

Sweeteners are not always sweet: the social and economic consequences of the growing demand for sugar in Ethiopia



Bula S. Wayessa¹

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Abstract

This article explores the recent increase in the demand for sugar in Ethiopia, and the ways in which the distribution and sale of sugar have been manipulated for political gain after the country's demand outstripped production and supply. It also examines how agro-industrial expansion programs have resulted in land dispossession and the resettlement of smallholder farmers in the southern Ethiopian lowlands who were promised better living standards through modernization. The results of this study indicate that the expansion of Ethiopian sugar projects took place not only because of the increased demand for sugar in the country, but also because of the global political economy that shapes the nature of development projects in Global South.

Keywords Sugar · Dietary change · Environmental degradation · Rural land grab · Taste preferences

Introduction

Sugar is a controversial commodity that lies at the center of debate due to its various sociopolitical and health effects (Moore et al. 2014). Sugar has transformed the socio-political landscape of societies in many parts of the world and has historical links to slavery, colonialism, and rural poverty (Campbell 2008; De Menezes et al. 2012; Mintz 1986). More recently, sugar has also become associated with land-grabbing and the forcible displacement of smallholders (Dubb et al. 2017; Lunstrum 2015). The crop was introduced into eastern Africa in the twelfth

✉ Bula S. Wayessa
bwayessa@umn.edu

¹ Department of African American and African Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA

century and was initially cultivated so that people could chew its stalk to release its sweet sap (McMartin 1961).

Although evidence shows that the crop has been in cultivation in Ethiopia since the sixteenth century, our knowledge of its origin and history of consumption is limited (Gashaw et al. 2016). Sugar, as a relative newcomer to Ethiopia, has transformed traditional food processing technologies and social practices and now rivals honey, one of the country's earliest known native sweeteners and one that played an important role in indigenous medicine, sweetening, and the production of beverages (Tafere 2015; Yadov 2013; Yineger and Yewhalaw 2007; Young 1996). Honey was traditionally used to sweeten medical plant extracts that were administered orally to treat illnesses and ailments (Teklehaymanot and Giday 2007) as well as to treat diarrhea, wounds, and respiratory infections (Ewnetu et al. 2013). In Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, it was also used in religious healing rituals (Anderson 2007) and played an important role in imperial Ethiopia. According to Zewde (1984:15), conquering forces imposed tribute on dominated polities in the process of Ethiopian state-formation that included demands for honey, which was paid to overlords and used to brew mead (*tej*), a beverage enjoyed by the nobility, chiefs, and warriors (Pankhurst 2004; Zewde 1990).

Ethiopia began to import sugar in the nineteenth century to replace native-grown sugarcane (Pankhurst 2004; Gashaw et al. 2016; Wendimu et al. 2016) and African sweet-stemmed sorghum (Rao et al. 2013). Since its introduction, sugar has become a part of Ethiopian folklore, is mentioned in traditional songs and used as a name for girls, standing as a metaphor for beauty and love. Early accounts also linked the commodity to corruption and bribery (Öazen 2004). According to Natsoulas (1984:159), *Lij* Iyasu (r.1913-1916) accused missionaries of bribing people with sugar and clothes to spy on his government and country. Ethiopia's reliance on imported sugar continued into the second half of the twentieth century, when the government – in collaboration with a Dutch Company, Handlers- Vereeniging Amsterdam – established its first sugar refinery in the Awash Valley in the eastern Ethiopian lowlands as part of Haile Selassie I's modernization plans (Behnke and Kerven 2013; Bondestam 1974). The Dutch company monopolized control of the factory, with only a 10 % share owned by the Ethiopian government, until the Ethiopian government nationalized the refineries in 1976 (Bondestam 1974). The introduction and expansion of large-scale sugarcane production soon outstripped smallholder cultivation in the country – a tradition that stretched back over 400 years. By stressing the fact that small-scale production hampered overall productivity, little attention was paid to the human cost of the modernization process (Tena et al. 2016; Wendimu et al. 2016), and small-scale sugar cultivators were denied industrial links and refused support by the government.

