

Listening to their silence? The reaction of the Gumuz people against large-scale land acquisitions in Benishangul-Gumuz region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

In Ethiopia, large-scale land acquisitions have been looming ever larger over the last few years, mainly in the lowland parts of the country. A substantial amount of land has already been acquired by both domestic and foreign investors in Benishangul-Gumuz region. The land acquisitions pose apparent threats to the economic, cultural, and ecological survival of local indigenous communities. In particular, Gumuz ethnic groups, who depend on customary forms of land access and control, as well as whose livelihoods based heavily on access to natural resources, are being differentially affected. Through a case study in some selected administrative districts of the Benishangul-Gumuz region, this paper is an attempt to use empirical evidence to examine how local indigenous communities are engaging with or challenging the recent land acquisitions. By doing so, the paper shows how the apparent silence of the Gumuz people regarding the land acquisitions is misleading. It shows how local communities, although not organized either politically and economically, express their discontent in differentiated ways against the state and social forces - particularly over land, access to employment and around state politics. As I show in this paper, local reactions range from covert to more open forms of resistance.

Key words: large-scale land acquisition; local resistance; Benishangul-Gumuz; Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

This paper sets out to examine how local indigenous communities perceive ongoing large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia, and how these communities, with a particular focus to the Gumuz people in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, have been reacting to it.

Ethiopia could be cited as a typical example of countries in which large-scale agricultural investments are looming ever larger. Clearly upward trends in land acquisitions, by both domestic and foreign investors, have been observed over the last few years mainly in the lowland parts of the country. As the land acquisitions have proceeded, civil society and human rights groups, opposition political parties, academics and researchers have increasingly expressed their concerns, emphasizing that these land acquisitions are threatening local livelihoods and the environment. In this regard, emerging but limited empirical studies focusing particularly on questions of local land rights have demonstrated the implication of land deals on local communities (Rahmato 2011, Lavers 2012a, Shete 2012). As is the case of Ethiopia, where the state formally owns land and at the same time is sympathetic to large investments in land, it is rather common for local communities to lose out in the process since they cannot effectively negotiate under a situation of wider inequalities in bargaining power (e.g., von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009, 2). This is exacerbated in areas where customary land rights are not respected or where clearly defined property rights and effective judicial systems to protect such rights do not exist or are weak.² Historical experiences suggest that land rights often define or are a reflection of the dynamics of power relationships that exist between peasants and the state. Control over land resources has always been the main source of political power and the basis for state hegemony in which the state assumes a decisive role over rights of access to and disposal of land resources (Rahmato 2009, 283).

It should be noted that land-based political power is of particular concern today as pressure and competition for land resources is alarmingly high. In light of this, there is no doubt that land acquisitions are disrupting local land-based social relations as the land rights of local communities are pushed aside when powerful interest groups, including the state, need the land (Borras and Franco 2012, Borras *et al.* 2011, Li 2011, HLPE 2011, Toulmin 2008, Visser and Spoor 2011). Practically, the land acquisitions taking place in many developing countries are not based on a consideration of ‘the complex and messy actually existing land-based social relations’ (Borras and Franco 2010a, 34) but rather rely predominantly on simplified categorizations by the state (Scott 1998).³ For instance, indigenous ethnic groups in Benishangul-Gumuz region that have distinct and long-standing local land-based social relations and territorial claims are now under renewed pressure because of current trends of land acquisitions by more powerful

² In analyzing large-scale land acquisitions, the notion of property rights is here conceived not just as ‘a bundle of rights’ over land but as ‘a bundle of powers’ that focuses on ability and this brings attention to relationships that enable or constrain the ability to access resources (Ribot and Peluso 2003).

³ As a counter to this ‘state simplification’, emphasizing the notion of ‘land sovereignty’ is crucial for grounding analysis from actually ‘existing local land-based social relations’ in order to ensure that local people are consulted appropriately and their priorities addressed in the process (Borras and Franco 2010a). What lies at the core of the ‘land sovereignty’ concept is ‘the rural poor people’s right to land’ (ibid.: 2010a, 35).

interests. This is because the land acquisition processes are largely carried out on the perception of abundant ‘unoccupied’ land availability in the region in which existing traditional land use practices and social relations that are rooted in the traditions of indigenous communities have been or are deliberately overlooked. Studies conducted so far in the country related to the issue, though limited, show that adverse implications have already occurred to these indigenous communities and their environment and contend that this will likely worsen further in the future (e.g., Rahmato 2011, Kelbessa et al. 2009, Shete 2011, Fisseha 2011, Lavers 2012b). For example, Rahmato (2011), through a case study in Bako Tibee *woreda* (Oromiya region) and Gambella region, demonstrated how the land acquisitions caused land displacement and damage to the livelihoods of local communities by depriving them from accessing ‘vital resources from what until now was their common property’.⁴ Beyond looking at the impact of land investments, recent papers by Lavers (2012a, 2012b) make a useful analysis of the role of domestic political economy and the state in influencing emerging patterns of agrarian transformation in the country. Yet these existing studies make only passing reference or say nothing at all about local reactions (responses) to these growing land acquisitions. Nor do they help us understand how local communities are trying to engage with or challenged the land acquisitions. This is, of course, not to say that the implications of the land acquisitions on local communities is well-researched, but it is to draw attention to the need to also examine how local communities are engaging with or challenging it. Therefore, it is essential to empirically demonstrate how affected indigenous communities perceive and react to the land acquisitions and why.

As generally argued in the emerging body of literature on ‘land grabbing’, large-scale land acquisitions do not always result in people losing their land, although in many instances it has led to the dispossession and displacement of peasants and indigenous people. Those people affected by such acquisitions may not necessarily engage in outright resistance as this depends on the particular economic, political, social and cultural contexts in which they are situated (Borras and Franco 2013). When resistance does occur, they occur in a differentiated way depending on the economic and political factors/agencies involved. Likewise, the choice of which strategies of resistance to use tend to vary depending largely on the specific social structures, strengths, and defensive capacities of the resisters (Scott 1987, 422). Although the indigenous communities in Ethiopia, particularly the Gumuz, appear to be ‘silent’ about the land acquisitions, both covert and overt forms of resistance are taking place. The reasons for the resistance of the Gumuz people is not just because they have been displaced from their lands or are being threatened with displacement, but also because they feel marginalized from emerging (but limited) employment opportunities available because of the ‘land investments’ and because of the lack of fulfilment of other promises that such investments were purported to bring. As will be demonstrated in this paper, the Gumuz have been challenging the land acquisitions in various ways, challenging the state and social forces particularly over land, access to jobs and around state politics.

⁴ There are five tiers of government administration in the country, which include (from the highest to lowest administrative unit): federal, region, zone, *woreda* and *kebele*. *Woreda* is roughly equivalent to district while *kebele*, especially in rural areas, corresponds to a group of villages.

This paper is thus an attempt to use empirical evidence in order to demonstrate the type and nature of reactions by local communities towards land acquisitions through a case study in Benishangul-Gumuz region. By doing so, the paper tries to show how local communities, although not organized either politically or economically, express their discontent in various ways. Information for this study comes from a combination of various data collection methods carried out during intensive fieldwork from April to June 2012. It includes semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants, focus group discussions (FGDs), direct field observation and secondary literature review. The in-depth interviews were conducted with seventeen key Gumuz informants and fourteen selected government officials and experts at various hierarchical levels. In addition, in the selected case study villages, a total of seven focus group discussions were conducted with the communities affected by the land acquisitions. Interviews were also conducted with five managers of investment projects operating in the study areas.

