle herders in the north-eastern ‘Afar region move along paths through the harsh environment of the desert.

From this perspective, as Pernille Gooch writes of landscapes in her research among pastoralist groups in the Himalayas, a productive landscape can also be regarded as not just one thing, but “simultaneously a home, an embodied life world, and hostile and alienating” (Gooch 2011, 78). The histories of former colonial times, visible in the ruins of the Italian frontier post, are all embedded in the landscape along the former caravan trails.

I now invite the reader to please watch the film “Arho – The ‘Afar Salt Trade of North-eastern Ethiopia” (30 min) on the link https://vimeo.com/372906276 (password: Arho20@0HH). In the following chapter I reflect upon making of the documentary, reflexive practices and further develop the *ethics of correspondence*

A FILM BY TILL J. F. TROJER

ARHO

THE AFAR SALT TRADE OF NORTHEASTERN ETHIOPIA

Chapter V: Reflections on Making *Arho – The 'Afar Salt Trade of Northeastern Ethiopia*

The purpose of film music and sound is very simple. You invite the audience in and say "I give you the opportunity to feel something" … I'm not telling you what to feel – that would be patronizing and horrible … You as the audience get to complete the emotion.

Hans Zimmer,
German Film Composer

In today's manner of shooting sync-sound direct cinema, the director can only be the cameraman. It is the ethnographer alone, to my mind, who really knows when, where, and how to film, in other words, to "direct".

Jean Rouch
French Anthropologist and Filmmaker

***

As I stop the video and close my laptop, there is a tangible silence in the room. For the past forty minutes, Ismael and Mohammed have attentively watched the documentary *Arho*. Ismael and Mohammed are both 'Afar from the Barhale district. They are in their late teens, and their fathers and grandfathers travelled to *arho*. Their families are closely related to *Gifta* Ibrahim's clan and during school breaks, they live and help out on *Gifta* Ibrahim's compound in Barhale.

On this particular day in June 2018, *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf had left to attend a funeral. They went after lunch, and Ismael, Mohammed and I remained at *Gifta* Ibrahim's house. The sky, a clear and vivid blue that holds up the burning sun, heats the air outside. The rusty ceiling fan inside creates a subtle breeze. The three of us lean comfortably against the back wall facing the door, with my laptop set up on a pillow in front of us.

Ismael and Mohammed are a few years apart. Both are fluent in 'Afar-Af, Amharic and Tigrinya. They do speak some rudimentary English, but we communicate mainly in Amharic.

Neither Ismael nor Mohammed ever travelled along the changing landscapes of the Sabba Canyon to the salt basin of the ‘Afar Depression. They only know the stories from their fathers. Ismael, the elder of the two, is slightly taller and slimmer than Mohammed and has a solemn aura that imbues his good looks with severity and elegance. After seeing the images from the journey to arho and the salt workers in the ‘Afar Depression, he says:

> He [my father] always told me about the stories of arho [the journey to the salt basin]. However, I never travelled to arho myself. It is the first time that I see what my father did all these years. My father used to be gone for many weeks when I was young. I stayed at home with my mother, brothers and sisters. We did not know much about the journey. My father, my uncles and older cousins talked about the hardship of travelling through Sabba [the canyon leading to the salt basin], but we [my brothers and me] never went to arho. We looked after our cattle and went to school.

For Mohammed and Ismael, the images and interviews from the documentary were a glimpse into their fathers and grandfathers’ past. Even though caravan traders were still active during our conversation in June 2018, for Ismael and Mohammed, the traditions of arho lay way back in the past and they had no interest in becoming salt traders.

Ismael and Mohammed want to re-watch parts of the footage. They do recognise other caravaners and salt workers, and can identify some of their clan’s camels by the camel branding [*gāli bedu*]. They recommend that I include ‘Afar music to go with the images and recommend the songs from Abdalla Lee, the most popular singer in ‘Afar. They search for traditional ‘Afar music about arho and camel songs on YouTube and explain their meaning. We play the music to the moving images and observe the produced effect until *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf return in the evening from the funeral.

Field returns and sharing footage

A plurality of voices were involved in the making of Arho and in shaping the outcome of film. From the pre- to the post-production processes, the 'Afar communities and salt traders I worked with during my research had an agency in expressing their opinion on the film. The three salt traders, Abdu, Idriss and Hussein, provided the sequence of actions, together with Yusuf, and also Tesfahun, the main cameraman for arho. I decided from where and what to film, although I did integrate during the editing process the ideas of the collaborators mentioned above on how they want to be seen by an audience.

These discussions shaped the end structure of the film. To this extent, the making of *Arho* follows Sarah Pink's idea, when she writes that reflexive ethnographic filmmakers need to

> be aware of how the camera and video footage become an element of the play between themselves and informants, and how these are interwoven into discourses and practices in the research context (2001, 80).

The discussions I had with people like Ismael, Mohammed, Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim, and the 'Afar salt traders directly involved in the documentary influenced the film's outcome. During my fieldwork, Yusuf and I put the footage from our journey in chronological order, then translated it and created subtitles. In the final month of my fieldwork, we shared this version with different 'Afar salt traders involved in making the documentary. Returning to my field sites, showing and discussing rushes and rough cuts of the documentary with people, was an essential part of my research experience.

At the same time, this direct engagement strengthened my field relations. It also led me to think differently about collaborative methods and ethical considerations for presenting "others" in ethnographic fieldwork. The discussions about the outcome continued even after my return to Europe. I worked with 'Afar colleagues and friends in London, Manchester and

Munich, who helped create subtitles and structure the film. I further shared my film through the video platform VIMEO with people in Ethiopia and corresponded with interlocutors in the ‘Afar region via email and messaging services. Additionally, I presented various rushes and preliminary edits at conferences, workshops and seminars in the United Kingdom, where I received further feedback on editing and story-telling devices.

Reflections on making Arho

In this part of the dissertation, I reflect upon the personal and virtual correspondences that influenced the film’s final outcome. To this end, the sections in this part seek to demonstrate two things.

First, by foregrounding these concrete correspondences with research participants in and away from the field, I am interested in anthropology as a reflective, relational and ethical ethnographic encounter. This encounter is reflective in the sense that it includes the perspectives of participants in the way the research is crafted and shared. I argue that ethnographic filmmaking, like the use of photographs in ethnographic research (Edwards 2015; Pink 1999; Wolbert 2000), allows specific forms of ethical engagements and co-crafting of collaborative research outcomes (Chalcraft and Hikiji 2020; Elder 1995; Diver and Higgins 2014). Compared to ethnographic writing, ethnographic filmmaking offers different and more direct engagement with research participants. The anthropologist as a filmmaker is directly entangled in a triangular relationship with research participants and audiences (Gruber 2016; Nash 2011). To this end this chapter further contextualises the *ethics of correspondence* exemplified by the concrete experience of making *Arho*. I suggest using audio-visual materials and filmmaking as research tools to move beyond the written text as the primary research output.

Second, the following sections address the role and function of ethnographic filmmaking and observational cinema as theoretical storytelling and cultural analysis (Henley

2006; Høgel 2013; Marcus 1990; Mermin 1997). The boundaries of observational cinema and ethnographic film have traditionally been blurry, fluid and unclear (Banks 1992; Heider 2006; MacDougall 1999; Nichols 1991). One ongoing debate is whether ethnographic films should serve primarily for cultural analysis and be of anthropological relevance much like written ethnography, or whether they should use standard story-telling devices to create cinematically aesthetic films that serve a broader audience (Groof 2013; Henley 2006; Marcus 1990). Jakob Kirstein Høgel for example asks we are not expecting too much "is it not expecting too much of visual anthropologists, with limited film experience, to tell good stories and at the same time perform analyses on a par with those in written anthropology?". He believes that anthropologist as filmmakers "should be less concerned with improving its narrative standard, which will always lag behind that of professional storytellers" and rather "focus on the analytical perspectives with which only anthropology can provide filmmaking" (Høgel 2013, 216).

In the sub-sections of this chapter, I am interested in how conventional story-telling techniques can serve central themes of cultural analysis. I specifically engage with the application of editing and story-telling devices like montage and soundtrack to the development of theory for ethnographic cinema (Henley 2007; Høgel 2013; Marcus 1990; Suhr and Willerslev 2012).[49]

Based on my concrete experience of making the documentary *Arho*, I argue, however, that ethnographic filmmaking should first and foremost create an open, ethical space for dialogue in which anthropologists and other people involved in the research can mediate their own representations. This form of engagement is the central idea behind the *ethics of corresponds*.

To frame my theoretical discussion, I contrast the works of the two anthropologists and

[49] Montage is here defined as "a way to go beyond the confines of chronological linear storytelling" (Høgel 2013, 214) rather than the superimposition of a series of fast-paced images (Suhr and Willerslev 2013).

filmmakers, Robert Gardner (1942-2014) and Jean Rouch (1917-2004). Both remain influential, yet controversial, figures in ethnographic cinema (DeBouzek 1989; Henley 2009; Kapur 1997; Loizos 2008; Mouëllic 2013; Taylor and Barbash 2007). My discussion proceeds in three steps. First, I introduce Gardner's and Rouch's films, and their significant contributions and legacies to anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking through a reduced lens of consent, and a particular focus on collaboration, ethics, and reflexivity. Second, I use this comparison between Gardner and Rouch to analyse my making and editing of the documentary *Arho*. Third, I delineate what I refer to as an *ethics of correspondence* for ethnographic filmmaking. I weave into this discussion the concrete interactions with interlocutors from my field experience and use stills (images) from the documentary and the editing process as examples.

21 Initial ideas on making a documentary about the 'Afar caravan trade

The initial idea of making a documentary about the 'Afar salt trade evolved after talking to salt traders during a first visit to the salt plains with my partner in December 2017. Based on the re-considerations of my research project (see Chapter 1) and discussions with former 'Afar salt traders in Logiya, Samara and Mekelle, it became apparent that the salt caravans would eventually disappear.

My ethnographic research kit included a Canon M3 mirrorless camera to take pictures and record short videos during my stay in Ethiopia. My camera, like my notebook, was a constant companion. Often my research participants asked me to take pictures and share them with them for posting on social media. Both *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf had previously facilitated and worked for two documentaries about the salt caravan trade: *The Hottest Place on Earth* (2013) produced by the BBC and የአርሆ መንገድ [The Road to Arho] (2008) by Ethiopian Television (ETV). At the beginning of January of 2018, we began talking about the possibility of making a documentary to preserve the arho journey through film.

