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Contesting Views on a Protected Area Conservation and Development in Ethiopia

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Abstract: This article discusses the contention between the state and local Guji people on issues of development and conservation of a Protected Area—Nech Sar National Park in southern Ethiopia. The park, which covers over 514 square kilometers, is a contested space between different actors, not only for its economic values, but it is also an arena of contestation over development and conservation perspectives. Since its inception as a national park in 1974, it has been administered with strict protectionist conservation approach, and later in 1990s, the ‘modernist’ development program was introduced in the form of ecotourism. On the contrary, the Guji people had strong determination for conservation embedded deep in their worldviews and beliefs. By tracing the genesis of the philosophies behind protected areas in Africa, particularly how it was adopted by the Ethiopian state and its implications, I argue that contrasts in environmental cosmologies between the western and indigenous perspectives have ultimately resulted in unsustainable resource management and also disrupted local livelihood conditions. Despite its existence as an independent country, Ethiopia also experienced similar conservation models that were imported to colonial Africa. In this article, I argue that conservation, particularly in the form of protected areas, is a form of hegemonic control over territories, people and their spaces (historical, economic, cultural and political spaces).

Keywords: conservation; development; protected area; local livelihood; contested space

1. Introduction

Notions, such as development and conservation, always have a relevant normative component. The involvement of different actors with competing interests and multiplicity of contexts of applications of

these notions are a few of the manifold aspects that make conceptualizations of these concepts difficult. Furthermore, these notions exhibit economic, political and cultural discourses of actors that depend on worldviews, ideologies and day-to-day engagements of people with their environment. Conservation discourses in Africa exhibit a series of competing perspectives between the state, local communities and conservationist organizations. Because of asymmetrical power relations between proponents of 'modern' conservation approaches—nation states and conservationist organizations on the one hand, and local communities on the other—protected areas have been established in many parts of Africa by excluding people from their customary rights [1]. However, much of the works on protected areas in Africa have given limited attention to the notions behind these ideals. That means, without thorough understanding of the notion of nature that has been represented in western thought as 'wilderness' and how this notion has been adopted to Africa, park-people relations and the consequences of protected areas in the continent remains obscure. This entails an investigation of interplays between local and global forces in the political ecology of conservation schemes in Africa, because conservation constitutes economic, political and social driving forces, as well as repercussions at different scales [2]. By taking a case of contesting views over the management and utilization of a protected area in Ethiopia, I will try to probe into different ecocosmologies. Although the genesis of protected areas establishment in Africa is to a larger extent linked to colonialism, the case in Ethiopia is quite different. Despite its history as an African country that has never been colonized, Ethiopia has remained open to experiments of western discourses in areas of economy, education and recently, conservation. In Ethiopia, development trajectories were noted for histories of adopting models without adequate harmonization with local values. Besides lack of home-grown development paradigms in the country under different regimes, development emulators failed to successfully transplant the models in compatible ways with local practices [3]. As it will be discussed later in this article, conservation schemes also took similar paths of development trajectories and experienced hostile reaction from local communities, whom the programs displaced or restricted from their traditional homes and resources.

In this article, I will analyze competing views advocated by the state and local Guji people regarding the management and utilization of a territory now designated as Nech Sar National Park. In this sense, I assess issues of legitimacy of state intervention and state initiated development and conservation projects on the one hand, and how the local community challenges state rhetoric of development on the other. The impacts of such intervention on sustainability of conservation projects and its implications on the livelihood conditions of the people are also investigated. As the ideals behind the establishment of the national park, issues of contestation over the territory, park-people relations and aspects of local resistance against state intervention constitute economic, political and ecological motives, this article draws on political ecology as a theoretical framework. The article is divided into five sections. The first section introduces how the 'conventional' conservation approach has been imported to the entirety Africa. It highlights the nature-culture debates and dwells on the synergies between conservation of 'pristine' nature and ecotourism development in western thought. The second section discusses the attempts by successive Ethiopian regimes (since the mid 19th century) to emulate development models from developed countries. The third section presents the park as a contested land, citing conflicting views of the state and local people considering it as a material or physical space, as well as an arena of cosmological contradiction in areas of conservation. In order to

make clear the boundaries of difference between the state and local Guji people, the fourth section briefly addresses Guji's cosmological views on nature-culture relation and pinpoints their customary rights and day-to-day practices in these areas. Section five analyzes the dilemma—confrontations of worldviews and its implications. Finally, concluding remarks are drawn on the basis of the analysis.

2. The Notions of 'Wilderness' and Conservation

Discourses of nature conservation in Africa have been cemented in western notions of nature-culture relations that were brought to the continent following the colonial onslaught. As history reminds us, it was a common trend for African states during the colonial and 'post-colonial' periods to emulate different 'development' models, including nature conservation from the developed worlds. These politics of development emulation that are premised on borrowing western notions of development—the 'modernist' ideals of 'progress'—in most cases contradict local conceptions, worldviews and practices in Africa. In areas of nature conservation, for example, African countries imported the protectionist model, or a 'fortress' conservation approach, that assumes people and nature as incompatible entities, and thus proposes separation of the two 'worlds' for the protection of 'nature' from human influences. As it is discussed below, the ideas of 'fortress' conservation were rooted in representation of nature as wilderness [1]. This introduced the nature-culture dichotomy that is difficult to discern in African context [2].

In the western academic and public thought, for example, the understanding that nature is wilderness has become the dominant discourse since the 17th century [4]. Accordingly, nature is viewed as something separate and distinct from human beings. As Cronon [4] points out, "Wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural." It is also argued that the wilderness premise that discretely posits the human and nonhuman on oppositional poles, "Ignores crucial differences among humans and complex cultural and historical reasons why different peoples may feel very differently about the meaning of wilderness [4]."

Since the protectionist or 'fortress' conservation approaches in Africa were the legacies of western conceptions of nature-culture dualism, a detailed insight into the wilderness debate becomes imperative to understand conflicts between these competing perspectives, particularly in and around protected areas. The notion of wilderness was deep-rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition that links wilderness with spaces of temptations, desertion and abandonment. It was where Adams and Eve were tempted by the Devil in receiving orders to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and it was also likened with the spaces where Moses travelled for forty years with his people and worshipped golden idols. Beginning from 17th century onwards, the meanings attached to wilderness were changed to represent places of enjoyment, relief and sites deserving protection. It represented parts of the earth that are 'unspoiled' by human influences, particularly through effects of industrialization (modern technology, economic transformation and social complexities, among others). This shift in western perception of wilderness from images of lost space, threat and temptation to untamed natural space brought sympathy toward viewing some territories as deserving protection before they are lost into the archives of history. Since then, "European colonists of the 'New World' have undertaken the massive effort to reinvent the whole earth in the conquered places in the image of the Garden of Eden but this time with the view of protecting, conserving, controlling and exploiting the biodiversity as museums in natural

settings [5].” Later during the 20th century, economic and aesthetic values began to be attached to nature conservation in the form of ecotourism development. Still in this context, western thought assumes nature as separate from the cultural meanings attached to it [2].