The overall goal of this article is to examine the growing demand for sugar as a sweetener in Ethiopia and the effects of large-scale state-operated or state-sanctioned sugar production and distribution activities. In so doing, the article contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding changes in taste preferences and the pitfalls of agricultural investment involving large- scale land concessions.

Methods

Data for this research were collected through a combination of ethnographic methods and the consultation of documentary and internet-based news outlets and journals. The fieldwork took place in the summer of 2016, and follow-up interviews were conducted later. I interviewed 55 participants from rural and urban areas, including smallholder farmers, government employees, shop owners, and researchers, who were selected using the non-probability purposive sampling technique considered most appropriate for in-depth case studies. The displaced farmers I interviewed came from the indigenous people of the Lower Omo Valley, while other participants were from Addis Ababa, Ambo, Fincha, Gimbi, Jimma, and Nekemte (Fig. 1). Participants were asked about the growth of sugar consumption in Ethiopia, the increasing cost of sugar as a commodity, and associated sociopolitical issues. They were also asked how the distribution and sale of sugar are manipulated for political gain in Ethiopia after demand outstripped production and supply in the country. I also checked documentary evidence, news outlets, and magazines against the data I obtained via interviews and observations.

Results

Ethiopia has a long history and a rich tradition of using sweeteners and flavorings in traditional dishes and recipes, and their uses have evolved over time. Since its introduction, the influence and popularity of sugar has grown rapidly, invading cultural rituals and culinary spaces. Sugar is now a significant factor in everyday food preparation and consumption.

The growing demand for sugar in Ethiopia

The increase in household consumption rates for sugar, along with the development of the confectionery and soft drinks industries, have contributed to the growth in demand for sugar in Ethiopia. Sugar is widely used as a major ingredient in preparing different cuisines and beverages (Table 1), and there is also evidence that it is replacing honey and salt. For example, Ethiopian mead, or *tej*, which was traditionally brewed from pure honey, is now brewed from a mixture of sugar and honey. Meanwhile, for the rapidly growing Ethiopian urban population, the decline of the honey harvest due to deforestation and the establishment of honey processing refineries has reduced the availability of honey in the country. Reports from farmers I interviewed in Wallaga, in southwestern Ethiopia, show that farmers have lost their honeybees following the 1980s villagization policy organized by the country's military regime (1974-1991), which forcibly resettled peasants in planned villages with the promise of improved rural communities. This policy included the forced settlement of nomads through communal farming in locations where beekeeping was forbidden or considered unsuitable. It was the scarcity of honey and the growing