By February, Yusuf and I had contacted the Bureau of Culture and Tourism in Samara

to inquire about permission to film in the ‘Afar Depression. The Bureau required a documentary proposal, production outline, budget, intended filming locations, and production crew details. Together with Yusuf, I drafted a preliminary outline for the documentary, then under the preliminary title *Shadow Caravans*. In this draft, we formulated our first ideas. The objective of the February 2018 proposal read as follows:

> The main objective of this ethnographic documentary is to explore the traditional subsistence salt mining and transportation system of the ‘Afar people in North-East Ethiopia. Specifically, the project is concerned with human ingenuity and subsistence farming techniques that do not require modern machinery. Further, the project tries to explore the interaction between the ‘Afar people and their environment as well as the human-animal relation, specifically camels that are used for the salt caravans. The project uses qualitative methods to document the traditional values and knowledge of the ‘Afar people regarding the salt trade and aims to record them through an ethnographic film. Beyond this, the project is set out to focus on a particular group of “caravanists”, that will be identified before shooting, and followed through the different steps of salt mining, loading the camels, transporting the salt, staying overnight and traveling to the markets. It specifically tries to give a descriptive account (either full or partial) of particular aspects of ‘Afar culture involved in this unique journey.

Throughout my research, the ten-page proposal served as a frame of reference for Yusuf and me. In the month leading up to the production, I discussed potential filming locations and possible shots with Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim. Initially, we intended to shoot the entire documentary in black and white to add a nostalgic flair and to match the initial title *Shadow*

Caravans.[50] However, after some tests and experiments, we abandoned the idea as the technical aspects were too demanding and decided to shoot in colour. At this early stage, the discussions with Yusuf and Tesfahun Haddis, the main cameraman for this project with whom I had collaborated on another documentary in October 2017, were useful to frame our approach from a technical aspect.

Andy Lawrence, the British anthropologist and filmmaker, writes in his practical handbook *Filmmaking for Fieldwork* about the importance of preparation and pre-contextualising ideas before starting a film project. He says:

> A strong central question is useful when beginning a research film project… Putting down ideas about technique, approach and research ethics in writing before you go on location is a good way to test how they may function in practice. As the work gathers momentum, your thoughts will become sharper and your methods will grow stronger (Lawrence 2020, 33).

Writing down initial ideas and thoughts before starting the project helped Yusuf and me think through the process. Further, it helped concretise our ideas that we then shared with *Gifta* Ibrahim and other members of the Barhale district. Sharing thoughts and ideas about anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking with Ivo Strecker over coffee in Mekelle in the months leading up to filming It was also Ivo Strecker who told me that anthropologist and filmmaker Robert Gardner had attempted to film the 'Afar salt caravan journey in the 1960s.

22 Ethical ethnographic filmmaking: methodological foundations

Now, I want to delineate what I mean by *ethics of correspondence* in ethnographic filmmaking. For that purpose, I compare the films and legacies of Robert Gardner and Jean Rouch. Both Gardner and Rouch influenced and shaped ethnographic documentaries in their

[50] I was inspired by the German documentary *Dem Himmel Ganz Nah – Die Kraft des Ursprungs (2010)*, by Titus Faschina about pastoral shepherds in the Transylvanian Alps in Romania that was entirely shot in black and white.

own way. However, their films stood for opposing views about the nature of ethnographic films. Therefore, their films and contribution to ethnographic practice lend themselves well to the exploration of the initial question posed in this chapter; whether ethnographic films should primarily be of cinematic aesthetic value, or primarily serve for cultural analysis.

Further, and considering the ethical framework laid out in this dissertation, I ask how we can negotiate the awareness participants have of the ethical implications of filmmaking, and specifically of the application thereof to our collaborative mediation. Additionally, I wonder whether merely being *reflective* about our (visual) ethnographic practices is enough in these precarious times of ethical uncertainty? Finally, I raise the subject of how we can make our reflective practices visible when presenting our work.

The aesthetics and politics of Robert Gardner

Robert Gardner was an American filmmaker and anthropologist whose artistic and poetic style has divided ethnographic audiences and practitioners. Gardner's films were visually aesthetic and highly personalised essays. He often tried to communicate his understanding of the human condition and his philosophical thoughts about it through his films and favoured stylized cinematic images over story-telling devices useful for cultural analysis (Gardner 2010; Loizos 2008; Taylor and Barbash 2007). Nevertheless, he remains one of the most influential ethnographic filmmakers of the past century. His films, characterised by long observational takes, provide audiences with an immersive and sensory viewing experience (Gardner 2006; 2010; Loizos 2008; Taylor and Barbash 2007). Peter Loizos, for example, writes that Gardner's films are "powerful and thought-provoking visual essays offering insights which went below the prosaic surfaces of the seemingly real" (Loizos 1993, 140).

When speaking about his films, Gardner had a clear understanding of his role as a filmmaker. Talking to Karl Heider about *Dead Birds* (*1963*), a film about ritual warfare among the Dani people of Western New Guinea, Gardner said "I seized the opportunity of speaking

to certain fundamental issues in human life…The film attempts to say something about how we all, as humans, meet our animal fate". Gardner continues by stating, "I seized the opportunity of speaking to certain fundamental issues in human life. The Dani were less important to me than those issues" (Heider 1972, 6, 34).

As Gardner describes, he was more interested in communicated insights about the human condition. The imposition of his philosophy and ideas remains a common theme throughout Gardner's later films.[51]

Several commentators have objected to Gardner's films for their imposing character and their reliance on visuals aesthetics, and the juxtaposing of images and de-synchronized sound – often from different locations and contexts. The absence of indigenous voices, narration, verbal explanations and collaborative methods often leave Gardner's politics and interpretations unchallenged and rendered them impractical for cultural analysis (Ruby 1991; Kapur 1997).

However, Gardner was aware of his approach and reflective about it. In his book *The Impulse to Preserve: Reflections of a Filmmaker* (2006), he talks about the making of *Forest of Bliss* (1986), a synaesthetic analysis of events on the cremation grounds of one of India's most sacred cities, Benares. Speaking about a specific scene from the film showing a boatman preparing and repairing the boats to cross the Varanasi river, Gardner says:

> Boats and boatmen put me in mind of my own mythology, of the Styx, of crossing a river and getting to the farther shore… I am trying to convey an idea of what goes on behind and beyond the boat. I want the boat, in some way, to stand for redemption. After all, it is being reborn, remade, reconstituted… I must remember

[51] . Speaking about what influenced his practice as an Anthropologist and filmmaker, Gardner said in a lecture in 1993: "There is no question now that my commitment to filmmaking would be influenced more by one of Anthropology's intellectual sources, Moral Philosophy, than any of its mainstream doctrines… The only appealing concept then current was something called "culture and personality"… I was destined to follow a different esthetic path in my search for imagery and for ways of making it into a film… I have never had the slightest wish to make instructional films" (Gardner 1993, 84).

> that such thoughts are imposed by me and do not at all reflect the views of Hindus. For them, Benares is a place of and an opportunity for exultation (Gardner 2006, 281–82)

In his writing, Gardner reflects on his approach and is critical about it. In his films, however, he leaves the approach unchallenged and for his audiences to figure out. Gardner's choice not to use subtitles, voice-over narration or inter-titles to contextualize the scenes in *Forest of Bliss* creates a different experience for audiences who are "drawn towards the sensorial world produced by the activities of the inhabitants of Benares and their relationship with the environment in which they live" as Mauro Bucci, for example, writes in his analysis of the film (2012, 35).

Peter Loizos says that we can "enjoy them [Gardner's films] for what they are, highly crafted personal visual essays on the enigmas of life, death and the self, in varied cultural settings" (Loizos 1993, 167) or engage with them more critically. In the following sections, I do the latter, by comparing concrete examples of Gardner's work in Ethiopia with my documentary. This discussion of Gardner's work is important to further inform the approach of ethics of correspondence approach.

A critique of Gardner's juxtaposing and editing: examples from Ethiopia

In 1968, Gardner undertook an attempt to document the salt trade in the 'Afar Depression of the northern 'Afar region in Ethiopia. Gardner had not previously done ethnographic fieldwork in the 'Afar region. He was not familiar with the 'Afar language nor the socio-cultural background of the groups involved in the salt caravan trade between the Ethiopian highlands and the 'Afar Depression. His interest in the region was purely aesthetic and cinematic. He was fascinated by the beautiful landscape and challenging environment. As he wrote on his website "my filmic interests in Ethiopia was to see and film the salt trade between the Highlands and the Dallol Depression, a wondrous environment of unbearable heat

and intense color" (Gardner n.d.)

However, Gardner was not able to finish his undertaking as he had the chance to finish his work on another project.[52] His unfished footage was edited and released as a three-minute short film in 2011 under the title "Salt" (Gardner n.d.).

Gardner did, however, return to Ethiopia, specifically southern Ethiopia, where he made a film about the role of women in Hamar society, *Rivers of Sand* (1974). For the film, Gardner collaborated with Ivo Strecker and his wife, Jean Lydall.[53] Lydall negatively about her experience working with Gardner on the Hamar. Both she and Ivo felt that through his editing Gardner "had destroyed the original rhythm and tempo of Hamar life and distorted the nature of the relationship between men and women" (Lydall 1992, 2).

Cuts, juxtaposition and montage

According to Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall, Gardner's juxtaposing of images in his film *Rivers of Sand* (1974) shot in southern Ethiopia created an "ethnographic farce", specifically when he cuts between two unrelated scenes of Hamar men branding a cow and a Hamar man putting an iron ring around a woman's neck. The two scenes are left without commentary or explanation and viewers get the impression of the Hamar as a paternalistic society in which women are treated like animals. In their critique and in response to a review by Lionel Bender of *Rivers of Sand* (L. Bender 1977), Jean and Ivo write:

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[52] As Gardner wrote: I had barely started on making a film about the Afar in the Dallol Depression when the proofs for Gardens of War arrived and I had the chance to revisit the days we spent among the Dani [New Guinea]. They were fresh in my mind, and it was not difficult to draw from such recent memory (Gardner 2010, 164).