This western notion of nature-culture dualism was introduced to colonial Africa as a mechanism of control over the people and its resources, while ‘post-colonial’ African states also followed the same path, for it granted these subaltern states the power to maneuver their subjects under the guise of development [2,6]. This dualistic view of nature-culture relation has been translated into practice in conservation schemes through protected areas that often lead to displacements, territorialization, patrols and surveillance over local communities in the name of protection of the wilderness from human contact, particularly from local people. It should be noted that most conservation schemes have been practiced as economic and political instruments of control over local communities. Such exclusion of local communities and indigenous people from their customary land and resources is premised on the presumption that indigenous people are a threat to nature, because of their ‘backward’ livelihood practices or for their lack of vivid environmental ethics. Willems-Braun [7] states that separating the territory from its cultural component displaces discussions of authority from questions of territory, tenure and rights of access. Escobar [8] argues that the notion of nature is, “Always constructed by our meaning-giving and discursive processes, so that what we perceive as natural is also cultural and social.” This does not refute the materiality of the environment. Rather, it provides an analytical lens to understand how social processes contribute to changes in landscape, resource fluctuation, contesting claims of access to resources, wealth and prestige.

The contested notions of nature entails that nature conservation by itself is political and economic inasmuch as it is ecological. Therefore, this article employs political ecology perspectives to explain the complex interplays between state approaches and local cosmologies, state conservation rhetoric and local people’s conception of nature, and to probe aspects of intervention and resistance. As political ecologists contend, the actual state of nature needs to be understood as an outcome of political processes and that the way nature itself is understood is also political [9]. Within such framework, I take as a point of departure the idea that, “Conservation, purportedly an effort to create better conditions in the world—for the humans and non-humans—*can frequently be a mechanism for (or more cynically a “cover” for) powerful players to actually seize control of resources and landscapes, and the flow of values that issues from these* [10].” In this regard, the article applies the ‘conservation and control thesis’ [11] as it draws on the following four fundamental theoretical foundations: (1) Conservation reflects a form of hegemonic governmentality; (2) It depends on the growing understanding of traditional resource management strategies as institutional systems, where rules govern extraction without necessarily state intervention on individuated property rights; (3) It draws upon the notion that wilderness—as imposed ideal and a produced material reality—is a social construct, specifically taking the form of nature without people; and (4) It reflects prominent understanding of conservation territories as bounded, regular, polygons, as ecologically and socially problematic and inadequate to meet the goals of preservation of either wildlife or livelihoods. Building on the conservation and control thesis, I probe into how the conservation and ecotourism project in Nech Sar National Park is used as mechanisms of control over the cultural, economic, social and political spaces of the local people, and how competing notions of nature reinforce contradicting

perspectives of conservation among the actors. The above four tenets of 'conservation and control' thesis will be briefly explained below.

Conservation practices, particularly through the establishment of protected areas on customary lands of indigenous peoples reflect asymmetrical power relations between nation states and conservationist organizations, on the one hand, and indigenous peoples on the other [1]. Nature conservation is, therefore, a practical manifestation of hegemonic ideas that determine winners and losers. In this regard, understanding the political and material meanings and interpretations ascribed to a territory is *sine qua non* to comprehend the motives of different actors because, "Any effort to environmental conservation in its many forms, for better or worse, is basically a *form of environmental control* [10]." Environmental control entails control over the material, cultural, economic and political spaces of people who inhabit or claim to have inhabited a particular territory. Following the establishment of the Nech Sar National Park, the local Guji people were restricted from access to their farmland, grazing fields and ritual sites. Through territorialization of the park territory, the state reveals its authority and power over the means of production and also detached them from spiritual connectivity to the supernatural power. Likewise, evictions and resettlement programs not only displaced the people from the physicality of the place, but also dis-spaced them by detaching the people from cosmological meanings embedded in their physical and cultural spaces.

The second important aspect of investigation in political ecology of conservation—the 'conservation and control' thesis—is that ideals of conservation are about control over the knowledge basis of environmental problems. As Peet *et al.* [10] maintain, scientific knowledge used in the process of knowing environmental problems often marginalizes other means of knowing. That means, as it has been commonly 'accepted' for long, western scientific knowledge and popular culture have been represented as the reliable sources of environmental knowledge, while indigenous knowledge systems, modes of governance and world views were identified as 'obstacles to development' and at odds with views of the mainstream society [6]. In conservation context, such dichotomization often emanates from the notion of nature-society dualism embedded in western public and academic thought. Concomitant to this argument, Bosak [12] defines nature as externalized and internalized, stating that, "In conservation context, the protection of nature is necessarily a social question, in which nature can be seen as externalized or internalized." When nature is externalized or separate from humans, its protection would be attempted from the outside through scientific knowledge and exercised by 'experts' trained in modern science and technology. This often leads to 'top-down' conservation policies that privilege scientific knowledge over local expertise. Conversely, when nature is internalized or seen as a holistic entity in which humans and non-humans are conjointly constituted, emphasis would be given to local people and their local knowledge, and responsibility for conservation is also on representatives of nature—the local people. It is this binary perception of nature that significantly determines the way conservation policies are designed and implemented.

Indigenous peoples' environmental knowledge is unique because of embeddedness in local cultural milieu, boundedness of local knowledge in space and time, conjoint constitution of the human, non-human and a supernatural and non-instrumental approach to nature [13]. Because of conjoint constitution of spiritual dimensions with other aspects of life, indigenous cosmologies consider nature as sacred, and thus indigenous ways of knowing are also their sacred knowledge. According to traditional ecological knowledge, humans are not considered as stewards of nature, who are bestowed

with responsibility of protecting nature 'out there'. Rather, humans and non-humans are conjointly constituted as societies of nature through mutual respect, reciprocity and interconnectedness [14,15]. However, although indigenous peoples and traditional communities have lived in harmony with nature through respect, trust and reciprocity, the western representation of these groups as 'the noble savage', 'close to nature', 'communing with nature' or 'traditional conservationists' often sidelines other sides of the story [13,15]. Berkes [13] argues that generalizing traditional knowledge as adaptive is naïve, because there are many cases where some traditional groups lack detailed environmental wisdom. Moreover, traditional knowledge alone does not guarantee that a certain group lives in harmony with the environment. It is rather the way the knowledge is translated into practice and the dynamism of traditional knowledge that are important points of investigation in political ecology.