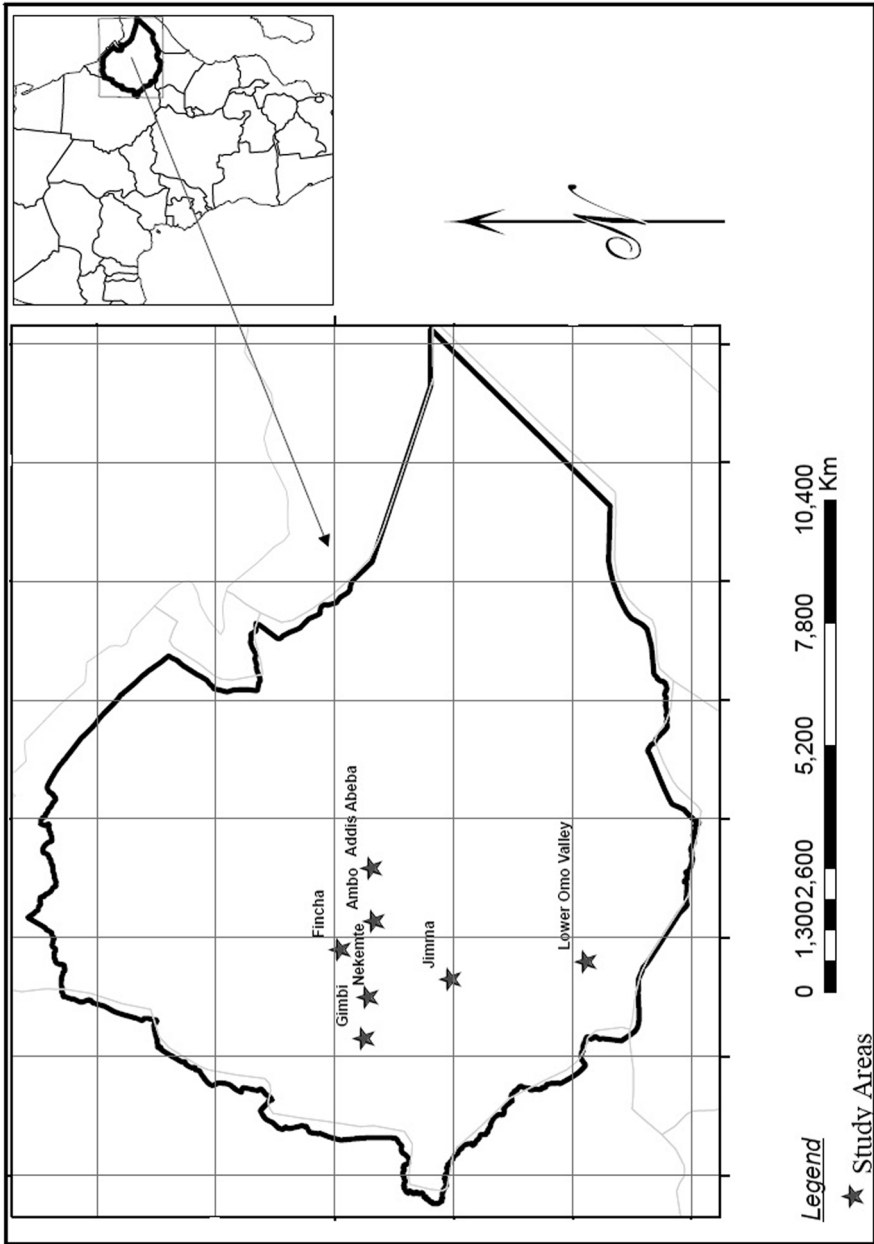


Fig. 1 Map of Ethiopia indicating locations of places mentioned in the manuscript

Table 1 Major foods, recipes, and beverages with which sugar is used in Ethiopia

Items	Brief descriptions
Coffee	Sugar is used to sweeten coffee.
Mead (<i>tej</i>)	Local beverage brewed from honey or honey and sugar. Also called <i>daadhi</i> in Oromo, and <i>myes</i> in Tigrinya.
<i>Buna Qala</i>	Prepared from opened coffee berries roasted on a fire in a pot. Pure butter with salt or sugar is added to sweeten/flatten it.
Soup	Soup is prepared from ground barley. Sugar is added to sweeten the soup.
Bread	Thick bread is baked on a ceramic griddle. Sugar is added to facilitate fermentation and sweeten the bread when baked.
<i>Keribo</i>	Roasted barley is soaked in water in a jar for a few days; sugar is added to ferment and sweeten. Later it is filtered and served.
Tea	Sugar is used as a sweetener. Sometimes they brew sugar without adding a tea plant. To change the color to amber, they roast two or three spoons of sugar and then brew it.
Gruel	Prepared from cracked barley. Sugar is used to sweeten the food.
<i>Khat</i>	A green plant whose tender leaves are chewed for recreation. Sugar is used to sweeten its aromatic but bitter leaves.
<i>Basso</i>	Prepared from the flour of roasted barely. The flour is mixed with water and sugar as a beverage.
<i>Shorba</i>	A thick broth prepared from cracked barley or wheat. Sugar is used to sweeten the drink.
Indigenous beer(<i>tela</i>)	Indigenous beer brewed from malts of cereals such as sorghum, millet, maize, and barley along with a plant known as <i>gesho</i> (<i>Rhamnus prinoides</i>). The beer is called <i>farsoo</i> in Oromo, and <i>siwa</i> in Tigrinya. Some people add sugar to improve the efficiency of fermentation.
<i>Caaachabsaa</i>	A breakfast recipe (also known as <i>chebchebsa</i>) prepared from broken pieces of unleavened bread baked from teff or barley flour. It is also called. To flavor the food, traditionally salt is added but recently people began to add honey or sugar.