This paper is structured in such a way that the next section provides an overview of the context of the study area. This is followed by a brief outline of the conceptualization of local resistance. The fourth section presents the empirical discussion and analysis. Finally, section five draws a short conclusion.

2. Background to the study region

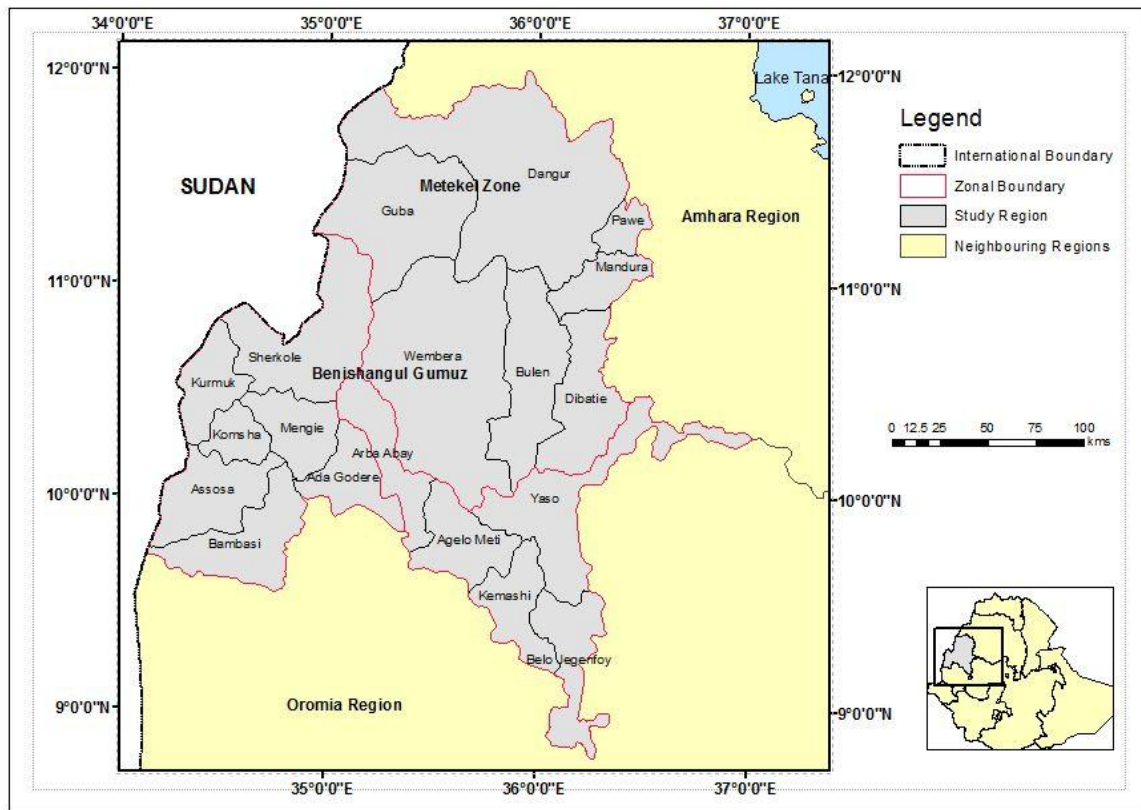
The Benishangul-Gumuz region, on which this study focuses, is one of the nine administrative regions of Ethiopia. This region, which is one of the areas where much of the current land acquisitions is focused, is located in the western part of the country, sharing an international border with Sudan in the west. In a national setting, the region shares borders with the Amhara, Oromiya, and Gambella regional states (Figure 1). It occupies an estimated total area of 50,380 km² (BGRS 2004), and has a total population of 670,847 (CSA 2008). The population consists of indigenous ethnic minority groups of Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo. It is also inhabited by settlers with a diverse ethnic background from other regions. Starting in the 1950s, these settlers moved into the area because of ‘distress push’ migration mainly from drought-affected areas of the northern part of the country, and later through state-sponsored forced resettlement schemes by the Derg regime.

The region is perceived to have extensive and untapped land resources with a great potential for agricultural development and has vast vegetation cover of natural forests, bushes and shrubs.⁵ In terms of its land-use pattern, over three quarters (77.4 %) of the region’s land mass is covered in bushes and shrubs, while forestlands constitute about 11.4 % (MoFA 2010). In addition, cultivated land and grazing lands constitute about 5.3 and 3.2 %, respectively. Marginal land is estimated at about 2.3 % of the total landmass of the region. The region is endowed with streams and rivers that flow throughout the year with a great potential for irrigation: the Dabus, Dedessa, Beles and Abay (Blue Nile) are the major rivers that flow through it. About 1 million hectare of land in the region is estimated to be potentially irrigable. Agro-ecologically, about 75 % of the region is

⁵ This perception by the federal state and local political elites appears to have shaped the current policy of leasing vast tracts of the region’s land to investors.

classified as lowland (*kolla*) while 24 % and the remaining 1 % of the region's area is classified as midland (*Woina dega*) and highlands (*Dega*), respectively (Ibid).

Figure 1. Map of Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, Ethiopia (showing location of study woredas).



The Gumuz ethnic group, the focus of this study, largely inhabit Metekel and Kemashi administrative zones, constituting the most numerous ethnic group of these zones (Figure 1). The Gumuz people, who are recognized as the original inhabitants of these areas, depend on a customary land tenure system of communal ownership.⁶ Gumuz people are traditionally shifting cultivators who practice slash-and-burn agriculture. The practice of shifting cultivation by the Gumuz has often been confused with pastoralism. However, the Gumuz are not actually pastoralists. They rely on shifting cultivation for their livelihood, which is supplemented with other subsidiary activities such as hunting, gathering, fishing, honey production and collection. They also keep some livestock. Unlike the highlanders, the Gumuz people do not cultivate their fields intensively. Rather, they cultivate a given plot of land for about 3 to 5 years then leave it to lie fallow when a decline in yield is perceived. Within their clan territory, new land is then cleared and cultivated in the same way until the yield is again seen to deplete. In the process, the

⁶ Unlike other regions, for instance the Amhara region, land registration and certification has not been undertaken in Benishangul-Gumuz regional state and thus traditional land tenure systems are still widely practiced.

whole village or part of the village may also be abandoned if the newly acquired lands are located too far from current villages. However, the Gumuz do not in fact move to new places all the time but rather move around and return back to their abandoned lands that were once left to regenerate. This shifting cultivation system is practiced according to their customary practice of land access and control.

Individual Gumuz associate themselves to a group that is basically identified in terms of their spatial location/territory. Within Metekel administrative zone, for instance, there have been main groups into which individual Gumuz have associated themselves; for example the Gumuz of Mandura, the Gumuz of Manbouk (Dangur), the Gumuz of Dibati, the Gumuz of Guba and the Gumuz of Wombera. These groups are differentiated on the basis of their territorial attachments and are separated by natural features such as rivers. For example, Beles River separates the Gumuz of Mandura from those of Manbouk. Each of these groups is then divided into several clans. Accordingly, each clan owns all the resources inside its territory marked by land features such as rivers, hills, big trees, roads and footpaths. To the Gumuz, land resources are communal property and rights to these resources are derived from the clan. Individual members have thus usufruct rights enabling them to clear and cultivate the land within the boundary of their clan. In this way they enjoy possession rights over the land they are cultivating until they leave it fallow. Once they leave the land unused, other members of the clan can use it. Generally, the real owner of the land is the clan, not individuals (see also Rahmato 1988, Abbute 2002). It is this fluid and complex customary land-based social relationship that has been at stake because of the large-scale land acquisitions underway in many parts of the region.