The third aspect of the 'conservation and control' thesis is the contested representation of nature-culture dualism. Political ecology challenges the presumption of treating nature without people. As it has been discussed earlier, the fundamental problems of wilderness are that it excludes people both physically and conceptually from their homes, because it "negates long histories of association between people and places, and thus excludes them historically [1]. In line with a similar discussion on the contradictions between western notions of nature and indigenous conceptualizations, Ingold [16] also argues that, "Now western thought, as it is well known, drives an absolute division between the contrary conditions of humanity and animality, a division that is aligned with a series of others, such as between subjects and objects, persons and things, morality and physicality, reasons and instinct, and above all, society and nature." Thus, western epistemology of nature constructs a dualist category and dichotomizes the human and non-human worlds, whereas the cosmologies of most non-western people conceptualize the two as inseparable. Among indigenous peoples, pastoralists, non-western local peasant farmers and hunter-gatherers, nature is not discretely dissociated into human and non-human binaries. Emphasizing on the integral accommodation of both the human and non-human 'worlds', Ingold further points out that, "Human beings must simultaneously be constituted both as organisms within systems of ecological relations, and as persons within systems of social relations [16]." It is argued that the knowledge of human beings about their environment and their perception of it is acquired through iterative engagement and interaction with it and through peoples' perception of environmental 'affordances' [17]. Environmental affordance refers to what the environment offers to human beings—something good or bad [18]. In this regard, people interact with their environment in anticipation of reciprocity or infliction based on the nature of their engagement. In other words, perception shapes their behavior, but at the same time builds their knowledge about the consequences of different aspects of engagement with nature.

In contrast to the notion of dualism, nature and society constitute inseparably complementary relations. Ingold [16] states, "Just as there can be no organism without an environment, so also there can be no environment without an organism." The interdependence and mutual inseparability of nature and society is stated as, "Thus my environment is my world 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 [16]." The engagement humans have with their environment marks their self representation as part of nature on the basis of cultural, economic, political and social affairs. That is why Ingold, in his article entitled "Towards the Politics of Dwelling", argues that, "In reality of course, just as people have forever carried on their lives in the fields of their relations with others, so they always inhabited

an environment including manifold non-human as well as human constituents. Social life has always been part and parcel of ecological life, if indeed the two can be sensibly distinguished at all [17].” It should be, therefore, argued that among indigenous peoples, their knowledge and views of nature are embedded in their world views (in the form of myth, belief system, norms and values).

Among the non-western and non-industrialized societies, where cultural practices are in dialogic relationship with nature, there is no separation between the physical, human and supernatural worlds [7,8]. For instance, Bosak [12] bases his argument on the Bhotiya people’s (in India) perception of nature as built on a reciprocal relationship through their physical and spiritual connection to their environment. Bosak further articulates that the Bhotiyas do something good for the environment in expectation that their god would reciprocate by looking after their crops, multiplying and regenerating their seeds and sustaining life. For the Bhotiyas, the three components of nature (biophysical, human and supernatural power) are inseparable [12]. It can, therefore, be argued that for indigenous people like the Bhotiya in India and the Guji in Ethiopia, nature is conceptualized as a holistic and internalized world where the three constituents coexist inseparably. Braun [7] challenges the western notions of nature stating that, “The cultural models of many non-industrialized societies do not rely on a nature-society (culture) dichotomy. Unlike modern construction (western views), with their strict separation between the biophysical, human and supernatural worlds, it is commonly appreciated now that local models in non-western contexts are often predicated on links between these three domains [7].” Thus, living, non-living and often supernatural beings do not constitute distinct and separate domains—certainly not two spheres of nature and culture. That is to say, natural worlds are integral to social worlds among non-western or non-industrial societies.

In this article, I have argued that the politics of conservation, specifically in the form of protected areas represents a form of hegemonic control over landscape, resource and people who inhabit a particular territory. As Robbins [11] describes as the fourth fundamental tenets of the ‘conservation and control’ thesis, protected areas limit people’s access to traditional land and resources through territorialization, surveillance, patrols and check posts, ultimately categorizing who is legitimate to enter the territorialized space and on what conditions [19]. Hence, it can be argued that in Africa, the colonial system imported the western conceptions of nature and implanted it into the colonial policies of conservation, where colonial authorities and conservationists attempted to create areas free from human influence in the name of protected areas (game reserves, sanctuaries and national parks). As Adams and Hutton [9] pointed out, the relationship between human and nature, particularly in the context of establishment of PAs [Protected Areas] is embracing issues of rights and access to land and resources. In this regard, the notion of establishing protected areas through exclusion of human society should not be seen as an innocent conservation scheme. Rather, as it will be detailed later in this paper, it is highly intertwined with economic and political discourses at the local, national and international level. The idea of pristine nature and uninhabited wilderness spread to Africa in the 20th century as an ideological framing of conservation, but implicitly as a mechanism of control of resources and the people [1]. These colonial legacies are evident in conservation discourses in post-colonial Africa, where ideals of development were included as mechanisms of state legitimization through ecotourism projects. Despite persistent efforts by nation states and conservationists to implement a protectionist approach, such attempts in Africa reveal a failure history. For instance, eviction of local people from protected areas has been a common occurrence, particularly in East Africa [20]. Academic works on

national parks in Eastern Africa and the resultant forced resettlement of indigenous peoples illuminate complex issues related to people-park relations in the region [21]. It hints on how the American ideals of pristine nature were imported to Africa and also shows the flow of global economic forces to Africa in the form of tourism development. These, together with the western conceptions of African people as hostile to the wildlife, have been triggering factors for the displacement of local people leading to poverty, malnutrition and all forms of marginalization [21]. As the case of the Nech Sar National Park reveals in this article, new forms of territorialization of the life process of local people has created antagonism between national parks and people who live in or adjacent to the park. Despite its multidimensional repercussions, protected area management and its resultant impact on local communities in Ethiopia has been underrepresented in academic research. Although Ethiopia did not experience overseas colonialism, it shares much in common with other African states in bearing foreign influences, particularly in areas of adopting development models. Taking the case of Nech Sar National Park as a contested space where state discourses of development and conservation, and local people's conceptualizations of these notions are contested, articulated and negotiated, this article contributes to the conservation debates in general and illuminates park-people relations in Ethiopia in particular. Before delving into the discussion on the national park, a brief discussion of Ethiopia's development trajectories hints on how conservation schemes have been adopted as a part of global forces through what David Harmon [22] calls a 'demonstration effect'.

3. The Politics of Emulation in Ethiopian Development Trajectories

Under successive regimes since the mid 19th century, Ethiopia passed through different development trajectories by borrowing various models from Asia, Europe and America, anticipating duplication of similar modernist outcomes as experienced by the host nations of the models. With strong similarities between pre-revolutionary Russia and the Ethiopian empire with shared values of Orthodox Christianity and feudal system, Russia was seen as an ideal partner as early as mid 19th century [3]. Emperor Tewodros (1855–1868) who was noted as a 'modernizer', for example, attempted to produce the Russian model firearm called Sebastopol that failed to achieve its target during the British invasion of Ethiopia in 1868 [23]. However, the shift in balance of power to another feudal state in the region, Japan, later prompted the Haile Selassie regime to solicit for political and economic models that Japan adopted and moved to the extent of copying its 1889 constitution to draft the first Ethiopian constitution in 1931. After the short Italian occupation (1935–1941) until the revolution (1974), British and American styles were incomprehensibly juxtaposed with local contexts that were not fertile for socio-political and economic transformations in line with development ideals copied [3]. The disillusioned feudal regime began amalgamating capitalist notions of development (as in the case of granting land to multinational corporations for agricultural investment) with feudal ethos, neither of which ultimately benefited the ordinary society. Rather, the emulated development model served the interest of the aristocrats, landowners and the nobilities, while exacerbating the destitute living conditions of the poor. For instance, the feudal regime introduced one of the first large scale commercial farms in Awash Valley project and the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) in the 1960s. While the Awash Valley project had led to the displacement of pastoralists blocking their seasonal grazing land, CADU brought massive resettlement and displacement of peasants among the

Arsi Oromo [3]. Such ‘modernist’ approaches of development that valued sedentary life style over pastoralism and state farm over peasant agriculture denigrated local livelihood conditions of the people and neglected their local knowledge of development.