public obsession with sugar that drove brewers to mix honey with sugar to prepare mead, concealing this from the consumers – although customers could often identify pure mead, which is more expensive but better in quality. I interviewed bar owners who roasted white sugar to caramelize it when making mead to disguise the fact that the mead had not been made from pure honey, although none of the bar owners directly admitted to using sugar to brew mead because they knew such an admission would affect their sales. More importantly, clients who bought honey from markets for home consumption or to make mead for sale informed me that it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain pure honey from the markets because honey traders who buy the product from farmers mix it with sugar and sell it for a high profit. Honey is more expensive than sugar, with an average price of 225 Birr (\$ US 8) and 40 Birr (\$ US 1.37) per kilogram respectively, which is the main factor that drives the blending process. Table 2 shows that of all those consulted (n=20), 8 (40%) now use a blend of sugar and honey to ferment mead. Sugar is also used to sweeten *buna qala* (slaughtering coffee). I discovered that the use of salt to season *buna qala* is now in decline, especially in urban areas, and is being replaced by sugar. I also

Table 2 Current use of Sugar compared with Honey and Salt in Ethiopia

	Sweetening Coffee	Baking bread	Fermenting <i>tej</i>	Sweetening Traditional medicine	Chewing <i>Khat</i>	Preparing Soup
Sugar alone	16 (80%)	15 (75%)	0	5 (25%)	14 (70%)	12 (60%)
Honey alone	1 (5%)	0	12 (60%)	2 (10%)	0	0
Sugar & Honey blend	0	0	8 (40%)	0	0	0
Salt	3 (15%)	5 (25%)	0	0	0	8 (40%)

N=20

discovered that people who moved to the city from rural areas wanted to drink coffee with salt, but the practice was considered odd by the urban people and is looked down upon as being backward. Salt is rarely served in coffee shops, and there is strong tendency for the new urban dwellers to switch to sugar.

According to my observations and experience, drinking coffee in Ethiopia is often part of a ritualized ceremony, and neighbors socialize over coffee to discuss current affairs and share their experiences. The coffee ceremony provides the community with a moment of unity, a resurgence of cultural identity in a globalized world, and adult family members gather at least three times a day to drink coffee – at breakfast, lunch, and in the evening before dinner. Coffee is also brewed at least twice during every meal, and after serving the first round, more water is added to the residue in the coffee pot so it can be brewed for a second time. Drinking from both rounds is part of the etiquette of the meal. On average, an adult is served three cups of coffee from the first round and two from the second. Each person is therefore served five cups of coffee during each gathering, which means fifteen cups per day. Sugar is rapidly replacing salt in these rituals, and according to interviews held during one of the coffee ceremonies in western Ethiopia, each cup of coffee is served with an average of two teaspoons of sugar, although young people and urban residents tend to use more. One of my interviewees grew up in rural Ethiopia and worked in Addis Ababa before finally returning to rural western Ethiopia. He reported that he grew up drinking coffee with salt, but when he moved to the capital, he began to use sugar to reflect the way most people took their coffee there. After moving back to rural Ethiopia, he went back to using salt.

While sugar is replacing salt in coffee consumption and brewing, my interviewees and local literature reported that sugar is now replacing honey in the sweetening of traditional medicines and to ferment and sweeten a traditional beverage called *keribo*, which is made from roasted barley and sugar. As Table 2 shows, from the population consulted (n=20), fifteen (75%) reported using sugar to sweeten the medicine, while two (10%) used honey for this purpose and the remaining three (15%) did not use sugar.