Situating the recent large scale land acquisitions taking place in the region within a historical, political-economic and socioecological context is vital for understanding the nature of the relationship that exists between the region's indigenous ethnic groups, the central state and territory. Traditionally, the indigenous ethnic groups of the region have suffered for centuries the encroachment and exploitation by Ethiopian highlanders and Sudanese states.⁷ As a sizable body of literature illustrates, this region, which is now referred to as the Benishangul-Gumuz, currently one of the nine regional states under the federal political system based on ethnic regional administrations, was annexed and incorporated into the Ethiopian empire towards the end of the nineteenth century during the reign of emperor Menelik II (Ahmad 1999, Zewdie 1991,83; Pankhurst 1977). After this incorporation, its people were made to pay tribute in 'slaves, ivory and gold' to the central state as well as to local chiefs (Ahmad 1999, 433). Historical accounts even show that in the mid-19th century, Kassa Hailu (later Emperor Tewodros II) is said to have raided these northwestern borderlands for slaves (Crummey 1986, 139). Nonetheless, as far back as in the 14th century the Gumuz people were already paying tribute to the central state of the then emperor Yeshaq (Pankhurst 1977, Huntingford 1989, 93). In the following periods, they faced continuous acts of domination and subordination by the Ethiopian highlanders on one side and the Sudanese Arabs on the other side of the border.

⁷ Historically, a large part of the Benishangul-Gumuz region was 'a buffer zone and a trade entrepôt' between Ethiopia and Sudan (Markakis 2011, 84).

The people of the area were not only enslaved by outsiders but local power elites were also actively involved in slave raiding and trading. Notably, ruling chiefs such as Sheikh Khojele of Asossa and Hamdan Abu Shok of Gubba (Metekel) were powerful local rulers who had historically raided and traded their own subjects (Danham 2002, Garretson 1986, Ahmad 1999, Zewdie 2002, 68; Gonzalez-Ruibal and Fernandez 2007). In so doing, these local rulers collaborated with central state authorities in subduing their own kin. As Markakis explains, past exploitations and oppressions ‘tore the fabric of indigenous communities, fragmenting and dispersing the people to find refuge in inaccessible malaria-ridden [lowland areas], from where they emerged only recently to confront a perplexing world’ (Markakis 2011, 84).

It was obvious that traditionally population growth and distribution trends in Ethiopia tended to concentrate in the highland areas, whereas lowland regions remained sparsely inhabited by indigenous people and underdeveloped in terms of basic infrastructure as compared to their neighbouring highland areas. Since the second half of the 20th century, the indigenous Gumuz communities have come under increasing pressure from migrants from drought-affected and environmentally degraded parts of the country and from the gradual encroachments by their neighbouring highlander plow cultivators who were expanding into the area slowly in search of cultivable land (Abbute 2002). The effort of the land-hungry highlanders’ search for land was later reinforced by the resettlement program of the Derg regime that has moved a large number of them to the lowlands. This consequently brought them in direct confrontation with indigenous communities, with predictably troubling consequences (Markakis 2011). In the 1980s, for example, tens of thousands of impoverished people from other areas were resettled on the land that belonged to the Gumuz. These patterns added extra pressures on indigenous lowland communities, separate from the longstanding subordination and subjugations. It is worth noting that the highlanders had deeply entrenched racist attitudes, which have not completely vanished today, towards the Gumuz whom they often described as inferior and hostile and called what is now a derogatory name, ‘shanjila’ meaning ‘slave’ (Ahmad 1999, Markakis 2011). Such stereotypical prejudice is still evident to this day in the interaction of the highlanders with the Gumuz and other indigenous communities (see Section 4.2).

Starting in the early 1990s, the Gumuz people of the Metekel area experienced another form of land alienation caused by the introduction of private rain-fed agricultural investment schemes. A number of private investors, commonly from the highlands, leased around 38,250 hectares of land from the regional government for commercial farming, natural gum and incense harvesting (Abbute 2002, 123). More recently, large-scale land acquisitions that involve both domestic and foreign investors are underway in the region, pushing the local communities further away: these communities are finding that they have no place left to retreat. For the Gumuz communities ‘easy retreat, mobility and inaccessibility through dispersion and bad communications have been the means of self-preservation’ (James 1986, 35) when they faced intense pressure. In this regard, considerable land acquisitions have occurred at a significant scale throughout the region, particularly in Metekel, while the land rights and natural resources-based livelihoods of indigenous local communities appear to have been subverted in the process. During fieldwork, I gathered data from various government sources (including the Regional

Investment Bureau and the Environmental Protection, Land Use and Administration Bureau) to estimate the amount of land that has been granted to investors in the region. The amount of land already transferred to investors has now reached about 390,590 hectares and recent trends further suggest that the transfer will most likely increase in the future as much land has been already earmarked for this purpose (see Moreda 2013).

A recent trend of implementing a villagization programme in the region, particularly in the areas that are the focus of land acquisitions, is instructive of the efforts being made by the government to clear more land for investors. For example, in 2011/2012, it envisaged settling 19,763 households from their scattered settlements to designated villages across most of the *woredas* within the region.⁸ Although the government presented this villagization programme as a major strategy through which the deprived indigenous communities of the region could be transformed, especially through the provision of services such as water, health care clinics, schools, transportation, and agricultural extension services, the very fact that villagization is currently occurring in the same areas as the land acquisitions makes plausible the claim that such a strategy may be used to clear the land for investors. For example, Gumuz informants interviewed in Dangur *woreda*, who were recently relocated to newly designated villages, were quite explicit in indicating that most of their previous lands have already been transferred to investors and the remaining will also inevitably be given away soon as well (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012).

No one so far has arisen to deny the immense damage and pressure brought to the Gumuz communities and their local environment by all the processes, both past and present. Meanwhile, it should be noted here that the current government claims that since it is leasing out 'unused' or 'underutilized' lands to investors, it is unlikely that the ongoing land investments will have an adverse impact on the lives of local communities. But critical questions have already been posed regarding the land that is described as 'unused' or 'underutilized', suggesting such a view is the outcome of the undervaluing of existing local land uses and different categories of users. In the present study areas, given the fact that most of the indigenous ethnic groups mainly depend on shifting cultivation, rising land acquisitions have been causing adverse impacts on local land-use practices and land resources including land displacements, declining access to resources and environmental destruction. Although land scarcity is not a problem, at least for the moment, the Gumuz interviewed in all study *kebeles* unvaryingly sense that this will soon become a reality due to the enclosure of the large land resources they had access to under their traditional system of tenure. The Gumuz generally view the land acquisitions as threats that create additional challenges by exerting intensified pressures on their local land rights and on access to their traditional source of livelihood (see also Moreda 2013).

In spite of the various types of pressures, the Gumuz traditionally attempted to defend their customary land from 'outsiders' using various forms of resistance. And when the pressures become too much, the Gumuz simply fled to inaccessible, remote areas so that

⁸ Benishangul-Gumuz regional state villagization plan for 2011/2012 or for fiscal year 2004 Ethiopian Calendar.

they could continue to pursue their traditional way of life. Finally, however, even these remote areas appear to have been reached by the current large-scale land acquisitions underway throughout the region. This is the situation that the Gumuz and other indigenous local communities of the region are stuck with today. It is to this issue that the next section turns and attempts to examine the reactions of those affected local communities to ongoing land acquisitions. First, however, I would like to make a few points from the literature, both theoretical and empirical, regarding the conceptualization of local resistance.