The revolution that removed the imperial regime in 1974 brought Ethiopia once again under Russian influence, but with a different ideological flavor. After half a century of its birth in Russia, the Marxist-Leninist model made its way to Ethiopia and was exercised under the official narrative of socialism for seventeen years (1974–1991), and in a different variant since then. Although the military regime was initially seen as reformist, mainly because of the 1975 land reform [23], the Ethiopian mass eventually became disillusioned, as the dictatorial power of the regime overshadowed the reformist rhetoric [24]. Neither the land reform nor the villagization program emulated from its socialist master—the Soviet Union—served the mission of development, apart from strengthening the power of the regime. The government that assumed power in 1991 (EPRDF—Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front) seems to oscillate between the western notion of development and the Eastern developmental state model. The world order of the early 1990s that prompted African states to conform to the ideals of the free market economy, privatization, multiparty politics and decentralization of state power were the basis of the political and economic re-articulation of Ethiopia in the early years of EPRDF rule. After 2005, the government shifted its development alliance to the eastern world, particularly borrowing the Chinese and Korean experiences of developmental state. According to the draft paper written by the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi entitled “Dead Ends and New Beginnings”, the western notion of neoliberal capitalism is described as a dead end, whereas the developmental state model of the eastern experience has been labeled as new beginnings [25]. Although it is not yet time to evaluate the success of the developmental state model in Ethiopia, the country swings between contrasting development models (neoliberal capitalism and developmental state). In the later case, a big state system is thought to be implanted so as to foster development, regardless of violations of liberal rights. When it comes to practical cases like the Nech Sar National Park, conservation and development programs are implemented at the expense of customary rights of local communities.

In short, as Clapham [3] calls ‘the politics of emulation’, the assumption behind early development emulators was that if a certain model proved to have achieved the development visions of the host state and transplanted in Ethiopia, it would successfully regenerate itself. Regrettably, none of the emulators succeeded in successfully transplanting the development models in a quest to ensure similar development outcomes as experienced by the countries of their origin. Although the approaches to adopt the models were different, what all shared in common across different regimes was that all lacked home grown development paradigms and relegated local values and contexts, and genuine participation of the subjects for whom development paradigms were presumably borrowed.

As it has been the case in many developing countries, ecotourism has gained momentum in Ethiopia since the 1990s. Despite its severe impacts on local communities, ecotourism and the economic values attached to this industry were among the important reasons for which protected area conservation is justified and legitimated [1]. The major justification for tourism promotion in protected areas is for its convergence of development and conservation purposes, though it is often at odds with indigenous values, practices and customary rights. It combined neoliberal and market -oriented environmental management and economic development. In the Nech Sar National Park case, for example, the transfer

of the park management to an international multinational company (2004–2008) was an indication of commodification of nature.

4. The Nech Sar National Park: an Embattled Terrain

Despite the much token independence of Ethiopia in terms of overseas colonial conquest, the country shares much with other African states as far as western influences are concerned. For instance, though it entered the international environmental politics with reference to establishment of Protected Areas late in 1960s, in contrast to the century old experiences of other African countries, Ethiopia also adopted the classical conservation models through partnership with UNESCO [26]. As a step towards adopting western conservation practices, the country partnered with UNESCO first in 1962. In the years that follow, UNESCO sent a team that surveyed and recommended three areas: Semein Mountain, Awash and Omo Valleys as potential areas to be designated as Protected Areas. Later on, a British biologist, Blower, who was one of the UNESCO team, added Nech-Sar onto the national park list in 1967 that came into effect in 1974 as game reserve [26,27]. It was this partnership that later enabled Ethiopia to adopt the ‘conventional’ or classical conservation approach as implemented elsewhere in colonial Africa.

The major initiative for the establishment of the park was for preservation of an endemic Swaine's Hartebeest and for its scenic beauty [28], but later because of its richness in biodiversity, economic objectives were included. With a total size of 514 km² (official figure during its establishment), the park adjoins Arbaminch town in the west, Amaro Mountains in the East, Lakes Abaya and Chamo in the north and south, respectively. In fact, parts of the two lakes are included into the park's territory in the 1990s. It should be noted that following the change in the administrative systems at national levels, the park is also reported to have undergone changes in size. Local communities and some academic sources [29] indicate that the official figure is far less than the actual park size. It is rather estimated to be over 1,000 km². In other words, the size of the park increases when the state exerts fierce control by annexing more territories from the local people. This happened first in 1980s following the eviction of the Guji and Koore people. However, it shrank following the downfall of the military regime. Once again, the EPRDF government expanded its borders in 2004 until the two regional governments (Oromia and SNNPR) agreed on grazing and water access into the park by the Guji Oromo in 2008. In terms of interaction with human population, in the west, Arbaminch town dwellers, and in the east, Guji and Koore, communities heavily rely on resources in the park for different livelihood purposes.

The territory now designated as a national park can be divided into three zones according to the nature of livelihood engagement of the local people and claims from both actors—the state and local communities. In the first zone is found the dense forest adjacent to Arbaminch town on the western side of the park. This zone is a home for arboreal animals and source of the ‘Forty Springs’ that provide almost all the water demand of the town. In terms of resource extraction by local communities, it provides a living for low income sections of the town society through firewood, wood for construction material and charcoal. The second zone is the plain of the park, where most herbivore animals inhabit. Traditionally, this area was the seasonal grazing land for the agro-pastoral Guji Oromo, who move their cattle between the plain and the edges of the Amaro Mountains in rainy and dry seasons, respectively. The dry season pasture land of the Guji lies in the third zone, which is highly