Women I interviewed in Jimma reported that *keribo* is alcohol-free and is commonly consumed on special occasions by Muslim and Pentecostal Ethiopians who avoid indigenous beer (*tela*) because of its alcohol content. Two protestant Christians I interviewed in Addis Ababa also noted that Ethiopian mead is alcoholic and told me they preferred *keribo*. Two other women I interviewed told me that people are also beginning to move from using salt and honey to sugar when baking bread and are now using sugar to prepare soup instead of the more traditional salt.

Sugar is also used to sweeten the taste of a narcotic plant called *khat* (*Catha edulis*). The amount of sugar used depends on how long a person has been using the plant and varies between regions. According to my interviewees, beginners tend to use more sugar to sweeten the taste of the leaves and stems, but as one becomes more addicted to the plant, sugar intake declines. Once again, the use of sugar is more popular in urban areas than in rural Ethiopia, and although many users argue that sugar is used to camouflage the bitter taste of the plant, some believe that chewing *khat* along with sugar enhances its hallucinatory properties, making it more satisfying. Table 2 also reflects interviewees' claims concerning the rising popularity

Table 3 Rural-Urban comparison of sugar use with coffee between different age groups

Location	Age Range	Coffee with Sugar	Coffee with Salt
N=50			
Rural	18-35(N=12)	10 (83%)	2 (17%)
	≥ 36 (N=13)	4 (31%)	7 (53%)
Urban	18-35(N=11)	10 (91%)	1 (9%)
	≥ 36 (N=14)	12 (86%)	2 (14%)

Table 4 Rural-Urban comparison of sugar use with *khat* between different age groups

Residence Place	Age Range in years	Sugar with <i>khat</i>	Sugar with no <i>khat</i>
N=50			
Rural	18-35 (N=13)	11 (85%)	2 (15%)
	≥ 36 (N=12)	7 (58%)	5 (42%)
Urban	18-35 (N=13)	8 (61%)	5 (39%)
	≥ 36 (N=12)	10 (83%)	2 (17%)

of sugar as an important ingredient in traditional cuisines and beverages. Of the total population consulted (n=20), sixteen (80%) reported that they used sugar to sweeten coffee while only one (5%) and three (15%) used honey and salt respectively for similar purposes. Meanwhile, fifteen (75%) used sugar in bread baking, while five (25%) used salt, and twelve (60%) used sugar to prepare soup and 8 (40%) used salt.

Table 3 shows that younger people tend to consume more sugar than adults. In rural areas, for example, of twelve respondents between eighteen and 35 years old, ten (83%) drink coffee with sugar, while two (17%) drink it with salt. In contrast, seven out of thirteen respondents aged 36 years old or over (53%) use salt while only four (31%) use sugar. In the urban population between eighteen and 35, 91% (ten of the eleven respondents) took sugar in coffee, compared with 86% (twelve out of fourteen respondents) aged 36 or older. Among the eleven people I spoke to aged between eighteen and 35, only one (9%) took salt in coffee, while 14% of people aged 36 or over took salt.

Table 4 shows that in rural areas, 85% of people between eighteen and 35 years of age (eleven out of thirteen respondents) used sugar when consuming *khat* and only two (15%) take it without sugar. Among the 36 and over age group, only seven out of twelve people (58%) used sugar with *khat*, and five (42%) took it without sugar. In urban areas, 61% (eight out of thirteen) people between eighteen and 35 used sugar with *khat*, while five (39%) take it without sugar. Of the twelve respondents over 36, ten (83%) used sugar with *khat*, and two (17%) did not. In general, Tables 2, 3 and 4 reflect my interviewees' responses concerning the rising popularity of sugar as an important ingredient in traditional cuisines and beverages. The data were categorized into age groups (18-35, and 36 and above), and the study was made in both rural and urban areas. The figures are interesting as they show a rise in sugar

consumption and preference among the younger population throughout the country, and a proportionally greater rise in preference for sugar in urban areas, even among older respondents. In general, more people in urban areas use sugar to sweeten coffee and *khat*, and the figure is higher among younger people. However, although the public's craving for sugar is rapidly growing, it is not the only factor driving the Ethiopian government to focus on sugarcane as an agro-industry. There are other and more intricate forces at work which will be discussed over the following sections.