3. Conceptualizing local resistance

If we are to examine the reactions of local communities against the large-scale land acquisitions today, then *a priori* understanding of the concept of resistance is critical. Although there is the risk of oversimplification, this section tries to achieve its goal through consulting the dominant literature about the conceptualization of local resistance. For almost the past four decades or so, a number of scholars have been engaged in the study of peasant resistance, heavily influencing current debates about its conceptualization (e.g., Scott 1976, 1985, 1987, 1990; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986, Kerkvliet 1986, 1993, 2005, 2009, Isaacman 1990, Moore 1998).

In the context of contemporary land grabs, local communities who have faced land alienation or are being threatened by displacement as a result of current land acquisitions engage in different forms of resistance in order to maintain their socio-cultural identities and moral economies (Scott 1976, Walker 2008, Malseed 2008). From ‘a moral economy discourse’, when the actions of the state and other actors threaten or cause damage to the local livelihoods of rural communities that are often characterized by distinct cultural identities, then the morality of ‘the subsistence ethic’ is disrupted and will likely lead to rebellion (Scott 1976, 3). Here the subsistence aspect of peasant households forms the central tenet of Scott’s argument. He understands peasants as moral and political actors who can defend their values as well as their individual security.

Viewed in this light, local rural communities engage in various forms of resistance to counteract the processes that threaten their livelihoods (Scott 1985, Walker 2008, Malseed 2008, Schneider 2011). Differences in the strategy of peasant resistance emanates from multiplicities in their political behaviour and relative strength that in turn depends on their particular context (Isaacman 1990, 21), the forms of appropriation and appropriating class they are facing (Scott 1985) and their own historical experience as well as their cultural background (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2012). As local rural communities can be politically fractured and socially differentiated in more complex ways than is often assumed, the impact of land grabs on and within even small communities can be differentiated, and consequently their reaction to it will likewise be differentiated depending on their particular economic, political, social and cultural contexts (Borras and Franco 2013).

Much of the debate has been related to the definition of resistance and what actions actually qualify as resistance. Scott (1985, 290) asserts that ‘class resistance includes any act (s) by a member (s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large

farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes'. Kerkvliet (2009, 233) defined resistance as 'what people do that shows disgust, anger, indignation or opposition to what they regard as unjust, unfair, illegal claims on them by people in higher, more powerful class and status positions or institutions'. What stands out clearly in these definitions is that resistance comprises thoughts as well as actions. In his most influential work on the 'Weapons of the Weak' based on the case of a Malaysian village, Scott (1985, xvi) identifies diverse forms of everyday resistance that include verbal characterization of superiors, dissimulation, pilfering, foot dragging, sabotage, false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, desertion, and so on. In this work, he demonstrated that while engaging in these various forms of resistance, 'subaltern' people belittled dominance and hence were not mere victims of hegemony.

However, other scholars have argued that such actions do not actually qualify to be considered as resistance since they do not have revolutionary potential: they do not directly challenge the underlying political system and hence are not politically effective. Drawing from Marx's discussion, Das (2007, 363) pointed out that 'as long as grassroots agency is confined to and aimed at a power structure within its own immediate vicinity, it is necessarily self-defeating. Class power is concentrated in the state at the national level, and those who proclaim the efficacy of everyday forms of resistance tend to forget this.' For this reason, it has been argued that resistance needs to be organized via the collective action of many people that directly threatens and challenges the system of oppression.

Moral economists such as Scott and Kerkvliet, however, note that the reactions of peasants against exploitation and subordination often tend to be individualized, unorganized and localized forms of insurgency that do not often make headlines. For Scott particularly, excluding these forms of peasant actions from the category of 'real resistance' would 'fundamentally misconstrue[s] the very basis of the economic and political struggle conducted daily by subordinate classes in repressive settings' (Scott 1985, 292) and he warns that those who hold these views will 'miss the very wellsprings of peasant politics' (ibid., 295). The goal of most everyday peasant resistances is not, after all, 'to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive...within it' (Scott 1987, 424). Following Scott, Isaacman (1990, 33) also underscores the significance of everyday forms of resistance in which 'to ignore the weapons of the weak is to ignore the peasants' principal arsenal.' Indeed, Scott strongly argues that formal political activity involving co-ordination among many people is generally exercised by the elites, the intelligentsia, and the middle classes since they are in a better position to gain easy access to the institutions of the state and other targeted actors to contest with. Peasants are likely to have limited access to these institutions and thus 'it would be naïve to expect that peasant resistance can or will normally take the same form' (ibid., 299). Empirically, Kerkvliet (2005) has shown the power of everyday politics in transforming national policies, for example in the case of Vietnam. Nevertheless, as Borrás and Franco (2010b, 23) argue, the ground for exercising everyday politics is not smooth and is played out under various constraining structures that make such activities difficult political endeavors. These constraints undermine the capacity of peasants to pursue their agendas further and hence such resistance generally does not have far-reaching consequences.

A crucial issue that emerged from these debates therefore relates to ‘what really counts as resistance’. In this regard, Scott demonstrates that such forms of peasant politics need not necessarily be effective to be considered resistance: for him what is important is the intention of the actions more than the outcome, although it is sometimes difficult to understand the intentions behind some actions. This conception is essential because the very presence of resistance is often an indicator of the existence of discontent among the resisters towards the rules of the ‘development’ endeavor pursued by the state and other elite groups.

The following empirical section scrutinizes the ways in which local communities have been reacting to the recent large-scale land acquisitions. As touched upon in the previous section, in spite of their long history of exposure to exploitative practices and subjugation, the Gumuz communities did not in fact fall as passive victims of ‘false consciousness’ and of dominant highlanders’ ideology and the state’s hegemonic representations.⁹ They were able, to a certain extent, to resist the subjugation and hegemonic ideologies of the highlanders and the state in order to maintain their material as well as cultural space. As will be discussed in what follows, the reactions of the Gumuz target those individuals and groups, including the state, that have participated and facilitated the land acquisitions in one way or another. In their reactions, the Gumuz try to make their actions and thoughts be felt by the targets although they are very careful in maintaining the anonymity of the individuals involved. This bears a resemblance to how Kerkvliet characterized the features of everyday resistance in which the resisters opt ‘[to] the extent that the target is rather specific, those who resist imagine that their actions would not be condoned by the target’ (Kerkvliet 1986, 108).