[53] I got to know Jean and Ivo closely over the past three years. I spent time with them in Ethiopia, Germany and the United Kingdom. Ivo and Jean have both influenced my thinking about anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking.[53] In June 2019, Jean invited me to the *RAI Research Seminar* on the life and work of Anthropologist Glynn Flood, who died during his research in the 1970s, to speak about my research in 'Afar Ethiopia (*Afar ethnography & its future: Glynn Flood's ethnographic estate*). Also, in June of the same year, I presented rushes of my documentary at a workshop convened by Ivo Strecker at the Max Planck Institute in Halle/Saale, Germany. Both Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall produced several films in Southern Ethiopia: *The Leap Across the Cattle* (Strecker 1979), *Dukas Dilemma* (Lydall and Strecker, K., 2001) and *Family Subsistence in the Hills of Hamar. We are guests of Shawa* (Lydall 2019).

> Gardner's use of these techniques [referring here to the juxtaposing of images] has succeeded in distorting rather than recreating the meaning and rhythm of Hamar life. An example of the kind of distortion he has created is found in his juxtaposing the scene of putting an iron ring around a girl's neck with that of burning a calf's neck with a hot iron. The viewers are led to believe that there is some meaningful parallel between these two scenes. Bender [referring to Lionel Bender's review of *Rivers of Sand*] for example saw them as a "poignant pair of scenes." No one knows that the calf is being treated medically, nor that the girl is being decorated by her brother upon her own request that she might be well-dressed in Hamar eyes. If these things were known, would the two scenes seem such a poignant pair? (Lydall and Strecker 1978, 945).

In their critique of Gardner's editing and montage technique, Lydall and Strecker point to an inherent issue in Gardner's post-production work: his failure to use anthropological knowledge derived from long-term ethnographic fieldwork to structure his films (Lydall 1992; Lydall and Strecker 1978; Strecker 1988).

While montage and the juxtaposition of images are standard editing techniques, they can distort the reality of specific cultural behaviour. Montage is here defined as "a way to go beyond the confines of chronological linear storytelling" (Høgel 2013, 214), rather than the superimposition of a series of fast-paced images (Suhr and Willerslev 2013). For audiences unfamiliar with the cultural and historical background of groups in ethnographic films, it is impossible to judge whether what they see is correct. Coming back to Robert Gardner and the critique on his work, Ivo Strecker wrote that working with Gardner was both fascinating and frustrating.

> Our main objection is that in Rivers of Sand, Hamar life is not allowed, as it were, to reconstitute itself on the screen. The constant cuts and counter-positioning of

> short sequences never allow an authentic view of Hamar life to emerge but lead to a complete distortion of time, space, and action as they are experienced by the Hamar. In fact, the film has a surrealistic and symbolic quality, a quality which, if I understand rightly, Robert Gardner intended. A good surrealist knows the primary order of things in a given context and then, by means of artful displacements, creates a second artificial order of things which is at one and the same time absurd and full of some deep meaning. In order to interpret such meaningful displacements, the recipient of a surreal (or symbolic) message has to know the primary order of things. But if neither the "sender" nor the "receiver" know that order, the act of displacing becomes a farce (Strecker 1988, 373).

There are several interesting elements in Strecker's statement about the distortion of Hamar life resulting from Gardner's decision to cut and juxtapose images. According to Strecker, this did not give viewers an authentic representation of Hamar life, and furthermore stood in stark contrast to how the Hamar themselves experienced time, space and agency. While the use of montage and juxtaposed images can be a useful stylistic device, as it has been since the inception of cinema, it should be dealt with reflectively when it comes to the post-production process of ethnographic films.

The question I am interested in now, is how ethnographic filmmakers can use montage techniques without distorting the cultural reality and authenticity of the life portrayed? Can ethnographic films use montage and images shot on a different day and in different locations to create a single story? Are these techniques consistent with the idea of observational cinema? I try to answer these questions by giving concrete examples from the making of Arho, focusing specifically on the use of music and soundtrack editing.

23 Music, soundtrack and editing: examples from *Arho*

The documentary Arho contains several montage scenes assembled from images taken on different days and in different locations, and presented with music. The first three minutes of the film, for example, contain nine different cuts foreshadowing the caravan's journey from a small village in north-eastern Ethiopia to the salt basin in the 'Afar Depression. The 'Afar song "Arho Tabba" [caravan leader] by Abdalla Lee, about the role and cultural importance of the 'Afar caravan leader or father of the caravan, plays alongside the images.

Figure 2: Opening montage scene from *Arho*. Images played to the song "Arho Tabba" (timecode: 1:12 to 3:45)

Including music in Arho was not something Yusuf and I had considered in our initial proposal and we were not able to record songs of the 'Afar caravan journey on location. In the first rough cut that I shared with the salt traders involved in making the documentary, I started the film with longer scenes of life in the village, together with atmospheric sound (images 5 and 6 above). Caravans appeared in the background and slowly walked through. This scene was followed by an image of the caravans leaving the village and disappearing into the Sabba Canyon while the title appeared on screen. This first cut then followed the journey in chronological order. When I returned to Barhale to discuss this version with *Gifta* Ibrahim and the salt traders involved in the making of the film, Abdu asked me to pause the video after the opening scene and said:

> This is not our village. Why do you start there? You were filming on the mountain when we prepared for the journey [referring to the first three images above]. Where

are these images? We want to show our village. Where we live and from where we start our journey.

I explained that I was not happy with the quality of the images from the village and that I thought it more interesting to start out by providing more insight into an ‘Afar village with children, women and men moving around. I also felt that including these shots would slow down the introduction as I did not have a voice-over. For Abdu and the other salt traders, however, it was more important to show their village and the starting point of the journey, so we agreed to include this. During our discussion and while watching the footage, Abdu and *Gifta* Ibrahim both mentioned how the film had no music and that they wanted to include ‘Afar songs about the caravan journey. They suggested several songs they deemed important and wanted us to include as a soundtrack.

I experienced frustration during these conversations with Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and the other salt traders involved in the making of the documentary. I was sceptical, as sound and music not recorded on location and during the journey were not in line with my idea of ethnographic observational cinema. I had the same misgivings about using pre-recorded songs as a soundtrack for an ethnographic documentary and how this stood in relation to “true” ethnographic cinema.

The songs in Arho

Eventually, we agreed to include two songs, “Arho Tabba” by Abdalla Lee and “Takkem Maggoh” by Mohammed Ali Talha, that represented the cultural importance and meaning of the caravan journey. The beat of the two songs also matches the rhythm and movement of the camels and was in sync with the journey.

The challenge for *Arho* was to find a way to edit the songs alongside the images. While in Ethiopia, I explained that adding music would mean that I needed to restructure parts of the film to make the music more present and follow the pace and movement of the final cut. In

order to make this work, I suggested re-arranged the opening scene, foreshadowing the entire caravan journey in a montage shown with the song "Arho Tabba". During the introduction, the song plays without subtitles. The idea was not to confront non-'Afar viewers too early with written text on the screen and let the images speak for themselves. The song appears a second time half-way through the documentary, this time with subtitles. The second time the song emerges, viewers are familiar with the three main characters of the Arho. I then reintroduce the song, this time with subtitles to convey its meaning, in a 1 min and 44 second uncut sequence of the caravan emerging from the Sabba Canyon (see sequence below).

Figure 3: Montage scene 2 to the song "Arho Tabba" using subtitles (timecode: 19:09 to 20:45).

The song plays one last time as an outro at the end of Arho. The song therefore serves as a framing device for the documentary. The second song that Abdu and the other salt traders included in the documentary was "Takkem Maggoh" by Mohammed Ali Talha.

Figure 4: Example of montage images played to music from Mohammed Ali Talha's "Takkem Maggoh" (timecode 22:31 to 24:19).

My self-doubts and self-interrogation about the power over representation in ethnographic filmmaking and how the negotiation over this power should be represented in the final outcome of the documentary helped me explore different ways of collaboration in the post-production process.

Music and soundtrack in ethnographic films

The use of a soundtrack in ethnographic filmmaking (Boudreault-Fournier 2020; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; Henley 2007) can be problematic if the music accompanying the footage does not match. Robert Lemelson and Annie Tucker, who write about the psychological impact of music in ethnographic cinema (Lemelson and Tucker 2017), say that in "crafting a soundtrack, it is important to remember that cultural genres and conventions will influence viewers' interpretations, and emotionally resonant music will be different", and they urge filmmakers to "consider a sound concept or style for each film" (Lemelson and Tucker 2020, 112). Paul Henley further argues that an evocative soundtrack can "be systematically

organized to enhance both the connotative and experiential texture of a film for spectators" (Henley 2007, 55). He says that a well-crafted soundtrack can improve the quality of ethnographic films in three ways:

> by "thickening" the ethnographic description on which the films are based, by enhancing the spectators' understanding and vicarious experience of the subject matter presented in the film, and by enhancing the modes through which the filmmaker can propose an interpretation of the significance of that subject matter (Henley 2007, 56).

Including these specific 'Afar songs in *Arho* helped me to "to explore the full potential of the sonic world—including music—as rich and essential sources of creative engagement and multisensorial cinematographic experiences" (Boudreault-Fournier 2020, 154) that offer ways to enhance "the audience experience and to provide new forms of engagement with the practices of listening, design, editing, manipulation, and even collaboration" (Boudreault-Fournier 2020, 158).

Although I was initially sceptical about using music in this documentary, it helped me rethink and restructure the work in specific ways. Whenever I presented rough or preliminary cuts to other 'Afar interlocutors in Ethiopia, they first and foremost appreciated the music. After presenting the preliminary version at SOAS after returning from fieldwork in February 2019, an 'Afar man in the audience commented that he appreciated the choice of music as "these are important songs for the 'Afar". Similarly, an 'Afar colleague in Manchester, who helped me finalize the subtitles, told me "these are 'Afar classics everyone knows". The different conversations also made realize that the documentary authenticity in the eyes of an 'Afar viewership.

Using montage to create viewer's suspension and evoking sensory receptions

Specifically, the decision to cut the film according to the rhythm of the music further

changed the structure of the documentary. To keep the remaining documentary in line with the opening montage scene I decided to cut back and forth between the caravan journey and the work of the salt basin. Since the journey of the caravan was shot following observational cinema convention, e.g., long takes and unprivileged camera style (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; Henley 2004; C. Young 2003), revisiting the footage after the inclusion of specific music offered the me an "opportunity for a second participative immersion in the events" and "to search for an appropriate structure within the rushes" (Henley 2004, 109).