infested with tsetse flies and mosquitoes during the rainy season, because of the swampy nature of the Sermale valley. On the other hand, the Nech Sar Plain (Ergansa—as the Guji call it) would be under ecological stress unless systematically utilized. That means it should be left ‘free’ during the dry season so that the grass would regenerate for the next season. As the Guji explain, it is a mechanism of conservation that has passed down to them from generation to generation. The third zone is the eastern border of the park where it adjoins the Amaro Mountain ranges. This zone is drained by Sermale River and provides all year round cultivation of different fruits and crops. In this part of the ‘park’, three major actors compete over access to resources. The park authorities claim it to be a dry season grazing land for the wildlife with easy access to the river [30]. On the other hand, the Guji and Koore communities use the lowland area of the zone called Golbo (by the Guji) or Tsalke (by the Koore) for agricultural purposes. Different fruits, like avocado, mango and banana, and crops, such as maize and sorghum, are predominantly cultivated by irrigation and rain-fed agriculture [31]. The three actors had administrative power over the valley at different periods. During the feudal and military regimes, Amaro province—where the Koore people belong—was given administrative jurisdiction over the valley and much of the present day Nech Sar National Park, though the inhabitants were the Guji Oromo. However, it was fully included into the park territory after 1991. The park authority, in collaboration with the government of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regional state undertook resettlement program, whereby over 1,000 Koore households were resettled in another area in 2004. Initially, the Guji resisted the resettlement program. Eventually, the regional government took fierce measures against the Guji and moved them to the outskirts of the park, but did not fully displace them [32]. The Golbo/Tsalke valley is thus a contested space not only between the park authorities and the two communities, but it also involves claims of entitlement between the two regional states—Oromia and SNNPR.

5. The State Conservation and Development Approaches in the Park

Soon after its establishment in 1974 the park administration subsequently restricted the local people from access to their customary resources. According to local Guji informants, the whole part of the park was their customary grazing land before state intervention. They recall that even the town of Arbaminch was within Guji traditional land before 1950s. According to the elders, the issue of restriction of cattle from entrance into some part of the present day park was started in 1960s, though it was not designated as a national park until 1974. It was the military regime (1974–1991) that first introduced strict protectionist approach of park management by evicting local people at gun point in 1982 [29]. During the eviction, over 2,000 people from both Guji and Koore communities were removed from the park [28]. During the eviction, houses, crops and properties were burned to ashes. Many cattle died because of shortage of water and pasture en-route to new settlement areas. Since the state did not prepare any resettlement areas for the displaced people, they were forced to compete over resources with other neighboring communities, such as the Konso and Burji. This led to prolonged inter-ethnic conflict that further destabilized the region and impoverished the people.

As the Guji informants narrate, the eviction dislocated them not only from their economic and material spaces (access to pasture and water for their livestock), but also dismantled them from cultural spaces as well. They were restricted from access to sacred sites, ritual places, burial sites, extraction of

medicinal plants and so on. According to Guji elders, they were blocked off from their ancestral rights to the land. They also consider the eviction as a major social crisis in that it exposed the people to famine, diseases and inter-group conflict in the new settlements, where they were seen as aliens. According to one informant, some clans perished because of famine and disease:

“That period [the period of eviction] was horrific. They [government forces] came with heavy arms and gave us only two days to move out; otherwise to destroy us and our livestock and crops by tanks and bombs. We replied we had nowhere to go. We were born here; our ancestors lived here and were buried here. Where could we go? Our cattle could not cope with other areas. But they were not ready to listen to our cries. On the third day, they came fully armed. Immediately, they began destroying our houses, burning all what they came across. Crops were chopped down and burnt to ashes. They shot at people; some wounded; there is even a woman who lost one of her eyes during that incident. Then we moved to Odoo Darba [some 15km to the east]. But this new place was full of diseases that killed thousands of cattle and many people. No road to medical centers. There were even some clans who were cut off their roots [perished]. Then we moved to Abulo Alfacho [to the south of the park] but that place was adjoined by many other ethnic groups such as the Burji, Koore, Konso and Gidole. There were conflicts over the resources. We lost many people in the conflict. Then we returned to our home [the park] following the downfall of the military regime [1991] (informant: Dhugo Waqayyo, April 2012).”

While the state claims control over the territory for conservation and economic purposes, the local Guji community consider state and other actors' intervention as a threat to their livelihood and cultural survival. As it will be detailed later in this paper, the Guji challenge the legitimacy of state approaches of conservation, building their argument on their local knowledge of conservation that is embedded in their cosmological views. For instance, a Guji elder argue that:

“These park people came few years back and began telling us what to do and what not to do regarding wildlife. But we lived in harmony with the animals for centuries. Our fathers and grandfathers; our ancestors in general lived here with the animals. We care for the animals not because these people told us what to do but we do so because we fear our creator (Informant: Gagasa Dokale, May 2012).”

An insight into the park management approaches across different regimes hints on changes and continuities at the national discourse and gives important information on state's perspectives of conservation. From its establishment till the downfall of the military regime, the park management was typically state-centered, top-down, exclusionary and coercive against local people. In a similar manner to the classical protectionist conservation approach, it used 'fences and fines' and considered local people as hostile to nature, particularly to the wildlife. Oral narratives of the communities (particularly Guji's and Koore's) indicate that the park management strictly controlled any access to the park by establishing police stations and taking coercive measures against the people who enter the park territories. In short, customary rights were criminalized whereas indigenous knowledge of resource management was denigrated.

Following the downfall of the military regime in 1991 and the subsequent legal and political vacuum created for a while, Guji and Koore communities returned to their former settlement areas in the park. But people's attitude towards the park and their relationship with the wildlife became hostile. Thus, the people opted to different forms of resistance. The regime change in 1991 also created new

form of competition between the two regions and added a different form of claim among Guji and Koore people. The Guji claim for the entitlement to the territory tracing back to their ancestral right, while the Koore used past administrative jurisdictions as the basis of their claim. Following the political restructuring along ethnic federalism in 1991, the park was put under SNNPR regional state though the inhabitants were the Guji Oromo. As a result, Oromia regional state claimed that it was supposed to be included under its administrative boundaries if the principles of ethnic federalism were genuinely translated into practice (interview with senior official of Borana Zone, April 2012). In terms of park administration, although some sort of administrative decentralization has been put in place in post 1991 period when it was administered by SNNPR until it was transferred to African Parks Foundation in 2004, the conservation philosophy did not change across the three regimes. The fundamental protectionist approach of the pre-1970s that advocated complete isolation of protected areas from human interaction and perceived local people as foes to the 'wilderness' continued to date. As a result, since the late 1990s, resettlement programs were designed as the only strategies to 'sustainably' manage the park and its resources. In a preparation to transfer the management of the park to a Dutch-based Multinational Company (African Parks Foundation—APF), the resettlement process of the Guji and Koore communities became an inevitable option. While over one thousand Koore households were resettled to Abulo and Alfacho villages in 2004, the Guji community initially had refused to move. Finally, the SNNPR government took coercive measure against the Guji and pushed them away from the Nech Sar plains at gunpoint. Reports from informants and written sources indicate that about 5,000 Guji Oromo were evicted and 463 houses were burned during the eviction [29,32].