4. Local reactions

4.1. Reaction against investors

As has been indicated earlier, the threat to rural livelihoods of increasing trends in land acquisitions appears to be on the rise. Although the land rights and natural resources-based livelihoods of local communities have been under pressure from encroachments by highlanders, state-sponsored resettlement schemes and state farms over the past several decades (Abbute 2002, Gebre 2003), the pressure is now increasing as more and more land resources are given out by the state to commercial agricultural investments particularly in the last few years. This in turn is resulting in land disputes and contestations between local communities, the state and investors. Despite these

⁹ As Gramsci (1971) argued, the dominant classes normally controlled not only the material means of production but also the symbolic means of production. Through creating discourses as well as through coercion, the dominant groups try to install or solicit ‘consent’ for their hegemonic rule by defining what is beneficial and legitimate and as a result the subordinate groups accept such hegemonic ideologies and exploitations as normal and justified. Nonetheless, Scott (1976, 1977) demonstrated that peasants were capable of opposing and struggling against exploitative practices and dominant ideologies that threatened their moral economies in ways that did not conform to the assumptions articulated in Gramsci’s formulation and, hence he contended that peasants were not in fact victims of ‘false consciousness’. According to Scott (1977, 280) ‘there can be no question of hegemony when vital needs are ignored or violated by elites, for these needs are an integral part of peasant consciousness and values.’

contestations, because of the weak bargaining power of local communities, the interests of those who have the power to manipulate institutional and administrative frameworks are prevailing. Specifically, the Gumuz are the overlooked losers in the process.

Interviews and discussions with local individuals and groups in the study areas made it clear that there have been increased disputes over the dispossession of cultivated lands and access to water associated with land investment projects. However, the informants underscored how powerless they are in defending their rights due to the strong politicization of the land investment undertakings, which now also involved the federal government. In this regard, the federal government was viewed as an entity against which it is impossible to dispute, something that has made the Gumuz fearful. As one Gumuz man (Guba *woreda*) concisely puts it: ‘We cannot wrestle with these rich investors.... we know that they have a link with and support from the government. If we wrestle with them, it is obvious that we will lose’ (Interview, Ayicid *kebele*, 06 June 2012). A similar view was also found among local and regional authorities, though in a muted form, over their reduced influence in relation to land allocations.

Nevertheless, several scattered forms of resistance took place through which the Gumuz people expressed their discontent towards the ongoing land acquisitions. The local reactions targeted all of the actors involved in the land acquisitions in one way or another. One of the main actors targeted by the local communities were the investors. The local communities generally reflected negative attitudes towards investors operating in their surroundings and several instances of covert expressions of resistance against them have occurred. Within Dangur *woreda*, for example, informants indicated that local communities sabotaged one of the investment projects that acquired land in their *kebele* (Interviews, Gimtiya *kebele*, May 2012). According to informants, a farm machineries warehouse belonging to the Jaba Agro-industry PLC was set on fire during the night by individuals who still remain anonymous. The manager of the project told me that as a result of the sabotage, machineries such as tractors, threshers and spare parts as well as many other valuable goods were destroyed (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, 17 May 2012). He believes that this was sabotage carried out by the local community. As the warehouse was the main target, he suspects that the action was mainly orchestrated by former guards working in the warehouse who knew the whereabouts of key machineries. Because of threats of more action, the company was reluctant to make further investments, speculating that more damage might be inflicted. Actually, the manager was well aware of the risks in the area, mentioning that this was not the first incident that had happened in that specific area. He explained that the land which now belongs to Jaba Agro-industry PLC used to be farmed by another domestic company which left the area some years ago because of the attacks it had faced. The brother of the investor who used to work as the manager on the project was killed on the land by a Gumuz arrow. Soon after that the investor stopped the project and left the area. Bows and arrows are the main traditional weapon used by the Gumuz for self-defense and hunting. As the case above demonstrates, such sporadic and anonymous actions by local people cannot be overlooked and could in fact have the potential to have a major impact on projects.

During focus group discussions on the above arson incident, the Gumuz noted that indeed Jaba-agro Industry PLC had suffered huge losses because of it, but they preferred to be

silent on the issue and they did not want to speculate on who may have been behind it (FGD, Gimtiya *kebele*, 20 May 2012). Rather, they emphasized the damage the project had caused them. They were even angry about the name of the project itself: Jaba is the name of a village in another area though within the same *woreda*. The local communities of Gimtiya *kebele* considered this an insult and contended ‘how embarrassing it is to hear the name of another place being given to our land while we have our local name’. Some of the informants among the Gumuz during individual interviews indicated that they wanted these people to leave the land as nothing good has happened since their arrival (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, May 2012).

Damaging field crops is another act of resistance that has been undertaken by the Gumuz people in Belojiganfoy *woreda*. In this *woreda*, for example, an estimated 700 hectares of land covered by maize ready for harvest was destroyed by fire. The investor accused the local community of deliberately causing the fire. Here again, local communities remained quiet when asked for the possible cause of the damage. Their silence cannot necessarily be taken as a sign of their ignorance. Here, it is fairly obvious that, as Scott (1985, 290) asserted, ‘the actor is unlikely to admit to the action itself, let alone explain what he had in mind.’ From an interview with an official in the regional capital, Assosa, it is clear that the regional government is aware of the hostile attitudes of local communities towards the investors and thus speculates that the crop damage might have been one of their strategies to chase out investors from the land they were allotted by the government (Interview, Assosa, 18 April 2012).

The Gumuz were not only involved in covert forms of reaction, there were also incidents of overt actions taken against the investors. Local people took part in outright conflicts with the investors in villages that were relatively far from zonal and *woreda* towns so that government forces could not easily intervene. Disregarding the claims made by investors, several Gumuz people occupied and cultivated the land already allocated to the investment projects. This was specially the case in Yaso and Belojiganfoy *woreda*, where local people occupied the land, disregarding the investors, in order to counteract them. In Dangur *woreda*, villagers of Gimtiya *kebele* also insisted on cultivating the land that was already cleared by investors in their villages. A key informant from Gimtiya *kebele* administration described it as follows:

One of the investors who acquired about 3000 hectares of land in our *Kebele*, for example, tried to clear large part of it. However, this investment project is actually unable to secure this whole land it is trying to develop, as some people in this village defy the land boundaries claimed by the project. In every direction, the villagers encroach upon the investor’s land when the planting season comes in order to take advantage of the already cleared land. We tried to tell them in various community meetings not to encroach on the land already cleared by the investors but they just ignore us. And instead claim that the land originally belonged to them. We even tried to warn the villagers that they must stop this or they will be jailed (Interview, Gimtiya, 16 May 2012).

In interviews, one of the project managers of investment sites in the area complained that it is harder to chase these people from the land without the help of local government authorities, something which might stir even more animosity (Interview, Gublak town, 18

May 2012). He indicated that once they sow crop seeds on the field then it is unthinkable to touch it because their revenge or reaction to that would be so serious. The investors generally refrained from taking measures in such situations for fear of inflaming and provoking violent confrontations. The solution was to compromise, that is, let them cultivate unless they push further and, of course, until permanent mechanisms to force the local people to stop such acts were devised. Despite this, there were times in which investors brought in the federal police forces stationed in the nearby town of Gublak to threaten the local people from advancing further into the investment lands already cleared. The villagers, however, claimed that they were cultivating their ancestral land and rejected claims of any wrongdoing. One elderly Gumuz stated that ‘it is them who came to us, not us who went to them. We were here, always’ (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, 19 May 2012).

4.2. Reactions against seasonal immigrant labourers

As a strategy to undermine the land acquisitions, local communities attempt to resist the immigration of seasonal agricultural wage labourers migrating from the central highlands of the Amhara region. In this regard, it is interesting to note that investment projects almost totally depend on agricultural labourers recruited from other regions of the country, particularly neighbouring regions. Following the ongoing land acquisitions, there has been a growing influx of highland seasonal migrant laborers coming to the area for wage employment in areas such as weeding and mowing.¹⁰

Not only do these migrant workers work as seasonal agricultural labourers, they also introduce a new form of encroachment on the available land resources. As the jobs are mostly seasonal in nature, many of the labourers stay in the area after the completion of their contracts. They tend to encroach into the forest to acquire land so that after a year or so of cultivating it they can bring their families and hence established new settlements.