Using montage and stylistic editing devices allowed me to keep the salt at the forefront of the viewer's mind without disrupting nor disturbing the social reality of the 'Afar caravan journey. Ultimately, the documentary Arho is about the salt trade and the journey to reach the salt flats. Intercutting between the events and interviews during the journey and events and scenes from the salt basin, the intention was further to keep viewers in suspense. I chose this particular form of intercutting montage to further create a particular narrative style with a more familiar story-line following conventions of documentary filmmaking (Chanan 2007; Balsom and Peleg 2016; Nichols 1991; Pressfield 2016).

After the opening montage scene and the title of the documentary, I cut for 25 seconds to the salt workers in the salt basin and show the final shape of the *amolé* [salt bars] before cutting back to the journey. The two images below show a montage examples from *Arho*, intercutting between the salt works happening at the 'Afar Depression and the journey.

Image 21: Still from *Arho*. Salt bars in the ‘Afar Depression (timecode: 4:16)

Image 22: Still from *Arho*. Moving caravan through a gorge in Sabba Canyon (timecode: 4:17)

At the same time, the specific decision to intercut between the journey and the work in the salt basin allowed me to be more creative and experiment with elements of sensory ethnography (Lee 2019; Nakamura 2013; Pink 2001; 2015). For example, in the two scenes below I cut between the events during the journey and the preparation of tea with sugar and the preparation of meat, directly to heaving of the salt and the salt workers in the ‘Afar Depression. The images

below show the inter-cuts between Hussein preparing tea with sugar and salt workers heaving salt out of the surface and a worker in the salt basin shaping the salt into *amolé* and Abdu preparing goat meat.

Image 23: Still from *Arho*. Hussein preparing tea (timecode: 6:04).

Image 24: Still from *Arho*. Salt workers in the ‘Afar Depression (timecode: 6:20).

Image 25: Still from Arho. Salt worker shaping the amolé bars (timecode: 10:02).

Image 26: Still from Arho. Abdu cutting meat with a knife between his toes (timecode: 10:08).

By cutting between sugar and salt, and salt and meat, I tried to cut between the earthly elements and evoke sweet, salty, and savoury taste sensations. In certain parts of the ‘Afar region, and other parts of Ethiopia, salt is sometimes used to sweeten tea and coffee. On the other hand, the *amolé* bars (as discussed in the previous chapter) are primarily used for animals, which allows them to grow healthy and produce milk and meat for communities. The two scenes, however, make do without further commentary or explanation as I leave these to the

interpretation of audiences and viewers.

Moving forward to the second point I want to elicit from Gardner's practice, I will now engage with the ethical questions raised by his work. My purpose is twofold; to tease out the main ethical issues involved in making anthropological films and to see whether and how these differ significantly from those involved in conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

The ethics of Robert Gardner's film

Here, I follow the critique of Gardner's films by Jay Ruby. Ruby argues that Gardner's approach should primarily be critiqued from an ethical perspective. Ruby writes that "there are some fundamental methodological and moral questions" raised in Gardner's films. For Ruby these are specifically questions of consent, and "the knowledge the subjects should have about a filmmaker's intention" (Ruby 1991, 7).

Ruby then goes on to quote Gardner directly:

> "My job was made easier because no one knew what I was doing". "As far as my film was concerned, one essential advantage lay in the fact that the Dugum Dani did not know what a camera was. I decided to protect this innocence by keeping all photographs and magazines hidden ... I wanted above all to photograph authentic Dani behavior" (Ruby 1991, 7–8). [54]

Ruby here points to three crucial, interrelated issues concerning ethnographic practice. First, there is the question about informed consent and discussing the intent of ethnographic research and filmmaking. Are anthropologists allowed to film and then present footage without the consent of participants? Knowing what we know today, would Gardner's films like *Dead Birds* (1963), *Rivers of Sand* (1984) or *Forest of Bliss* (1986) still be selected for an ethnographic

[54] Ruby takes these two quotes from Heider, Karl G. 1972. *The Dani of West Irian: An Ethnographic Companion to the Film Dead Birds*. New York: MSS Modular Publications, Inc; p. 8 and from Gardner, Robert. 1969. Chronicles of the human experience: Dead Birds. *Film Comment* 2 (1): 25-34, p. 30.

film festival? Should they still be used as teaching materials in courses on anthropology and film? At the time Gardner made his films, anthropology had already begun to critically reflect on its practices and ethics (Asch 2015; Foley 2002; Groof 2013; Ruby 1982). While Gardner set high standards for visually engaging cinematic experiences, he seems to have failed to address, at least in the making of some of his ethnographic films, not only ethical and political implications, but also the responsibility of anthropologists.

This having been said, the majority of ethnographic films made during the first eighty years of the 20th century included asymmetric power-relations between the filmmakers and the people filmed. As Kathleen Kuehnast writes, many of the films made in the 1960s and 1970s included "strong tones of racism, classism and sexism" (Kuehnast 1992, 187). The films were not intentionally malicious, but they were "unaware in terms of the set of biases underlying the era in which the film was produced" (Kuehnast 1992, 187).

Kuehnast's critique brings me to the third and most important point about the nature of ethnographic practice and ethnographic filmmaking: ethics and reflexivity. Insofar as all ethnographic practice involves representing others, it always raises political and ethical questions about the power asymmetry between the researcher and the people who are the topic of the research.

Jean Rouch (1917-2004), an anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker who was a contemporary of Gardner, forwarded a different approach that is useful for purposes of comparison.

24 Cinema verité and shared anthropology: the films of Jean Rouch

Jean Rouch's films are mostly associated with "ethnographic cinema's 'reflexive turn'" (Groof 2013, 109). His films had a strong collaborative character and often included the voices

of participants. To this extent, Rouch's films have influenced and driven the development of different genres within the ethnographic film spectrum, including indigenous cinema, ethnofiction and essay films (Groof 2013; Mouëllic 2013; Port 2018; Sjöberg 2008). Compared with the films of Robert Gardner, where the power-relation between filmmaker and the people being filmed remained largely unchallenged, asymmetric or uneven, the "subjects" of Jean Rouch's work became collaborators and active participants.

Rouch is probably best known for his *cinéma vérité* [later *cinema direct*] approach that he developed together with the French filmmaker Edgar Morin. In contrast to American contemporary documentary filmmakers like Robert Gardner, Donn Alan Pennebaker, Richard Leacock or Robert Drew, who argued that the camera should be as invisible as possible and only observe (Grimshaw 2013; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; MacDougall 1999; C. Young 2003), Rouch and Morin wanted the camera to provoke and stimulate action, and to be visible within the film. Rouch wanted to show how the presence of the camera and of the film crew influenced people's behaviour. He believed that this influence could not be ignored and should be made explicit. Therefore, Rouch was not only concerned with the film as a product, e.g. the outcome of the film, but also with the epistemological and philosophical concerns of combining ethnographic research with filmmaking (Groof 2013; Morin [1956] 2005; Rouch 2003).[55]

Rouch made the majority of his films in the colonies of former French West Africa (today Mali, Niger and Benin) and Ghana (former Gold Coast), where he initially worked as a hydraulic engineer under the French colonial administration during World War II. His films range from the direct portrayal of ritual events and festivals as in *Les Maîtres Fous (1955)*, to ethnofiction like *Moi, un Noir (1957)* and *Jaguar (1967)* in which participants act and portray specific characters of their own society (Groof 2013; Henley 2009). Until his death in 2002,

[55] According to Robert Drew, who is seen as the founder of American *direct cinema*, the production team should be small and not interfere with the group that is being filmed. The camera should only observe the objective truth, as 'a fly on the wall'. Rouch on the other hand argued that the camera should be like 'a fly in the soup' (Grimshaw 2013; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; MacDougall 1999; C. Young 2003).

Rouch produced more than 40 films and a full engagement with his work is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What is relevant here is Rouch's reflexive and collaborative approach with research participants.

Fieldwork and collaboration in Jean Rouch's cinema

Compared to Robert Gardner, who according to Jay Ruby did not speak the language of "any of the people he filmed except for the Dani, nor has he stayed in the field in any of his filming expeditions long enough to do ethnography" (Ruby 1991, 10), Rouch spent much time within the communities he filmed and spoke the language of the people he worked with – at least he could communicate with people in French (Bregstein 1986).

Further, Rouch had a distinctive understanding of the relationship between anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking, unlike Gardner who saw his main responsibility as an anthropologist to be "as social scientists", and the "author of the film" (Heider 1972, 6). In *The Camera and Man* (2003), Rouch writes in quote at the beginning of the chapter "it is the ethnographer alone, to my mind, who really knows when, where, and how to film, in other words, to "direct."" He continues

> Finally, and this is without a doubt the decisive factor, the ethnographer must spend a long time in the field before beginning to shoot. This period of reflection, apprenticeship, and mutual awareness might be quite long (Flaherty spent a year in the Solomon Islands before rolling a foot of film) and is thus incompatible with the schedules and salaries of a crew of technicians (Rouch 2003, 36).

For Rouch, ethnographic films should derive from a long-term engagement in the field. Only then, he says, is the ethnographer able to develop a sense of whom, what and where to film. Rouch adds that the ethnographer can then make informed decisions on how to edit the film during post-production (Rouch 2003).

Shared ciné-anthropology

Central to Rouch's films was what he called "shared ciné-anthropology" or "shared anthropology". In the field, Rouch discussed the filming process and subsequent stages with participants. With the technological advancements of the 1960s and 1970s, Rouch brought viewing projectors to West Africa and screened first rushes and rough cuts of his films to review them with the participants of his films.

Together with Gilbert Rouget, Rouch directed the film *Horendi (1972),* about a seven-day ritual practised by Songhai women in Niger who have been diagnosed as being possessed by spirits, and who come to terms with these spirits and make peace with them. Rouch wrote regarding *Horendi*:

> By studying this film on a small moviescope viewer with my informants, I was able to gather more information in two weeks than I could get in three months of direct observation and interview. This type of a posteriori working is just the beginning of what is already a new type of relationship between the anthropologist and the group he studies, the first step in what some of us have labeled "shared anthropology." Finally, then, the observer has left the ivory tower; his camera, tape recorder, and projector have driven him, by a strange road of initiation, to the heart of knowledge itself. And for the first time, the work is judged not by a thesis committee but by the very people the anthropologist went out to observe. This extraordinary technique of "feedback" (which I would translate as "audiovisual reciprocity") has certainly not yet revealed all of its possibilities (Rouch 2003, 42).