The dark side of sugar

In Ethiopia, the sugarcane industry is seen as means of transforming rural livelihoods by replacing small-scale farming and pastoralism with more mechanized approaches to agriculture. Since the 1950s, sugar refineries in Ethiopia have been linked to forced displacement, deforestation, and environmental pollution because of their indiscriminate use of chemicals (Bondestam 1974). In Ethiopia's rural areas, small-scale agriculture and pastoralism are seen as less productive and as going against the interests of national economic transformation (Behnke and Kerven 2013; Bondestam 1974), an assumption that has persisted and grown since the early twentieth century. The first sugar plantation in the Awash valley was established to replace pastoral nomadism with agro-industry, resulting in the displacement of the Afar and Karrayyu Oromo pastoralists (Behnke and Kerven 2013). During the military regime, the plantations continued to expand at the expense of pastoral nomadism through further displacement and marginalization (Getachew 2001; Woldeesenbet 2020).

Like its predecessors, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), continued to focus on expanding large-scale state-operated sugar cane plantations, necessitating the construction of large dams for irrigation and the generation of electric power. The Ethiopian government has initiated and supported the expansion of existing sugar refineries including Wonji, Metehara, Tendaho, and Fincha, as well as helping to establish new initiatives such as the Arjo Dedessa, Kuraz, Kessem, Tana Beles, Tendaho and Welkait Sugar Development Projects, making sugar the country's leading state-operated industry (Fig. 2). Farmers in the Lower Omo Valley told me that they had been forcibly displaced with no offers of replacement smallholdings and insufficient compensation. All the displaced smallholders ($n = 15$) reported that they used to cultivate crops and breed cattle to support their families, but they claimed they had now become much less well-off and had lost not only the land but all the possessions they had as well. As Table 5 shows, sugarcane plantations have prevented a significant number of displaced people from accessing the resources they used to exploit as part of their livelihoods, as a result of which an increased number of people and families are reported to be dependent on food aid. Promises of clean water, health services, and electric power supply also remain unfulfilled. As Table 5 shows, the displaced peasants I interviewed ($n = 15$) in the Omo valley overwhelmingly reported that they had lost their livelihood to sugar projects and ironically could not afford sugar to sweeten their food and drink and would not be able to in the foreseeable