Information from local communities and government officials indicate that the local people did not air out their voices in the process of resettlement. Rather, local officials and few elders were co-opted into the system to persuade the masses. Though participation may take different forms, such as nominal, passive and interactive participation, the only way for the success of development projects is genuine interactive participation where local communities participate in the planning, management and benefit of the project [31]. The essential feature of interactive participation is that, "Local people are involved, from the start in design and implementation. It must surely be accepted by now that, unless people have real power to influence the way a project is designed and managed, they will not feel that it is 'theirs', whatever (often temporary) benefits they derive from it [33]." In the case of Nech Sar National Park, the management approach has largely been exclusionary of the local people, except involvement of local 'elites' as a mechanism of control.

The park management approaches, evictions and resettlement programs undertaken by the state hint on its conception of nature on the one hand, and the 'modernist' development perspectives of the successive regimes on the other. The state's conception of nature-culture relation, particularly in southern Ethiopia has been a replica of the western notion of wilderness. As David Turton [34] argues, following the birth of the modern Ethiopian empire in the late 19th century, the territories in the peripheral south were considered as wilderness, while the people were perceived as close to nature. The argument goes that the imperial state used this notion of 'uninhabited' wildernesses in the region as justifications for state control of land and resource, and thereby as a mechanism of strengthening state power. In line with the classical protectionist perspective, the park authority under the federal state also considers that wildlife and people should not live together. Girma Timer [30] argues in the

report on the conditions of Nech Sar National Park that the existence of people in and close to the park boundaries is a major threat to the survival of wildlife. It has been from this view of the state that policies of eviction and resettlement were undertaken in 1982 and 2004.

The other point of investigation is related to the state discourses of development, particularly in relation to pastoral communities. An overview of this point enables us to get insight into competing perspectives on development among the state and local communities. Despite differences in political ideologies and macro-political economy, successive regimes since the period of Haile Sellasie I were the same in views and policies towards pastoralist groups. While the feudal and the military regimes used to consider the pastoral territories as threats for national security and insignificant for national economy, the current regime emphasizes on sedentarization as the pathway towards modernization and development. In all cases however, pastoral communities remained victims of state development projects, resettlement programs and displacements [35].

For instance, in the agreement between the government and APF in 2004, the Ethiopian government took the mandate and responsibility to resettle the local people so that the company would proceed in fencing the park to deter any human and livestock entrance into the territories designated for the park [36]. There was no doubt that the resettlement program would detach the local people from their customary land because it was intended to fence the park to curtail any encroachment into the park territory. It had also economic consequences as it dislocates the communities from the fertile lowland area called Golbo/Tsalke, which is drained by Sermale River. The fertile valley along Sermale River provides year-round opportunity for agriculture through irrigation. Currently, both the Guji and Koore inhabitants produce mango, avocado, coffee, banana, enset (false banana), maize and root crops. For the Guji and few Koore communities who still live adjacent to the park, the Sermale valley provides a means of survival that cannot be compromised. However, for the park authority and the state (particularly SNNPR), resettling the pastoral community is a step towards fostering 'development'. In a close analysis of the situation, the state's interest is rather on economic values of the park through ecotourism development—a new global trend that sounds environmental friendly in the eyes of donors. As Brockington *et al.* [1] noted, ecotourism has become the strong justification for protected areas establishment in most parts of the world. The major justification for tourism promotion in protected areas is for its convergence of development and conservation purposes, though it is at odds with indigenous values, norms and customary practices. It should be noted that the applauded benefit of ecotourism as environment friendly and integrative of local culture obscures its impacts in the form of exacerbating local discrimination, domination and exclusion, and appropriation of land and resources by a few social elites [1]. The establishment of Nech Sar National Park, promotion of ecotourism and resettlement of local communities can be seen as the state's 'modernist' vision of development. In contrast to the view of the state, pastoralism is the major livelihood of the Guji people. The Guji challenge state discourses of development and conservation contending that their local knowledge that is embedded in their cosmologies holistically addresses environmental questions and human needs. In the next section, Guji's conception of nature-culture relation will be discussed for better understanding of how the people conceptualize issues of conservation and development.

6. Guji Conception of Nature-culture Relation¹

For the Guji agro-pastoralist community who live in the southern part of Ethiopia, conservation practices are traditionally entwined with their cosmological schemes and embedded in their culture. According to their indigenous cosmology, their nature does not disjointedly exist outside the human realm. Rather, they believe that the human, non-human and supernatural power constitute inseparable constituents of nature and mutually coexist [37]. According to Guji conceptions of nature, all human and non-human components of nature, including the universe, were created by a supernatural power called *Waaqa*—the term being equivalent to ‘God’. During my fieldwork among the Guji in Ergansa village, a Guji elder, Ararso Aga, has explained the relations between humans and non-humans in the myth of creation, and he also argues that the relationship is based on reciprocity and trust.

It has been a deep-rooted belief among the Guji that any disruption in their relationship with non-human things in nature (wildlife, rivers, sacred spaces, forests, spirits and so on) would displease *Waaqa* and invoke punishment in the form of drought, famine, disease and war. For the sake of this paper, I briefly discuss on Guji’s restriction of killing wild animals. Traditionally, the Guji never kill wild animals for food or business. The reasons were related to belief and social implications of the act of killing. As indicated above, the Guji believe that their ancestors had a covenant with *Waaqa* not to kill the animals they believe belong to *Waaqa* himself. In return for their good care and harmony with the animals, the Guji anticipate reciprocity from *Waaqa* in the form of fertility to people and livestock, rain and good harvest, peace and prosperity. In a similar way as what Ingold [16] states, that people-animal relation in non-western world is built on trust and reciprocity, the Guji even describe the concept of trust on two levels—between people and *Waaqa* and between people and animals. While keeping the ancestral covenant is a strong sign of trust that pleases both the ancestors and God, they also believe that the animals trust the people and their livestock. Therefore, breaching the relationship that is built on trust such as in the case of killing animals would invoke infliction. There is a belief among the Guji that anyone who kills wildlife would face severe infliction on his family, clans and even offspring. They believe that killers of wildlife would be ‘uprooted’. The metaphor of uprooting is used here to imply generational discontinuity as punishment from God upon a transgressor. In other words, they will not get children, especially boys. In patriarchal society such as the Guji, boys are considered to prove continuity of their clan.

Social implications of killing wildlife are also among other aspects of restriction. This is because killing wildlife for food or business is a sign of poverty, which in turn has negative social implications in cases of marriage arrangement, conflict resolution, rituals, rites of transition and any sort of inter-personal or inter-societal relations [38]. Cultural aspects such as food taboo and local norms and health issues—a belief that wild animal meat causes disease—are also behind restrictions. However, there are great intergenerational differences on the views, beliefs and conceptions of people-nature relation among the Guji community. Because of the introduction of Protestant Christianity, modern education, exposure to urban life, cultural diffusion and introduction of a cash economy, the Guji

¹ The details of this section has been included in the article entitled “Contested Terrains: Conflicts between State and Local Communities over the Management and Utilization of Nech Sar National park, Southern Ethiopia”, *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* (Volume 13, No. 5, 2011, pp. 49–65).

youth have slightly slipped away from old traditions, according to the views of the elders. More importantly, the dislocations they experienced under the Ethiopian state since the 1980s has pushed them to re-invent a new identity of people-animal relation that has been a complete rupture from coexistence to hostility. The Guji believe that they were dislocated from their homeland for the sake of and only because of the wildlife in the park. Therefore, the people often cast their anger by killing the animals as revenge against the state.