There are several interesting elements in Rouch's quote that I want to unpack. The first of these is the playing back of video footage to interlocutors while in the field, as reflexive technique to deepen the knowledge about the culture in question. Rouch's deliberate use of images as a visual aid is a concrete research approach to trigger and elicit memories that would not

otherwise have come up in conversation (Rouch 2003).[56]

The second point is the term "shared anthropology" that Rouch used to indicate this concrete form of collaboration with his interlocutors. His interlocutors participated actively in the production and post-production processes of his films and therefore become participants in "storytelling and aesthetic choices" (Rouch 2003, 42). Rouch invited some of the people he worked with to France and trained them in film techniques, sound or production (Bregstein 1986; Ungar 2007). In other cases, he recorded films that his interlocuters wanted to make (Groof 2013; Jorgensen and Madsen 2007).

According to Paul Henley, the approach of shared anthropology made Rouch a pioneer of reflexivity in ethnographic filmmaking. Henley writes

> Rouch was far ahead of most other anthropologists of his generation in suggesting that anthropological knowledge should arise not from detached scientific observation but rather from engagement and mutual accommodation between subject and observer (Henley 2009, 321).

Shared anthropology further means that the anthropologist as filmmaker gives up his position of power and leaves his "ivory tower", as Rouch puts it, to engage in a dialogue with participants in the films. In a conversation with Enrico Fulchignoni, Rouch called this a "ciné-dialogue" in which "knowledge is no longer a stolen secret, later to be consumed in the Western temples of knowledge", but rather "the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and ethnographees meet on a path" (Rouch and Fulchignoni 2003, 185). While the sharing of knowledge in the ethnographic encounter is not "reflexive per se" (Groof 2013, 115), Rouch

[56] In an interview with John Melville Bishop for the documentary *In The Wilderness of a Troubled Genre* (2013), Gardner spoke about reflecting upon images in the postproduction process that for him happened away from the field. He says that "editing is a way of finding ideas and the idea comes through the re-seeing… in the editing stage you are given another opportunity to think about your experience as an observer and to reorganize all of these feelings and impressions, which have been objectified to a certain extent in imagery into some kind of composite of feelings and ideas that result in a film."

used his films “to provoke conversations that would allow for an exchange of ideas and visions, across cultures and over time” (Berthe 2018, 272).

Critique on Jean Rouch's films

Rouch's films did not remain without criticism and have been considered, by some, as “both paternalistic and colonialist” (Henley 2009, 331). The best known critique is that of Ousmane Sembène, a Senegalese writer and film director, who is considered the father of African cinema (Armes 2006; Harrow and Garritano 2019). In 1965 Ousmane Sembène accused Jean Rouch of portraying Africans as though they were insects (“*Tu nous regardes comme des insectes*” [You look at us as though we were insects]) and charged Rouch of being an entomologist and zoological filmmaker (Amad 2013; Groof 2013).[57]

Another critique comes from Inoussa Ousseini, a Nigerien writer and director from the *Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines (IRSH)*, who worked with Jean Rouch. In an interview included in the documentary *Jean Rouch and His Camera in the Heart of Africa* (1986), by Philo Bregstein, Ousseini criticised head-on Rouch's approach of “shared anthropology”. He said:

> Why can't we also make films on Europeans, to show a certain aspect of their culture, a certain aspect of their civilisation, which to us have a certain element of barbarism since for them certain of our sacrifices are, let's say, real savage elements. I would call this, if you like, shared anthropology. Because if they study us, we have to study them also! (Bregstein 1986).

Ousseini's critique hits a nerve relating all at once to ethnographic research endeavour, the reflective turn in anthropology and Rouch's reflective ethnographic cinema, e.g., the one-

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[57] Paul Henley in his book *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (2009) has brought together some of the critiques on Rouch's films and work (Henley 2009). For a further critique on Jean Rouch work see the articles of Pierre Haffner and Albert Cervoni in the French publication *CinémAction n°17 – Jean Rouch, un griot gaulois* (Prédal 1982).

sidedness of "shared anthropology". Even though Jean Rouch trained some his interlocutors in France, most of them returned to their home countries to make films about their own societies and cultures. This elicits the asymmetrical power-relation and inherent colonial discrepancy of the "native" anthropologist or filmmaker, who is trained in the west but returns home to conduct research about his own culture or society. As Delmos Jones writes,

> this discrepancy can only be explained in terms of the way in which the native anthropologist is seen by the field as a whole-not as a professional who will conduct research and develop theories and generalizations, but as a person who is in a position to collect information in his own culture to which an outsider does not have access. There is, then, the expectation that the insider will know things in a different, more complete way than will the outsider (Jones 1970, 252).

The "native" anthropologist and filmmaker is then nearly reduced to a data collector, who is assumed to possess "the immeasurable advantage of trustworthiness, authentically revealing precisely the elusive intimate thoughts and sentiments of the native" (Lowie 1937, 133).

Collaborative examples from Arho

To contextualise the participation of filmmakers and their involvement, I decided to explain this in an introductory inter-title at the beginning of the documentary. While I refrain from using inter-titles and further explanations throughout the film, I use this explanatory note at the beginning of the documentary as a "reflective device" (Groof 2013, 124) to establish the ethical relationship between the people involved in the documentary and myself as filmmaker. Using inter-titles as reflective devices is not a novel practice in ethnographic film. Matthias de Groof explains how Robert Flaherty uses inter-titles in his film *Nanook of the North (1929)*, about the life of Nanook and his family, members of the indigenous Inuit people in Canada, to highlight "the intimacy between spectator and Nanook, despite the remoteness of the filmmaker, or rather thanks to his absence, since the filmmaker's transparency facilitates the

spectator's identification with his position" (Groof 2013, 124).

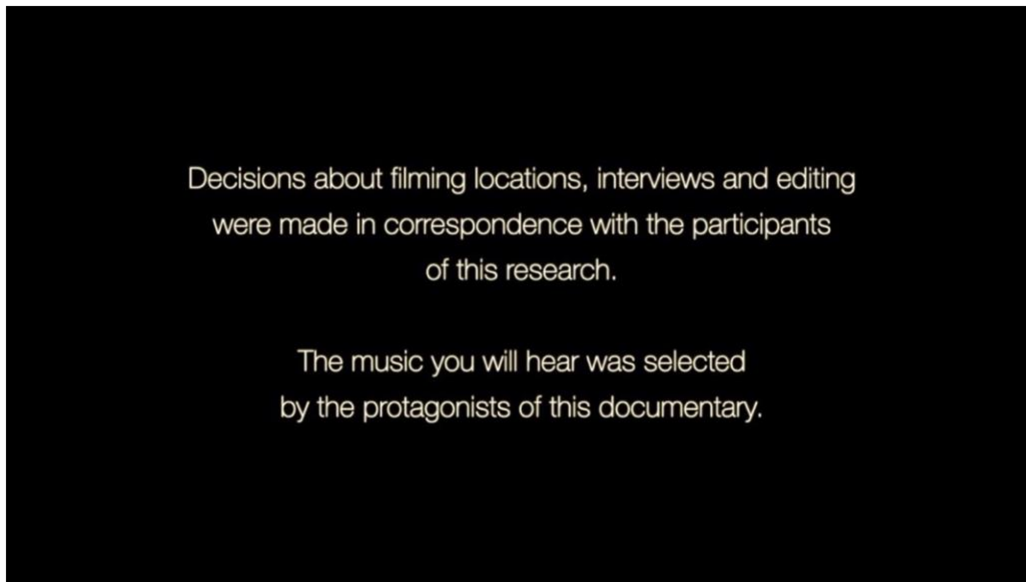

Image 27: Still from the introduction of *Arho* informing viewers that participants in the documentary were actively involved in the different processes (timecode: 00:44).

Reflexivity in ethnographic film does not necessarily mean that the filmmaker has to appear on screen or be present through a God-like voiceover or narration. This differs from an ethnographic text, in which anthropologists include themselves through their "ethnographic-"I"" to reflect on their positionality or to convince readers of "being there" (Geertz 1988), e.g. being present in the field. Reflexivity in a documentary film can be problematic; if it is not made explicit and can lead to a disruption of the film's narrative flow (Groof 2013; Sjöberg 2008).

Since the documentary *Arho* has a folkloristic character in the sense that it tries to document a lost past, I decided not to include myself in the documentary. Even though you can hear sometimes hear mine and Yusuf's voice from behind the camera, I did not want to appear in front of the lens. To make the collaborative nature of the documentary visible on screen, I include a scene in which Hussein, one of the salt traders, says during the preparation of *gogoyata* that we should also film him as he refills the goat-skin water container [*sarr*] with water.

Image 28: Still from Arho. Hussein acknowledging and addressing the camera directly, when he asks us to film him and the other salt traders as they refill the water container made of goat skin [sarr] (timecode: 16-06).

The final image after the credits shows Abdu, Hussein, Idriss, Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and me sitting in front of my laptop in Barhale, watching the final version of the film before I leave Ethiopia. This last image was further meant to make the collaborative character of this documentary explicit to audiences.

Image 29: Viewing and discussing Arho on a laptop with the people involved in the making of the documentary (Barhale, Ethiopia, June 2018)

25 Conclusion: limits of collaboration and ethics of correspondence

I have reflected on Gardner's and Rouch's work and used examples from Arho to show what I mean by shared and reflexive anthropology for ethnographic film. This reflection is part of the *ethics of correspondence* I forwarded in this dissertation. From this perspective, ethics become a reflective process in the ethnographic encounter. This reflexivity is based on the relations created in the field. The way in which I conducted my fieldwork with Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and other salt traders in Ethiopia shaped the way the film was crafted and presented.

I started out this chapter by asking weather ethnographic films should favour cinematic aesthetics or cultural analysis. Positioning myself within the "cinematic aesthetics" and the "anthropological relevance" discussion, I agree with Paul Henley. Henley has called *ethnographic documentary* a hybrid form that draws "on the best of the two different fields expertise" (Henley and Flores 2009, 94). I believe that with new technological advancements,

smaller equipment and editing in the field make it possible to communicate concepts that are both relevant to the anthropological inquiry, and produced with high quality standards. Another important question is: With whom lies the ultimate responsibility of the anthropologist and filmmaker? Who is the intended audience for the film?