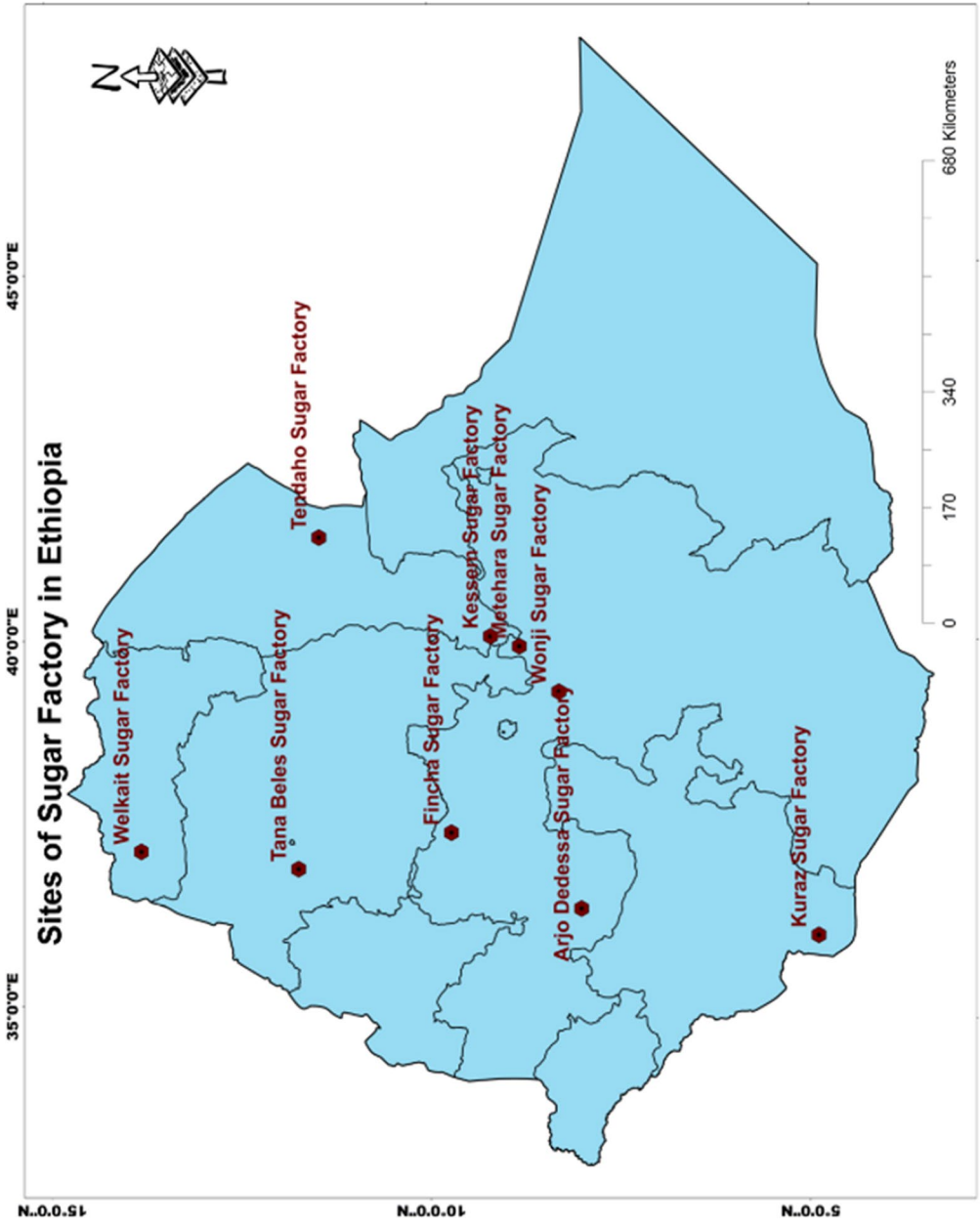


Fig. 2 Locations of major Sugar Projects in Ethiopia

Table 5 The socio-economic situations of selected smallholder farmers before and after displacement

Variables	Before displacement	After displacement
<i>N</i> = 15		
Received food aid	0	10 (66.6%)
Breed livestock	11 (73%)	2 (20%)
Access to health services	4 (27%)	5 (33%)
Access to electric power	0	0
<i>Use sugar as a sweetener</i>	0	0
Access to a water tap	0	0
Access to fishing resource	15 (100%)	0
Unrestricted access to forest resources	15 (100%)	0

future. These remarks confirm my personal observations in other areas of rural Ethiopia, where displaced people do not use sugar as a sweetener either because of its prohibitive cost or because they are not accustomed to using it.

Land is a crucial resource for rural communities, and its ownership determine socio-economic status of a person (Muchomba 2017; Quinn and Halfacre 2014). Loss of land is not only a form of economic deprivation and impoverishment but also detrimental to the social fabric of rural communities that are based on land (Terminski 2014:13). These remarks align with the situation facing displaced people of the Omo valley, whose social fabric has been destroyed by various crises caused by displacement. It has been reported that local people are the first beneficiaries of sugar projects in a process whereby agro-industrial innovation goes hand in hand with a mission of “civilizing” peasant farmers and smallholders through forced resettlement into planned villages, where they were told they would have the opportunity to replace their indigenous nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyles with a more settled way of life (Solomon 2019). The Ethiopian government justified this dispossession by claiming that the land was being inefficiently used and was mostly lying idle. However, Daniel and Mittal (2010:19) reported that locals were being forcibly displaced from land they used to cultivate and on which their livestock once grazed. Although plans may be in place to benefit the local community, the individuals ($n = 15$) I interviewed reported a significant decline in meeting their annual food needs (66.6% of them receive a regular food aid) as well as significant disruptions to their customary social events and gatherings. A researcher who is currently involved in a project on the displaced indigenous people of the Lower Omo Valley told me that their situation is frustrating as the displaced peasants have been resettled in planned villages with little or no access to farmland or fishing. They were not provided with tap water, and the nearest stream – which used to be safe for them to drink from – had either become polluted by the refineries or had been restricted, forcing them to travel for hours to collect water from other streams. In other words, the large-scale projects were not re-settling people into more developed and improved situations but were in fact depriving people of their customary lifestyles by limiting their access to natural resources on which they had relied for generations. Meanwhile, the price