The creation of such ‘illegal’ settlements has generated additional challenges for local communities, intensifying the pressure on available land resources. This has been the case mainly in Dangur and Guba *woredas*, where the *woreda* authorities now consider it to be a major challenge to the peace and security of the area, likely to fuel land conflicts (Interviews, Manbouk and Mankush towns, June 2012). The Gumuz people are well aware of this kind of encroachment on their land and its implications for them. One informant from the Agriculture Office of Dangur *woreda* illustrates that the people who encroach and establish new settlements tend to over-exploit the local land resources as their continued existence on the land is highly uncertain (Interview, Manbouk town, 29 May 2012) and that sooner or later they will be forced to leave. Due to this uncertainty, they resort to using the land and other natural resources more intensively, in contrast to the land use practices of local Gumuz communities.¹¹ Notwithstanding his earlier

¹⁰ Most of these seasonal wage labourers, migrating mainly from the central highlands of the Amhara region, are landless young men or those with small landholdings who are unable to provide for their families from such holdings. For many of these labourers, seasonal migration is the only available source of income.

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of more or less similar cases in Metekel see Abbute (2002).

argument, this same informant also concedes that these ‘illegal settlers’ hope that they might claim permanent control of the land they occupy once they have occupied and farmed it for a few years. This did not, however, seem to stop them from exploiting the resources to the greatest extent possible.

Local communities have been reacting against the influx of migrant workers, not just in order to prevent their encroachment on local land resources but also to undermine the land investment projects by denying the investors access to labour. Several migrant agricultural workers interviewed in Gimitiya and Gublak *kebeles* within Dangur *woreda* stressed that they were ‘scared’ of the Gumuz people (Interview, May 2012). They emphasized that they are fearful to the extent that they felt unable to go on foot from the places where the investment projects are located to nearby towns. According to these informants (seasonal labourers), many migrant workers had been killed by the local communities while they were trying to go back to their home areas on foot. Reacting to these allegations, the Gumuz people contended that the incidents had nothing to do with them. Rather, they explained how migrant workers face challenges when they come to the area (Interview, Gimitiya *Kebele*, 21 May 2012). The labourers migrate to these destinations from various areas such as Gojjam, Gondar and Siemen Shewa and not knowing their way around is one of the challenges they face. The lowlands are covered in vast expanses of woodlands and forested areas and the migrants, unfamiliar to the area, get lost in these vast areas, unclear of the direction they need to take. Once they are lost, many do not manage to find their way out. The Gumuz complain that when something happens to these workers everybody puts the blame on them.

But migrant workers insist that they face intimidation from the local communities every day. Similar attitudes towards the Gumuz was reflected during focus group discussions I held in some selected villages of Tach Gayint *woreda* of the Amhara region, among the main areas of origin of seasonal labour migrants (FGDs, July 2012). The participants stressed that threats from the Gumuz is the major risk factor that they consider when deciding whether to move to the Metekel area, with malaria and harsh climatic condition forming other risk factors. Many labourers, particularly inexperienced young workers, could not withstand the harsh daily labour and long working hours expected on the investment projects and found the harsh climate and cultural shocks they face difficult to cope with. As a result some decide to return back to their home areas partly on foot in order to save some money. According to the participants, there were cases in which these people were attacked and killed by the Gumuz while they were travelling. However, it should be noted here that such allegations could also be related to the stereotypical views prevalent in the highlands which characterize the Gumuz as hostile. Nevertheless, one local official from Dangur *woreda* administration council admitted that there were a number of such incidents in the *woreda* but they did not know who was behind them. Whoever is to blame, and whichever group, the Gumuz or the migrants, are right, it is evident from both individual interviews and group discussions with the Gumuz that they have explicit, negative attitudes towards both the migrant workers as well as the investment projects.

A closer look into the issue reveals that the hostilities of the Gumuz towards the land acquisitions are not only because they face threats of dispossession and displacement

from their ancestral lands, but also because they feel marginalized from the employment opportunities brought by the projects. As already pointed out, with the exception of a few guard positions, almost all the seasonal wage employment opportunities are filled by labourers from the highland areas. Since I was curious to know the reasons why the projects make use of outside labour coming from as far away as Siemen Shewa, the manager of one of the farm projects located in Gimitiya *kebele* (Dangur *woreda*) explained that they have been forced to bring labourers from other regions because of the lack of interest among the local communities to engage in seasonal labour activities (Interview, Gublak town, 18 May 2012). Implicit in his argument is the clear inference that local indigenous people are ‘lazy’ and have a culture that does not encourage hard work. A highlander himself, his views were no different from those hegemonic ideologies of highlanders in general that considered the Gumuz people ‘as little better than animals – unintelligent, ugly, heathen and evil’ (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2012, 69). In contrast to this however, in my own interviews and discussions most of the Gumuz expressed their interest in making use of the employment opportunities. This is what the following focus group discussion account demonstrates:

We wanted to work and get some money. ... But these investors don't like us. They don't want to employ our people. They say this community [Gumuz] is not capable of doing daily wage work and they even went to the extent of calling our people lazy. This is their common response when we approach them for employment. They don't even see us as human beings. That is why they prefer to employ migrant workers. These same investors first promised that they would employ our people and that they would only employ people from other places if there were no enough workers from our communities. But this is not what is happening here. We always ask them for work. Except for a few guard positions in which our people are employed, the available job opportunities are almost all filled by migrant people coming from the Amhara region.....That is what we see here in connection with these investors (Gimitiya, Dangur *woreda*, 20 May 2012).

Similarly, one young Gumuz man, who once worked as a guard and for almost three months was in charge of looking after some daily labourers in an investment project located in Dangur *woreda*, expressed the view that the Gumuz people are very hardworking and that they can accomplish their tasks (such as weeding and mowing) in a very short time when given the opportunity (Interview, Gublak town, 26 May 2012).

Women in particular stressed that when they approached the investment projects for employment, they were treated suspiciously by the employers and even seen as thieves who went there not to work but to steal (Interview, Gimitiya *kebele*, 21 May 2012). Generally, the Gumuz informants stressed that this is why they wanted to make the investment projects leave. So although the investors argued that they were forced to employ highland migrants for the available seasonal work because of the lack of local labour, which they attributed it to a lack of motivation among the Gumuz,¹² the fact that local people seeking the work were not even offered the chance or were less preferred suggests that the project leaders gave preference to highlanders. In terms of employment

¹² Interview with managers of two investment projects in Dangur *woreda*, May 2012.

opportunities, therefore, the experience with existing investment projects is that they appear to have benefited highland migrants rather than the local communities, at least in the present study areas. This discussion reminds us of an earlier observation made by Tania Li (2011, 286) in Southeast Asia, in which she cogently described the situation of the local population in such a way that ‘their land is needed, but their labor is not’.