The idea of ethnographic filmmaking forwarded here combines my anthropological perspective with the multiple perspectives of the people involved in my research. I view this as a "collaborative process of knowledge production" (Gruber 2016, 17), which relates to the three interdependent fields of ethics, responsibility and storytelling in ethnographic filmmaking. To this end, the reflections on making *Arho* and this chapter have shown "the capacity of film not just to illustrate an analysis but actually to generate it" (Henley 2004, 108).

Limitations of collaborative research

Before I departed from Ethiopia, I asked collaborators to identify any part of the filmed material they did not want to appear in the film. There were specific sequences and interview passages in which they spoke critically about the *'As 'Ale Salt Association* that they did not want to be shown. They were satisfied with the rushes they had seen and pleased that I had included the music.

After my return to London, many elements made it difficult to maintain the collaborative character of the production process during post-production. The geographical distance was not conducive to intensive exchange. It was further difficult to sustain a steady commitment to the project during the writing of this dissertation, teaching, and the departure of my initial supervisors from SOAS. The situation worsened with the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 and the lockdown restrictions. I had booked and organized a follow-up trip to Ethiopia for five weeks in April 2020 to revisit my field sites, conduct further interviews and present the rushes and edits at Samara University and to the communities involved in the making of the documentary. The idea was to further interviews with 'Afar women engaged in

the salt trade and to record a voice-over and narration to contextualize certain sequences of the film. Instead, however, I had to cancel the trip and could only share film edits via the online streaming platform VIMEO and stills from the documentary via text-messaging services with collaborators in Ethiopia.

Best efforts notwithstanding, it became clear that, the relationship I had established with my interlocutors in Ethiopia, one based on trust and face-to-face interactions, was disrupted by physical distance.

My experience is that collaborative work is methodologically challenging and truly "ethical" research remains in part an unfulfilled aspiration, as I struggled to manage and keep relationships across long physical distances. Working within collaborative frameworks implies pushing the limits of roles and responsibilities, pushing the dichotomy of researcher-interlocutor and its associated hierarchies, and at the same time, showing flexibility when collaboration needs to be re-adjusted.

For instance, when my collaborators in Ethiopia did not answer messages or did not give point by point input, it was difficult to proceed with the editing. There non-replies did not mean they were no longer keen on participating in the project, but rather, that they had moved on with their personal lives.

Conclusion: corresponding landscapes and ethics of correspondence

Those who make journey/travel together, knows each other better than those who live in the same home.

'Afar proverb

To practise anthropology, …, is to restore the world to presence, to attend, and to respond. It is to move forward in real time, not to stop the clock in order to look back. Our responsibilities, therefore, are to the future: what we seek are ways to answer to the worlding world. And in this, anthropology is – indeed *must be* – a discipline of correspondence.

Tim Ingold
British Anthropologist

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In this dissertation, I brought together ethnographic and audio-visual material to outline the history of the 'Afar's salt caravan trade as a social system. I showed how the relationship between the past and present, best understood through the study of the *corresponding landscapes*, has influenced specific salt traders and communities from three districts, Dallol, Konnaba and Barhale (Dakoba), in north-eastern Ethiopia. We have seen that most current debates about the 'Afar are dominated by their peripheral position to the central Ethiopian state, ethno-religious identity construction, past and present forms of violence applied in local politics and revolutionary liberation movements, as well as the role of national and international concessionary companies. These topics are all linked to the 'Afar's historic role resulting from their strategic position in the Horn of Africa. By focusing specifically on the salt caravan trade of the northern 'Afar region, this dissertation has contributed and opened up new avenues for research.

I have shown that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the expanding Christian Ethiopian Empire challenged the 'Afar's dominant position over the control of the salt basin. This expansion led to various social groups becoming involved in the salt trading networks,

like the Tigrayan "arhotay" from the Ethiopian plateau. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, these new dynamic processes caused conflicts over resources and new forms of violence while at the same time creating economic interactions and social practices beyond ethnic boundaries, such as bond friendships and intermarriages between 'Afar and non-'Afar groups. The salt caravan trade's economic features created particular niches for 'Afar communities along the caravan trails. The 'Afar communities and salt traders I worked with during my research occupied a unique position within these trade networks. For example, the 'Afar I introduced in this dissertation profited directly from their relationships with salt traders moving through the Sabba Canyon, as embodied in the exchange of the *amolé* [salt bars], flour, hides and skins and other commodities. For the 'Afar salt traders in Dakoba, kinship ties, the different forms of exchange negotiations, culturally specific business ethics, trust and reciprocity, the *ḏāgu* and mutual customary laws [*meda'a*] provided a sense of belonging to more extensive social networks within a shared cultural framework.

The the formation of modern political borders, a direct outcome of European colonial imperialism in the Horn of Africa, did not obstruct the 'Afar trade connections and social movements across international borders. However, after 1995 the 'Afar salt trader communities had to adapt to a new regional boundary demarcation within the Ethiopian federal state. Further, the federal political system created new regional trade relations and political systems. The *'As' Ale Salt Association*, currently holding a monopoly over the salt trade, is one of the most direct outcomes of these new developments. The use of trucks for transporting the salt has increasingly reduced the number of caravans and many former 'Afar salt traders have now stopped going to *arho*, looking for other means of income.

Thus, in the contemporary ethnographic context of north-eastern 'Afar, the memories and legacies of the salt caravan trade's history continue to shape local discourse. While the existence of Dakoba 'Afar salt trader communities as a specific group has complicated the

discourse about ethno-religious identity, the fluidity of cultural and kinship boundaries and the shifting nature of self-identifying processes, it has also enabled ‘Afar salt traders to reconcile notions of past and present through corresponding memories and legacies embedded within specific landscapes along the caravan trails.

26 Corresponding landscapes

During our journeys along the camel trails, my interlocutors repeatedly discussed the past in idealised terms. Speaking about the relationship between ‘Afar and non-‘Afar, one woman thoughtfully said,

> The relationship with the people from the highlands was very good. Our fathers and grandfathers passed their friendships down to us. There was much trust, support and kindness [*ita luk alia*] during that time. They brought different products down from the highlands to the market. Sometimes, we even gave them salt as a loan or gifts [*aḥwa*]. Our wealth depended on the salt and animals. We were rich in goats, camels, milk, meat and butter.

These memories of a better, peaceful past based on trust and support seemed to contest some of the prevailing violent narratives in the current discourse about north-eastern Ethiopia, specifically about ‘Afar-Tigray relations. Further, her memories of a general wealth of animal products from the caravan trade shows how the decline of the trade has impoverished some of the communities in the Dakoba region. Now, only a few people profit directly from the salt trade and international tourism. This became apparent during the salt flats journey and from the conversations with Abdu, Idriss and Hussein. Many salt traders did not want to give up going to *arho* as it was an essential part of the *‘Afar ‘adā* [culture and tradition]. As Hussein explained “Arho is a long tradition of the ‘Afar people. It is part of their livelihood. I don’t believe the caravans will ever disappear”.

In remembering the past, my interlocutors had strong sentiments of the *arho* journeys. Their idealized past often seemed to directly contradict other memories of the hardships involved in the journey. While watching footage from the documentary *Arho*, one ‘Afar salt trader recalled: “I was very young when I went to *arho*. Seeing these images now, reminds me of the hardships involved in traveling to *arho*”.

The younger generation and the sons of former salt traders I spoke with during my research had no interest in the caravan trade. For much younger ‘Afar, the images and interviews from the documentary *Arho* were a glimpse into their fathers and grandfathers’ past. Even though caravan traders were still active during my research in 2017-2018, the traditions of *arho* lay way back in the past. They had no interest in becoming salt traders. When, after watching the documentary *Arho*, I asked a group of young ‘Afar, all in their late teens and early 20s, whether they wanted to join the caravans in the future, the son of a salt trader replied:

> There is no future for me in the caravan trade. They [referring to the *‘As ‘Ale Salt Association*] are using trucks now. Our fathers are now stopping to go to arho because there is not enough money. I want to study medicine in Mekelle and go abroad. Here [in Barhale] there is no future for us. We have many relatives in Europe, but I need to study first and then get a scholarship.

Understanding all these comments only make sense when we explore how memories of the past enter into dialogue with present discourse. Contemporary social practices, such as the refusal of the younger ‘Afar generation to engage in the caravan trade, or else salt traders who cannot yet completely reconcile themselves with the fact that an important part of their culture and tradition is disappearing, inform how many ‘Afar remember the past, which in turn plays a role in how people understand the present.

In this dissertation, I forwarded the approach of *corresponding landscapes* to bring together the different memories of my interlocutors. I have called the different elements of the

corresponding landscapes the *productive*, the *material* and the *political* landscapes. Like other ethnographic studies on trade networks, the approach of *corresponding landscapes* recognises the interconnections between past and present, memories and legacies, and brings these into dialogue to structure discourse. Jacqueline Fewkes helps us understand this through comparison, when she writes in her ethno-history of the trans-Himalayan salt trade in Ladakh in northern India that "memories are the ways in which narrative about historical trade connections have been reshaped by individuals and groups to have significance." Similarly, so she continues, the "legacies of trade are the ways in which social relations formulated within trading networks continue to provide patterns for interactions within, and discourse about, contemporary Ladakh" (2008, 150).

The productive landscape

For making sense of the concrete understandings of the social worlds of the 'Afar salt traders I worked with, the approach of *productive landscape* showed that memories and sense of temporality are an essential part of people's *engagement with* and *perception of* the specific landscapes they inhabit. Here it is useful to return to the concept of landscape of Christopher Tilley that I used in the introduction. He says that

> neither space nor time can be understood apart from social practices which serve to bind them together. The human experience of encountering a new place or knowing how to act or go on in a familiar place is intimately bound up with previous experiences. Places are always 'read' or understood in relation to others (1994, 27).

The other two components of the *corresponding landscapes*, the *material and political landscapes*, help understand how particular economic, historic, political and social contexts influence individuals' and community's perception and agency in a specific landscape. Therefore, the *material* and *political landscapes* frame the particular understandings of the

productive landscape within regional and theoretical literature.