Institutions of resource governance and ethics pertaining to utilization and access to resources among the Guji have been entwined with their cosmological schemes. Among the Guji, local frameworks that guide and regulate resource management and access rights are formulated under different institutions such as the *Qaalluu* institution (religious institution) and the socio-political system called the *Gadaa* system. Guji sacred cosmologies are embedded in their attachment to the environment as part of their connection to *Waaqa*. Social norms, values and taboos are also important local frameworks. It is also worth mentioning that the livelihood of the people, that is, pastoral activity, thought the people should systematically utilize the resources (pasture and water) in order to cope up with local climate variability. Among the Guji, access to resource is decided by clan elders in which all members of the clan are eligible to access common pasture and water grounds. However, granting water sources and pasture to members of other clans or ethnic group(s) is considered as a future investment during times of scarcity or in cases of drought. There are also other social networks, such as marriage and trade, that necessitate the sharing of resources. The Guji say that letting livestock die by blocking access to water and pasture is considered as transgressing the Guji's oath with *Waaqa*. Such an act is believed to bring infliction on oneself by the *Waaqa*, who would hold back rain or cause disease.

As elsewhere among indigenous people, the Guji explain conservation and development in a different context than the conventional modernist understandings of the concepts. For the Guji, neither conservation nor development can be described separate from cultural contexts. For instance, caring for the environment is part of their cosmological schemes of local knowledge and belief. Nature conservation enhances cultural sustenance, and vice-versa. Development is also understood not as part of 'modernization' per se, but as culturally compatible way of life. Any practice that respects, enhances, and promotes local customs, values and livelihood traditions of the people is understood as development. However, this does not mean the Guji are against 'anti-development' programs. Although they have expectations to get schools for their children, road connecting to nearest markets, health centers, mill machine and access to pure water, any 'development' program that disrupts their traditional livelihood system—pastoralism—is not acceptable to the ordinary men and women. As stated earlier, livestock has significance beyond mere economic purposes among the Guji. Thus, the state's development conception that gives emphasis to settled agriculture and ecotourism projects in the area is seen as a challenge to their livelihood and a restriction on their customary rights of resource utilization.

7. The Dilemma: Implications of Conflicting Perspectives between the State and Local People

Nech Sar National Park involves conflict of interests and worldviews among different actors. Besides the persistence of competing interests over the territory at local, regional and national levels,

there are apparent evidences of divergence in worldviews on the approaches to conservation and perspectives on development. In this section, I will analyze the bases of the contestation between the state and local Guji communities and address the implication of such competing perspectives on the sustainability of conservation programs and livelihood conditions of the people.

As it has been described in the preceding sections, the two major actors exhibit competing interests over the park with varying degrees of power position. The state exerts structural power through forced resettlement programs, territorialization, control and surveillance of access to traditional resource areas of the local people. Moreover, it exercises its power through deployment of state agents such as park authorities, armed scouts and police force. It also presents itself as a legitimate body to plan, administer and decide on development projects in line with its economic and political discourses. For instance, tourism development is often presented as a modern pathway towards ‘modernity’. Regarding state’s development conception in pastoralist areas, the following quote from the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s speech on the 13th annual Pastoralist Day in Jinka, South Omo is instructive:

“The Federal government is working hard to bring a permanent solution [to problems pertaining to pastoralists]. The Gilgel Gibe 3 dam is developing rapidly and when it is finished the flood, which has been a huge problem for years in this region, will end forever. It will then be possible to create a big irrigation system in this wide and fertile area of South Omo. Following the good results we have achieved in the Afar region, the government is planning, and working hard to establish, a 150,000 hectare sugarcane development in this area starting this year. When this development work is done, we believe that it will transform the entire basis of the area. This will benefit the people of this area and hundreds of thousands of other Ethiopians, by creating employment. The pastoralists who live around this area will be given some fertile land from this irrigation system, which can be used for their own cultivation. There will be support for the pastoralists to combine agriculture with modern cattle herding [39].”

It can be inferred from the above script that big irrigation projects, commercial farming, as in the case of sugarcane development, creating employment opportunities and introducing combination of agriculture with modern cattle herding have been presented as the basis of transforming the pastoralist lives towards development. It is not the objective of this article to delve into whether sedentary agriculture is a more right path to development compared to pastoralism. It is, however, important to note that the state uses its authority and power in translating development discourses into practice. In this process, the nature of the power relation between the state as a major development actor and local pastoralist communities determines successful translation of the discourse into practice. If the relationship is in the form of domination-subordination relation, the latter would opt to different forms of resistance, often a hidden form of resistance [40].

As James Scott [40] points out in his seminal work in “*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*”, the ‘weak’ opt for different forms of resistance under conditions of domination. Scott maintains that the weak design hidden strategies to weaken the powerful. Looking back to Nech Sar National Park, state intervention had created new reconstruction of identity among the Guji in that they began dichotomizing between themselves and the wildlife. Guji informants explain that the government of Ethiopia has given priority to the wildlife over the people. One elder noted this as:

“We don’t know whether this government is a government of animals or of the people. They chased us from our home to create free space for the animals. Aren’t we at least equal to animals? They consider us threats to

the animals but if we, even our grandfathers, didn't care for these animals, what do these people [park officials] talk about today?" (Interview with Obbo Dhugo Arero, April 2012)

The Guji youth in particular have deep-rooted discontent against the state and the wildlife, which they believe are the cause for their displacement. On the contrary, the park authority accuses the Guji of encroaching upon the park through cattle trespass, hunting and setting fire to the park [30]. As Neumann [2] discusses, in the peasant's resistance against park imposition of state laws in the case of Mount Meru, Tanzania, the Guji also systematically challenge the state power. As I observed during my fieldwork in February-May 2011 and March to June 2012, young herders graze their cattle inside the park territory during the night and take back to the 'free zone' around 5 am in the morning. In areas where the park control is weak or where scouts are reluctant, grazing trespassing during the day is also common. Another fascinating strategy of resistance is targeting the 'identity' of the park—hunting down Swayne's Hartebeest, for which the conservation of the park was originally established. When I visited the area in February 2011, the number of this endemic animal was reported to be eleven. In less than a year, seven of them died. Park officials reported that two calves died by parasitic diseases, while the others were killed by hunting (interview with head of the Scouts, April 2012). It seems that hunting takes place, but not exclusively by the Guji. Other groups such as the Koore, Gamo, Konso and Gidole also hunt for food and business. However, selective attack on the Swayne's Hartebeest is a systematic strategy of challenging the core objective of the park. The park authorities allege that the presence of local communities close to the park boundaries is the cause for transmission of diseases from cattle to wildlife. However, as some park scouts and local communities maintain, wildlife are often infested by parasites because of the banning of seasonal burning of the grasses. Traditionally, the Guji undertake controlled burning for different reasons. First, it was practiced because it enhances regeneration of fresh grass. Secondly, it was also a local knowledge of controlling parasites such as ticks and mosquitoes. According to a Guji elder, Chari Udessa, failure to burn pastureland would lead to reproduction of parasites and transformation of grassland into bushlands. Following the banning of burning by the park, much of the grassland were changed into bushland and prompted the wildlife to migrate to areas where local people inhabited. In fact, the wildlife, particularly the prey animals, stay close to homesteads of the people during the night, seeking protection against predators.