4.3. Reaction against the state

Generally, the Gumuz reflected negative attitudes and hostilities not only towards investors and migrant labourers but also towards the government which they perceived as facilitating the land acquisitions that were threatening their traditional land use practices and the natural environment. The Gumuz contend that even before the current displacements due to land acquisitions, the state had been in the forefront of their subordination and subjugation and that what they are now facing is nothing but the continuation of their long history of exploitation and marginalization.¹³ Looking back to the establishment of state farms and state sponsored resettlements schemes in the 1970s and 1980s and the introduction of private commercial farms in Metekel in the 1990s, some scholars have argued that these initiatives exemplified the central state’s desire to consolidate its control over people and territory. Contesting the motive of the 1980’s resettlement schemes, Gebre (2003, 54), for example, argues that ‘although the resettlement was portrayed as a response to the famine [that affected the country in the 1980s], the overall decision to establish resettlement in remote locations may have been partly driven by perceived collateral advantages, such as controlling outpost regions’.

In the context of the current ongoing process of land acquisitions, ‘state simplification’ /categorization of land as ‘unused’ or ‘underutilized’ in order to lease it out to investors is based primarily on expected short-term economic benefits. It does not take into account the social and cultural dimensions of existing local land uses despite the fact that these are critical for indigenous communities (Scott 1998, Borras and Franco 2010a). It is important to note that current government perceptions and discourses favour the highland plough cultivators and commercial farmers while undervaluing the land use of the lowlander peripheral communities such as the Gumuz.¹⁴ It was such a discourse that shaped the recent state policy of making lowland areas major sites for large-scale production of commercial crops and biofuels. As Makki (2014, 89) puts it, ‘instead of the alliance between smallholders and the state envisioned in the highlands, the strategic alignment in the lowlands involves a pact between the state and large-scale investors’.

Land transfers to investors across the region have been undertaken by the federal government on the one hand, and regional and local government authorities on the other hand. At the federal level, increasing levels of land transfers in the region have been

¹³ For further reading as regards to the history of centre/periphery relationships which was characterized by a long history of inequality, exploitation and marginalization see Ahmad 1999, Gebre 2003, Abbute 2002, Pankhurst 1977, 2001, Zewdie 1991, 2002, Donham 2002, Markakis 2011. See also Makki 2012.

¹⁴ The use of land by pastoralists and shifting cultivators in the lowlands is contested by the state as such existing land uses are perceived to be unsustainable or inefficient (Lavers 2012b). This image of existing land uses in the lowlands has been very formative in the design of state policy that focuses on leasing vast tracts of land to investors in those areas.

carried out by the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate (AISD) which was established in 2009 to identify potential investment lands in the regional states. It has been argued that this trend of land administration by the federal government is justified due to the prevailing limited capacity of the regional government to manage substantial land investments. Strikingly, information collected during fieldwork for this paper revealed that neither local communities nor respective regional authorities have been involved in most of the land deals carried out so far by the federal government. Land transfers negotiated with the federal government were easily able to bypass legitimate rural land administration authorities at the regional government. The regional government was simply notified about the land transfer deals carried out between the federal government and the investor.

This apparently contradicts the clearly stipulated desire both by federal and regional governments to enhance decentralized political power and decision-making in rural land administrations. Due to the inherent power asymmetries in the relationship between the regional state and the federal government, the latter having undisputed sway: local and regional authorities seem to have exerted no or very little influence over substantial land deals administered by the federal government, despite the fact that these could have considerable impact on local land use and biodiversity. While the central state has always maintained its key concern for the ‘peripheral’ areas in the borderlands in relation to the control of territory and people, recent decisions around land investments have direct consequences for contestations over authority between state actors at federal and regional levels. This serves to illustrate not only how contests over land and authority are played out in federal and regional state contexts, but also its salience as a site for the reproduction of the history of marginalization reflected in the pre-1991 subordinated power relations. Although the federal government may have reasserted its authority over territory and people in this way, the implications of undermining the authority of local and regional state actors over the allocation, use and regulation of land resources within their jurisdictions may become a focal point of resistance.

At the regional level, before the present regional land administration proclamation 85/2010 that provided the mandate for administering rural lands to the Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Use and Administration, land investment processes in the region involved different regional government offices. This created overlaps and ambiguities in land acquisition processes and procedures.¹⁵ For example, although the *woreda* authorities were in charge of identifying and facilitating the land acquisition process, there were also cases in which the investors themselves identified the desired investment land and approached local authorities for approval. As these land acquisition processes appear to have lacked consistency and coordination, individuals (investors and representatives of the state acting in their own private interests) were able to manipulate them, exploiting the existing confusions and overlaps in the land administration process.

¹⁵ Above all, recentralizing the facilitation and administration of investment lands as observed in recent land deals in fact undermines the political process that was intended to promote and implement decentralized land administration system as was stipulated in the regional land administration proclamation 85/2010.

As a strategy of resistance and to undermine its legitimacy, focus group participants in Gimitiya and Qotta *kebeles* in particular, expressed their anger at the government, suggesting that they had been deceived by local officials and had their ancestral land taken out of their hands. Thus they threatened not to pay taxes although they were aware that this would bring them in direct confrontation with the government. More than anything else, the Gumuz were highly irritated by the muteness and, at times, the role of local authorities in the land acquisitions. This is particularly so because, in contrast to previous regimes, most of the local administrative offices are now filled by people from the indigenous communities themselves. One elderly informant in Ayicid *kebele* (Guba *woreda*) expressed his sentiment, remarking:

How come a person who is born from us lets its ancestral marks be destroyed by outsiders, or worse, by those people who enslaved our fathers and us for generations? We thought a new day has come for us in which our voices will be heard when our children assumed government positions and kids started going to school. But these local officials of ours did not stand on our side when our lands were grabbed. They deceived us instead. We don't trust them anymore, I swear! Had it not been to our fierce resistance, we would have disappeared from this area long ago (Interview, 07 June 2012).

This comment highlights how important had been their own agency in defending their territory. Indeed, during group discussions, local communities emphasized that they appealed to local authorities almost every single day. For example, the administrator of Qotta *kebele* particularly stressed that all the grievances of the community are directed at him and that he faces intimidations every day, forcing him in turn to talk to *woreda* and zonal authorities in various instances.

Almost all Gumuz informants interviewed held the view that an effort to relocate many of their villages is a strategy of the government to expropriate their land. Some people who were already relocated to new villages refused to stay and returned back to their previous villages although in some places, for example Qotta *kebele*, their lands had already been taken by investors. Informants contended that they would not leave their current villages entirely for fear that if they did, they would lose their land and would not be able to come back again (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012). As a result, they comply with local authorities by accepting relocation to new villages as a strategy in order to avoid confrontation but in practice they also insist on maintaining their previous villages. This is an act of resistance without directly challenging the government's villagization programme. Other people resisted the villagization efforts outright and refused to comply with it.

Historically, the Gumuz have been able to resist pressures from the state at various conjunctures. Gonzalez-Ruibal (2012, 70) describes their resistance as follows:

It is not only strange that the Gumuz have not vanished as a people or their numbers drastically reduced after centuries of enslaving and exploitation. It is equally surprising the degree to which their culture has resisted the pressures of dominant groups, avoiding disappearance or mixture to a large extent.

Although it seems ambiguous, at least for some scholars, to consider flight as a form of resistance, the Gumuz have been able to maintain their moral economies and cultural identities because of their continuous flight to remote areas when the forces they had to fight, including the state, were too strong. The current widespread land acquisitions that have been claiming large tracts of land from the Gumuz appear, however, to have greatly reduced the number of areas to which the Gumuz might flee. It was through flight that the Gumuz resisted and refused to live side by side with other groups in the past. And this resonates with what Adas (1986, 64) once called ‘avoidance protest’, referring to cases in which peasants used flight as an act of social protest and a means of defending themselves from what they perceived to be exploitative conditions. Indeed, violent forms of resistance against the ongoing land acquisitions have been rare among the Gumuz. This sharply resonates with Scott’s argument based on the case of rural Malaysia in which he argued that the lack of more violent forms of resistance among the peasantry is largely ‘the result of a prudent, calculated, and historically tested choice favoring other strategies more attuned to [their] particular social structure, strengths, and defensive capacities’ (Scott 1987, 422).