The political landscape

This dissertation has relied on region-specific literature on north-eastern Ethiopia, ethno-historical texts and travelogues to frame the *political landscape*. Here we have seen that the history of north-eastern Ethiopia, and the history of the Horn of Africa at large, is linked to the physical ruptures of the landscape between the Ethiopian highland plateau, part of the Great Rift Valley that stretches from Eritrea through Ethiopia to Kenya, with an altitude ranging between 2000 and 4642 m (Ethiopia's highest mountain Ras Dashen in the Semien mountains), and its surrounding areas, commonly referred to as lowlands. Historically, as Christopher Clapham has argued, the "physical fissures" between the highland and lowlands "have helped to sustain regional identities" (Clapham 2017, 12). Understanding the physical landscape of this part of the continent has been a useful starting point to frame the histories of these regions. However, by focusing on the narratives of my interlocutors, I have shown that their experiences, agency and social practice are inscribed within specific landscapes. The salt traders and people I worked with during my research created and mediated a sense of their cultural and personal self (identity) and group belonging in relation to specific landscapes. Applying this lens allowed me to challenge prevailing centre-periphery and highland-lowland discussions on Ethiopia.

The material landscape

The theoretical foundation of the *material landscape* was primarily based on Pierre Bourdieu's work. What made Bourdieu's writing useful for this dissertation was that he helped me translate the concrete experience of my fieldwork experiences and those of my interlocutors into a conceptual structure. By employing Bourdieu's theory of social practice and symbolic value throughout this dissertation, I was able to bring these experiences into dialogue with the concrete understandings of business ethics and the exchange of commodities between groups

in the context of ‘Afar salt caravan trade.

The difficult task was to bring the three different approaches, the *productive*, the *material* and the *political landscapes*, into correspondence with one another, which is to say, to render the social experience and practices of social agents into ethnographic descriptions while remaining faithful to the way in which events unfolded in the real world. Here it is useful to fully quote Pierre Bourdieu once more. Bourdieu writes that

> one of the most important effects of the correspondence between real divisions and practical principles of division, between social structures and mental structures, is undoubtedly the fact that primary experience of the social world is that of doxa, an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident. Primary perception of the social world, far from being a simple mechanical reflection, is always an act of cognition involving principles of construction that are external to the constructed object grasped in its immediacy; but at the same time it is an act of miscognition, implying the most absolute form of recognition of the social order (1996, 471).

Following more recent ethnographies and theoretical storytelling devices, I structured parts of this dissertation along journeys and travel along specific paths and trails.

27 Participant observation, reflexivity and ethnographic filmmaking

The ethical considerations discussed throughout this dissertation have influenced and shaped my approach to ethnographic practice. The cultural understandings of trust and honesty among the ‘Afar I worked with led to a critical and self-reflective practice that translated into collaborative work, most visible in the documentary *Arho*.

Reflexivity in ethnographic practice

The idea of anthropology as reflective practice has been central to the discipline’s endeavour since the reflexive turn in the 1970s and 1980s (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Ruby 1977). Self-reflexivity has undoubtedly become the pre-condition for ethnography and one of the most critical tools for anthropologists. It is part of the decolonising strategy to think through our relationship with others, power asymmetries and the consequences of our acting and reveal this the audiences of our ethnographic (re)-presentations (Callaway and Okely 1992; Myerhofer and Ruby 1982). Helen Callaway writes that reflexivity opens up

> the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge. Other factors intersecting with gender—such as nationality, race, ethnicity, class and age—also affect the anthropologist’s field interactions and textual strategies. Reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness (Callaway 1992, 33)

However, every so often, this kind of reflexivity only accounts for the side of the anthropologists. While over the past decades, reflexivity has found its way into the ethnographic text (Behar and Gordon 1996; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rabinow 1977) and ethnographic films (Barabantseva and Lawrence 2015; Port 2018; Ruby 2000a), they produce mainly reflexive accounts for a western audience.

For the anthropologist Peter Hervik, however, there is a difference between a reflexivity

in the world, meaning during participant observation, and a reflexivity in the text. He argues that reflexivity, together with partly shared social experience, brings “cultural models and idiosyncratic experience” (Hervik 1994, 68) that are formed through interaction and trust between individuals in the cross-cultural encounter. For Hervik, participant observation is a reciprocal process, in which “a space is created where shared reflexivity becomes an essential tool for gaining cultural knowledge”. This process works in “both directions, from ethnographer to local persons, and vice versa” (Hervik 1994, 71–72).

The concrete experience of working with Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and other ‘Afar salt traders informed my understanding of participant observation as not merely a method for anthropology, but “a form of production of knowledge through being and action”(Shah 2017, 48). During my research, Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and I were engaged in a constant dialogue over my ongoing research. I shared preliminary ideas from my observations, read out my notes to see if I captured certain events or phenomena correctly, like the *dasiga* meat-sharing ritual described in Chapter 3. Yusuf helped me translate my notes on conversations to ensure I captured the most important meaning. There was a clear understanding of the intentions and nature of my research. On the other hand, *Gifta* Ibrahim and Yusuf also showed me the limits of what I could and could not ask for my research. Regarding the control and monopoly position of the ‘Afar over the salt basin, for example, *Gifta* Ibrahim once urged me to put my notebook aside and said:

> I will answer your question today, but I do not want you to write it down. Today we will not discuss this. There will be a time. Talking about the past can be dangerous. It can provoke feelings that people will use for their interests. I trust you with this information, but I ask you not to use it for your research.

I respected *Gifta* Ibrahim’s wish, and I closed my notebook and tucked it away. *Gifta* Ibrahim

answered my question that day and permitted me to write about our conversation without mentioning specific details about what he had said, and I have omitted the context of his narration from this dissertation.

Reflexivity during participant observation, e.g. a reflexivity in the world to use Hervik's words again, can therefore produce "conceptualisations and insights that are clearly a joint creation of the anthropologist and his/her local partners in interaction" (Barth 1992, 65). In the specific context of my research, this led to the making of an ethnographic documentary.

Visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking

I have interwoven the discussions about making the documentary *Arho* into the different chapters and have further concretised some of these ideas about ethnographic filmmaking in Chapter 5. Ethnographic filmmaking has been an integrated part of my project and I see several advantages to using a camera during fieldwork and to develop a visual output alongside a written text. To David MacDougall's words:

> Film and writing are such different modes of communication, filmmaking is not just a way of communicating the same kinds of knowledge that can be conveyed by an anthropological text. It is a way of creating different knowledge (MacDougall 2011, 100).

Further, MacDougall says that images and written text do not tell us different things, but they tell them differently. Reviewing clips from *Arho* with my interlocutors often triggered specific memories of the past. The use of audio-visual material as a fieldwork methodology, what Jean Rouch considered a *shared ciné-anthropology*, facilitated a more detailed understanding of social practices and helped to connect memories of the past to the present.

While ethnographic filmmaking and the use of visual images as a collaborative and reflective method is not a new idea, the argument I made in this dissertation consists in showing anthropology as an interdependent discipline that allows co-learning and collaborative

practices grounded in and derived from ethnographic research. This approach has is limitations. Technological advancements over the past five decades have yielded new forms of collaboration and of representation of a plurality of voices and have changed how films are shown to audiences and experienced by them. At the same time, it is important to consider both the ethics of production and the morality of exhibition of ethnographic film. These new technological forms have further led to different ways of corresponding with interlocutors, and the possibility of doing so even over extreme distances. The face-to-face correspondence in the field has expanded into the technological and online spaces, allowing interlocutors direct forms of participation, but also intervention. Reflexivity for the anthropologist remains important in this correspondence. According to Jay Ruby, being reflexive means

> to insist that anthropologists systematically and rigorously reveal their methods and themselves as the instrument of data generation and reflect upon how the medium through which they transmit their work predisposes readers/viewers to construct the meaning of the work in certain ways (2000c, 152).

He continues by saying that an anthropologist

> assumes responsibility for whatever meaning exists in the image, and therefore is obligated to discover ways to make people aware of point of view, ideology, author biography, and anything else deemed relevant to an understanding of the film, that is, to become reflexive. The idea that being moral means being objective is abandoned, and in its place is the open acknowledgment of the ideological base of all human knowledge, including films (Ruby 2000c, 206).

This form of ethical reflexivity, however, also implies that consent is no longer a one-off thing, but has to be continuously renegotiated not only to protect participants but also for purposes of readjustment to changing circumstances.

However, in this correspondence, reflexivity as an ethical stance "can only deal with ethical issues, and cannot transgress these; it can acknowledge and show power relations, but cannot pretend to neutralize asymmetry by showing this asymmetry" (Groof 2013, 111).

Anthropology as a study with people

While anthropology as a self-reflective and critically focused discipline is not a new idea, this thinking accentuates decolonisation's current waves and politics within the anthropological practice, both in written ethnography and ethnographic filmmaking. While there are different waves, trends and turns within anthropology as a discipline, the concrete experience of my research has led me to consider anthropology as a study from *within* rather than from *afar*. This consideration emphasises the shift anthropology has undergone over the past decades, at least for some of its practitioners, from research *on, of* or *about* peoples to a study *with* people. Many anthropologists now tend to speak *alongside* people rather than *for* them and develop different forms of collaborative practices that translate into co-authored text or films (Gruber 2016; Ingold 2017; Ruby 2000a). From such a perspective we can then follow Tim Ingold, who argues that anthropology underwent the transition from "*of*-ness" to "*with*-ness" (2016, 24). He writes:

> To study anthropology is to study with people, not to make studies of them; such study is not so much ethnographic as educational. An anthropological education gives us the intellectual means to speculate on the conditions of human life in this world, without our having to pretend that our arguments are distillations of the practical wisdom of those among whom we have worked. Our job is to correspond with them, not to speak for them (Ingold 2017, 21).

Further, from such a perspective, we can view anthropology and ethnographic research, including filmmaking, as co-production and re-discovery. Practising anthropology then offers conduits and opportunities "to join with others in an ongoing, speculative, and experimental

exploration of what the possibilities and potentials of life might be" (Ingold 2016, 24). This means to correspond with people, listen to others properly, and be open and receptive to silence, sound, movement, body language, and environmental change. It requires choosing not to follow one's automatic thinking process, and instead considering that other people perceive the world differently. It means allowing ourselves to understand that people have their own reasoning for their acting in the world, and engaging in a dialogue about this. Further, it urges us to reconsider our outward behaviour when interacting with others and to allow multi-interpretations for different situations. However, to re-set or rather to re-configure our automatic default thinking settings is not an easy task; it requires patience, training, and virtue. It takes time. It must be trained and exercised as these are not necessarily innate human characteristics. In Anthropology, this is done through participant observation.