It has been pointed out that competing perspectives are evident between the two actors in areas of knowledge basis of conservation (traditional versus scientific), customary right and statutory right, customary law and state law and local conceptions and modern discourses of conservation. The imposition of these perspectives depends on power positions of the actors. In the structural form of power, the state is believed to have constituted more power than the local people, but there are cases whereby the latter deploy their own form of power. As Scott [40] maintains, the weak design strategies as counterbalance against the powerful through everyday forms of resistance. In the case presented in this paper, the Guji resist state intervention through hidden forms of resistance (setting fire to the park, hunting and grazing trespassing) and also through using legal procedures. They formally appeal to the Oromia regional state, while at the same time opting for the hidden resistance. While the hidden resistance is a sign of delegitimizing state authority and its conservation and development discourses, the formal legal procedure implies their systematic maneuvering of the legal opportunity at their disposal.

The complex interplay between the state and local Guji people in this case leads to the argument that local communities are not passive recipients of state policies. Rather, they have the capability and knowledge (agency) to articulate, contest and negotiate intervention. As Long [41] maintains, intervention should not be construed as smooth process of planning and executing development programs. It is rather a complex multilayer process through which state discourses are scrutinized and contested by local communities that see it from their own worldviews. As a practical example from my field experience reveals, the state did not fully implement resettlement plans of the Guji in 2004 because of internal and external pressures. After they managed to lobby human rights organizations and state officials—this indicates that state is not homogenous—the Guji managed to remain at the outskirts of the park, while their Koore neighbors were resettled far to the south. Furthermore, the Guji were given part of the park for settlement and access to water in 2008. In this regard, Guji's agency of maneuvering areas of state weakness through hidden forms of resistance, co-opting local state officials to their causes and winning the attention of international human rights organizations has prompted the state to compromise its rhetoric of conservation and development. In this regard, I would argue in line with what Li [42] calls as 'compromising power', that the interaction between the state and local communities should not be placed at polar binaries between intervention and resistance. It is rather the iterative engagement of contestation, negotiation and compromise of programs, ideas, discourses and power. In this process, local people's agency in deploying different forms of power and negotiation strategies is pivotal in shaping state actions. It is such articulation on the side of the local Guji people that made the state officials compromise and negotiate the objectives of conservation, as in the case of park scouts' reluctance to bring cattle trespassers to court. In fact, the people co-opted some scouts through social networks. Similarly, some local government officials implicitly support the community, while at the same time they conform to state policies.

In analyzing the implications of competing discourses of conservation and development on Nech Sar National Park, it is imperative to highlight whether the conservation and development discourses of the state has achieved its mission in the process of being translated into practice. Both government officials and local community members agree that the number of wildlife in the park has been dwindling from time to time and is exacerbated particularly after the eviction of the people in 2004. Because of the new dichotomized nature-society relations developed among the people as a result of state protectionist approaches, a state of hostility has been created between the people and the park (*i.e.*, park authorities and the wildlife). Acts, such as killing the animals, cattle trespassing and setting fire to the park, are some aspects through which the people cast their anger against the state. Unlike the apolitical notions of environmental problems in which these acts are described as economic motives or perpetrated because of local people's ignorance of environmental ethics, I argue that these acts are expressions of delegitimizing state authority. On the other hand, the local people face continuous threats from park authorities. For instance, they are often warned not to build permanent houses and other social services in areas close to the park boundaries. Their memory of eviction and forced resettlement is another source of insecurity. During my fieldwork, I witnessed that the people have no access to modern social services, even to the standards of remote rural Ethiopia. For instance, they travel for five to seven days to take their cattle to market. This has economic and social repercussions on the agro-pastoralist Guji community. To reach the nearest hospital, the people have to carry patients for over nine hours. In short, there is no sign of state presence in the area, except the park that is

equated to coercive institutions like police, army and prison. As the whole discussion in this article illustrates, the state controls the social, economic, political and cultural spaces of the people through physical enclosures and displacements, as well as by trying to shift the livelihood style of the people from agro-pastoralism to settled peasant farming. This also entails a shift in socio-economic and cultural foundations of the people. It is thus fair to argue that conservation in the form of protected area is a form of control over people, their histories and landscapes.

8. Conclusions

In this article, I presented Nech Sar National Park as an embattled space for its contestability between local people and the state over economic, material, political and cultural representations. Through its conservation model, that is presumably considered as a pathway to development in the form of ecotourism, the state intervened into local practices and disparaged indigenous knowledge of the people. It imposed 'modernist' discourses of development through sedentarization, ecotourism and territorialization of their customary lands. It is found that the state, under successive regimes, shares similar views in representing the territories in southern Ethiopia as 'wilderness' or 'uninhabited' vacant lands. By adopting the rhetoric of global environmental conservation as a justification, the state managed to control indigenous territories in the form of protected areas such as the Nech Sar National Park. In this particular case, two central issues have been singled out. First, unlike the experiences of other African states, the western notions of conservation were not introduced to Ethiopia along with colonialism. Rather, internal empire building projects in the country, which were analogous to the overseas colonial conquest, were typical for the adoption of the 'wilderness' views and its translation into practice in southern Ethiopia (Turton 2009). Second, most works on park-people relations in eastern Africa present the local people either as resistant to ideas of national parks or passive/weak recipients of state conservation programs. On the contrary, in this article, I argue that local people have the agency (capability and knowledge) to contest, negotiate and articulate any external intervention. Thus, by systematically strategizing their actions, the Guji people for example, were able to co-opt state officials to their causes or 'forced' the state to compromise its conservation discourses. It can be concluded that through acts, such as cattle trespassing, hunting and setting fire to the park, are practiced as means of survival and as mechanisms of delegitimizing state power (that means resistance); the relationship should not be placed on the binary of state policy versus local resistance. Rather, it is a complex process through which the actors deploy different forms of power, negotiation strategies and networks. It has also been found that conservation is a form of hegemonic control. For instance, the Guji label the state and its institution—the park—as coercive and exclusionary. In the case of Nech Sar National Park, competing perspectives between the state and local Guji community have ultimately led to unsustainable resource conservation in the park and, at the same time, threatened the livelihood conditions of the people. Unless the state involves the local community in the planning, management and benefit of the park by recognizing their customary rights and knowledge, the relationship between the two will continue to be hostile and severely affect both sides.

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