4.3.1. *Official politics*¹⁶

The agitations and discontents of local communities related to land acquisitions, as expressed in various forms as discussed above, appear to be shared by some local and regional officials. As indicated earlier, in contrast to earlier regimes, local political power in the region is now in the hands of officials that belong to the indigenous ethnic groups. Some of the officials interviewed admitted their discontent over the land acquisition process although they were very cautious in voicing opinions that would identify them as being explicitly against the system of which they are a part. For example, two regional government officials interviewed in Assosa and Gilgel Beles who requested anonymity, expressed their concerns regarding the involvement of the federal government in the administration of investment lands in the region, with particular concerns over the processes and relations of power this implied (Interview, April 2012).¹⁷ The officials contended that this current trend of direct federal government intervention undermines the regional government’s authority to challenge and negotiate land transfers that may potentially affect local land rights and to promote investments based on distinct regional socioeconomic and ecological contexts. For example, as the fieldwork for this particular study was underway, there was a widely circulating rumour among both experts and *woreda* and zonal authorities related to the transfer of an area which is known for its rich woodland, water and wildlife resources. This area covers large tracts of land in both Dangur and Guba *woredas*, that is, bordered by Alatish Park in Quara of the Amhara regional state, the boundary being marked by Ayima River. Local and regional authorities contended that they would resist such an acquisition by investors if the federal government actually went ahead with it. This example indicates that local and regional

¹⁶ See Kerkvliet (2009) for a discussion of this.

¹⁷ During the interviews, especially with one of the higher officials in the zonal capital, Gilgel Beles, before starting the interview formally I was asked by the official not to record any of the discussions that we would have on the issue and for that I had to disassemble batteries from my voice recorder and hand it over together with my cellphone until we finished the discussions.

authorities seem to have reacted to some of the land deals that threaten the natural environment. However, their resistance does not seem to have changed or contributed to the rethinking of policies related to the ongoing practices of land acquisitions. It is also not in the open, as most local officials do not wish to openly speak out and oppose the political system of which they are part, but choose, rather, to be silent in order to maintain their position in office. Thus, while engaged in a form of official politics (resistance) in backstage, local regional authorities have also been working alongside the federal government in the process of land acquisition despite professing that they do not support many of its aspects. Although it seems clear that some internal dissension has been occurring within local authorities regarding land acquisitions, in practice such tensions have not been linked to the hostilities of local communities in order to reduce the latter's political and economic marginality. Of course, regional authorities, though they are recruited from local communities, are in fact 'creations' of the federal government to serve its interests. As Markakis (2011, 8) argues, although there are fundamental changes in the 'social composition' of 'political space' in the peripheral regions, the trend of soliciting the collaboration of a 'subordinate elite' in the longstanding centre/periphery relationship that could help the administration of the peripheries has not changed to this day. This is further explained in the following quote:

The imperial regime was able to secure the collaboration of traditional authorities in the conquered lands and compensated them accordingly. This class was dispossessed by the 1974 Revolution along with the entire imperial establishment, and the military rulers produced an alternative peripheral elite in the form of a 'Marxist' cadre corps to staff the state apparatus. The cadre corps in turn was ousted by the EPRDF, which then produced its own auxiliary elite in the form of a class of 'regional intellectuals' to administer the periphery. In no instance was the hegemony of the centre diminished (Markakis 2011, 11-12).

In the context of the recent large-scale land acquisitions, while the federal constitution in principle granted the regional state the authority to administer its land resources, the reality on the ground reveals that the federal government has already reasserted/recentralized its authority in administering investment lands.¹⁸ That is why the regional authorities were unable to contest the land deals committed by the federal

¹⁸ The Constitution of Ethiopia adopted in 1995 gives regional states the power to administer all land and other natural resources. However, recent rises in land values have seen the federal government recentralize the administration of land resources (e.g., investment lands) taking the power from regional states, in a move which is, in fact, contrary to the constitution. While the federal system has restored some of the autonomy of lowland areas in terms of self-administration, in practice these regions have nominal authority to administer their land resources, especially when it comes to much of the potentially cultivable and valuable land that can be brought under large-scale commercial agriculture. This is particularly interesting, as the exploitation of land resources in lowland regions was perceived on a grand scale. As Markakis (2011, 260) rightly pointed out, the recent 'process of leasing land touched the very core of the federal arrangement, since the main advantage of decentralization from the viewpoint of the periphery was to give its communities a measure of control over their land, and to prevent it being taken over by [the centre] as in the past'. Similar remarks were also made by Lavers (2012b, 814): 'Despite the creation of an ethnic federal system, which is intended to protect the rights of minority ethnic groups, recent processes of agricultural investment seem likely to continue past patterns of exploitation of the resources of minority ethnic groups for the benefit of the centre'.

government, irrespective of whether the deals had adverse implications on local communities or not. In short, the ‘Central rulers devolved authority and prerogative to localities, but local leaders often found that what they had been handed was an “empty envelope”’ (Boone 2003, 317 quoted in Markakis 2011,12).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that the Gumuz people, who are now under mounting threats from the current large-scale land acquisitions, are hostile to such acquisitions and have reacted in various ways to threats of dispossession and displacement that have already occurred or will certainly occur. Although the Gumuz seem silent, resistance is occurring. The emerging discontent of the Gumuz people, expressed in various ways are not, however, organized and structured large-scale reactions. Likewise, the Gumuz are not supported by local authorities or civil society organizations in defending their local land rights effectively.¹⁹ Despite this, the overall intention of the reactions is to challenge the land acquisitions taking place on their ancestral lands. As has been demonstrated, their reactions are not only against investors and migrant seasonal agricultural labours, but also against the state, challenging its definition of ‘development’. Such local reactions, that range from covert forms (such as destroying field crops and machineries, and attacking/killings) to more open forms (such as intimidation, refusal to comply with villagization, threats not to pay tax, and encroachment onto land already acquired by investors), are in fact illustrations of how the Gumuz have not been entirely helpless (though they do not often want to speak about their actions). These reactions are efforts to challenge the recent large-scale land acquisitions not just because of their implications for possible displacement, dislocation and disruptions to local livelihoods, but also because of the absence of economic benefits from the land acquisitions both in the present and the future. It seems unlikely, however, that the Gumuz will be able to effectively defend their land this time from the current widespread land acquisitions that involve both domestic and foreign companies with a strong connection to and support from the state. In the current context of the ongoing strong politicization of land investment undertakings involving the federal state, the disadvantages to the Gumuz and other indigenous communities stand out more clearly.

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¹⁹ Given the country’s civil society law, enacted in 2009, that appeared to severely weaken the work of civil society organizations, particularly those of human rights defenders and advocates of democratic governance, it seems very unlikely that local indigenous communities who are threatened by the land acquisitions will be supported by such organizations in defending their local land rights against the combined weight of the state and private capital (domestic and foreign). The Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 prohibits all foreign NGOs as well as those local NGOs that receive more than ten percent of their funding from foreign sources from engaging in activities pertaining to human rights and conflict.

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