Participant observation is then neither a method nor is it ethnographic. Instead, it is "educational" and an "ontological commitment" as Tim Ingold has recently stated (Ingold 2014, 388; 2017, 23). Considering it is a study *with* rather than *about* or *of* people, anthropologists need to remain flexible, reacting and responding to the changing conditions of their research. My particular role among the 'Afar communities was shaped and influenced by the dialogical dynamics between me, and the people involved in my research. As I have shown in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, my positionality changed from guest (stranger) to friend. However, this was only possible after people started to trust me and once I allowed myself to partly give up my attitudes and beliefs about the world. This opened up collaborative ways of working together and I became a participant involved in the process of knowing rather than the producer of knowledge.

Anthropology as a discipline then has to take into account that the social practice of our interlocutors is actively co-constructing and shaping theoretical knowledge and our social worlds. As Bourdieu writes

> Those who suppose they are producing a materialist theory of knowledge when they make knowledge a passive recording and abandon the 'active aspect' of knowledge to idealism, … , forget that all knowledge, and in particular all knowledge of the social world, is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression, and that between conditions of existence and practices or representations there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who, far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to the invitations or threats of a world whose meaning they have helped to produce. However, the principle of this structuring activity is not, as an intellectualist and anti-genetic idealism would have it, a system of universal forms and categories but a system of internalised, embodied schemes which, having been constituted in the course of collective history, are acquired in the course of individual history and function in their *practical* state, *for practice* (and not for the sake of pure knowledge) (Bourdieu 1996, 467).

This form of knowledge production, as Bourdieu further writes, then aims at "explaining the social origins of the principles of construction, and also at exploring the foundations of these principles in the social world" (1996, ibid).

If we consider ethnographic knowledge (ideally) to be a dialogue of co-production and re-discovery that is "perpetually 'under construction' within the field of relations established through the immersion of the actor–perceiver in a certain environmental context" (Ingold 2011, 159), we allow ourselves to think about ethnographic ethics in a similar vein. By this, I mean that we take the ethical and moral dispositions of the people involved in our research as a point of departure to reflect upon our own understandings, conceptualizations and limits of what ethically informed research might look like. Entering into such a dialogue can help inform

more ethnographically based research ethics that open the way for more collaborative, creative and innovative outcomes. The specificities of my ethnographic research experience let me rethink and consider my ethical responsibilities towards the people I worked with.

28 Whose ethics are we talking about anyhow? Towards an ethics of correspondence

In this dissertation I have challenged certain ways of doing anthropology and suggested more collaboration to explore the boundaries and limitations of what can be observed, documented and published.

During my interaction with Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and others, ‘Afar ethics were negotiated in the interpersonal relations. Ethical guidelines and frameworks are useful because they help anticipate certain dilemmas, think critically through our research projects, and make sure we protect vulnerable people (children, victims of political violence, migrants, political activists). However, ethics should not be demanded or imposed by a third party to regulate the personal relation between people.

The concrete experience of working with salt traders has caused me locate ethics (back) within the realm of interpersonal relations that are specifically built on the notions of trust and honesty. My research among ‘Afar groups, and my relations with Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim, Abdu, Idriss, Hussein and my other interlocutors have made me more conscious of my own acting in the world and the responsibility I have towards those who put their trust in me.

The constant sharing of information through *ḓāgu* also meant that Maknun Ashami, my ‘Afar contact in London, who established the contacts for me in Ethiopia, was constantly aware of where I was, whom I talked to and the state and progress of my research, even though we never communicated directly. When I returned to London for a week to recover in June 2018, we ran into each other by chance in Bloomsbury, central London. I was excited to tell him about my research, but he stopped me and said: “Do not worry, you are doing well. I have

heard all about what you were doing".

I realised that I not only had a responsibility towards Yusuf, *Gifta* Ibrahim and the other people directly involved in my research, but that my actions in Ethiopia and among the communities there also had broader ramifications for Maknun Ashami in London. Further, this episode shows that ethics should be conceived and considered from different perspectives and that there is not one simple way to solidify them.

Current ethical guidelines for doctoral and early career researchers

Over the past years, it has becoming worrying that the power over data protection, copyright issues and what is considered "ethical" for doctoral and early career researchers is dictated by decisions and policies made by people in other places, who are often unknown and intangible to the people they directly affect, including the anthropologist conducting the research (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017; Sleeboom-Faulkner and McMurray 2018b; Wiles, Clark, and Prosser 2011).

This puts researchers, especially at the doctoral and post-doctoral level, in a state of emotional and psychological dissonance and they eventually have to become conformist with regard to these rules – for the sheer fear of legal consequences, even if this means going against the wishes of their interlocutors.

Edward Simpson suggests reconceiving the discipline's codes and regulations around "frames, tropes, and engagements of contemporary practice within anthropology" and "[retiring] the figure of anthropologist-as-Malinowski from our ethical codes" to replace him with a more contemporary figure, like Didier Fassin (2016, 123). I agree with Simpson that ethics should be reframed around contemporary practices within anthropology. However, I personally do not see the solution of ethical frameworks and guidelines in anthropology as being the mere replacement one anthropologist with another, or several others, as Simpson suggests. If we truly want to reconceive ethics around the current decolonising waves of

anthropological practices, for example an anthropology *with* rather than *of* or *about* people, then anthropology "needs – indeed *must be* – a discipline of correspondence", as Tim Ingold says in the quote at the beginning of this conclusion (Ingold 2016, 24).

Practical considerations

So, what then should this *ethics of correspondence* for doctoral and early career researchers look like? How can it be conceived and formalised? What are the solutions out of the ethical conundrums? The answer, for me at least, is twofold, and I think it is useful to distinguish between (1) a personal phenomenological oriented ethics that puts more responsibility on the individual researcher; and (2) a general communicative ethics of correspondence that negotiates and mediates good research practices with the people involved in the research, as well as the ethical standards that should be considered in the concrete situation during research.

The first suggestion would entail more training of doctoral and early career researchers in the Anglo-American worlds (and potentially elsewhere), including senior anthropologists and staff in the departments. This may take the form of a training workshop every three to four years, which must be passed in order to continue research (maybe in form of an "research licence"). During research, anthropologists could also be asked, to record their engagement with people and take notes of ethical dilemmas that emerge, and they would have a chance to communicate these back home to their institutions and supervisors. This logbook should also provide space for the people involved in the research and allow them to provide feedback on the anthropologists' acting and behaviour within the community.

For the second part, I am neither suggesting a universal ethical guideline as an ideal, nor a universal morality that would be recognised by all anthropologists – but an *ethics of correspondence* for doctoral and early career researchers that takes seriously other forms of what is considered ethical by the communities engaged in the research, alongside an openness

to ethical guidelines for research co-developed together with interlocutors in the field. Such an attempt has already been made by the San, an indigenous group in South Africa, who published their own code for research ethics in 2017. The San's code of research ethics was the first ethics code written and issued by an indigenous group on the African continent. It was born following several years of interaction that the San experienced as frequently disruptive and on occasion harmful to their communities, and outlines what the San require from researchers before they conduct their research (Chennells and Steenkam 2018; Schroeder et al. 2019). The code reads

> We [the San] require respect for our culture, which also includes our history. We have certain sensitivities that are not known by others. Respect is shown when we can input into all research endeavours at all stages so that we can explain these sensitivities. Respect for our culture includes respect for our relationship with the environment. Respect for individuals requires the protection of our privacy at all times. Respect requires that our contribution to research is acknowledged at all times. Respect requires that promises made by researchers need to be met. Respectful researchers engage with us in advance of carrying out research. There should be no assumption that San will automatically approve of any research projects that are brought to us…. Researchers need to follow the processes that are set out in our research protocols carefully, in order for this Code of Ethics to work. The San research protocol that the San Council will manage is an important process that we have decided on, which will set out specific requirements through every step of the research process. This process starts with a research idea that is collectively designed, through to approval of the project, and subsequent publications (San Code of Research Ethics, 2017).[58]

[58] see the full text of the "San Cod of Research Ethics", http://www.globalcodeofconduct.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/San-Code-of-RESEARCH-Ethics-Booklet_English.pdf

In line with ethics codes ranging from *Research Ethic Codes* (SOAS) to the *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice* issued by the *Association of Social Anthropology (ASA)*, the San code of research ethics code is built around four central values: respect, honesty, justice and fairness, and care. Compared to the other guidelines, however, the San "requires collaboration from the start – that is, from the inception of the research – rather than approving fully conceived studies" (Schroeder et al. 2019, 77). In such an approach, consent then is not a one-way trade obtained through signed forms or digital thumbprint, but an ongoing process that entails sharing potential research outputs and that continues after leaving the field.

Concluding thought

The ethical ramifications of current anthropological practice will be judged by future generations. The world is moving quickly and digitalisation seems set to challenge the impact of our practices more than ever before. Given anthropology's problematic colonial history, these are positive and necessary developments. The full consequences of this remain beyond the scope of this dissertation.

There is definitely a need for Universities and institutions in the Anglo-American world and elsewhere to produce ethical guidelines and regulations for research. Ethical guidelines should not be thrown out with the bathwater of post-modernity and the waves of decolonising practice. The *ethics of correspondence* for doctoral and early career researchers can bring forth more ethically conscious anthropologists (something we all want) and further translate contemporary trends in anthropology into the ethical realm (something that is needed).

It is not clear how other researchers may adopt the proposed *ethics of correspondence* as a method in the future and the extent to which it will influence others and my own work. However, there are glimpses of possibilities: Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim with whom I have

remained in contact since leaving Ethiopia in October 2018 have shared images, clips and photographs from *Arho* via mobile phones with ‘Afar in Ethiopia and Djibouti. I have been invited to follow up on the life histories of some of the former salt workers and to find ways to tell the stories of former liberations fighters. Additionally, I have been invited by the new ‘Afar *derdar* [sultan] in Tadjoura, a city in Djibouti and former important entrepôt on the Red Sea Coast, to collaborate on a clan and urban history of the city. Yusuf and *Gifta* Ibrahim have clan and kinship relations to north-eastern ‘Afar in Ethiopia.

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