of sugar and other food crops has risen dramatically in recent years in Ethiopia, and basic cereal crops have not received attention from the Ethiopian government or from investors.

Rumors that helped turn sweet to sour

The shortage of sugar in Ethiopia has had a negative economic and political effect on the state, and any failure in production is considered a weakness on the part of the government. In 2017, around 56,900 tons of sugar were needed per month to satisfy the needs of Ethiopia's population of over 100 million, but only around 44,400 tons of sugar were being produced (Bogale 2017). This difference between demand and supply resulted in a spike in the price of sugar as the government was forced to import it. This meant that most Ethiopian citizens could no longer afford the commodity, and the government responded by organizing union shops throughout the country to ration sugar on a monthly basis and by shutting down private shops that had hoarded sugar illegally and confiscating their hoarded sugar. Shortages in supply were mainly ascribed to corruption scandals involving the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation (ESC) and the Metals and Engineering Corporation (MetEC), companies that oversaw the construction and operation of the new sugar refineries (Maasho 2017).

The sugar shortages, the resulting high prices, and the exposure of government corruption coincided with a popular uprising against the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF), an alliance of four ethnic-based parties which had come to power after overthrowing the military regime in 1991. The lack of political space, the ability to express dissent, and the misuse of political power to benefit loyal individuals at disproportionate levels resulted in protest and defiance across the country. As Table 6 shows, the government manipulated many state-operated services and commodities for political reward, and sugar was one commodity that was seriously affected as a result. Of the total population consulted ($n=48$), forty-six (95.8%) reported that their political views affected their access to state-subsidized sugar. Similar observations were noticed in other government subsidized supplies and state operated subsidies. More importantly, 100% ($n=20$) of individuals handling supplies and service areas were reported to be members of the ruling political party.

Table 6 Participants' views on the correlation between political views and state operated services and supplies in southwest Ethiopia

Variables	Correlated	Not correlated
<i>N</i> =48		
Sugar	46 (95.8%)	2 (4.2%)
Food oil	39 (81.25%)	9 (18.75%)
Fertilizers	40 (83.3%)	8 (16.7%)
Urban land to build houses	48 (100%)	0
Government sponsored educational opportunities	45 (93.75%)	3 (6.25%)
Promotion in government institutions	41 (85.4%)	7 (14.6%)

National and international communities accused the EPRDF of human rights abuses and corruption, and these were used in conjunction with sugar shortages as political propaganda by homeland and diaspora-based Ethiopian activists to mobilize citizens against the government. Social media, satellite television, and websites were used to organize stay-home boycotts, roadblocks, sit-ins, and demonstrations in public squares in different regions – often coordinated to coincide on the same date and time – to give a clear message of dissatisfaction to the government. In public discourses, top political leaders were sarcastically referred to as sugar dealers and smugglers.

It was reported that some officials – especially those within the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation – collaborated with black-market operatives to manipulate sugar distribution for political and financial gain, and top political leaders became involved in corruption related to the sugar industry. The situation was exacerbated when some businessmen began to hoard sugar illegally to sell when prices rose even higher. This contributed to the widening gap between demand and supply and forced prices up even further. Over time, the sugar shortage began to take on an ethnic dimension, and activists in the homeland and the diaspora, as well as opposition parties, started blaming the EPRDF, which according to allegations had become dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The party was reorganized as the Prosperity Party in December 2019 but was still accused of condoning corruption and manipulating the market. According to my interviewees in western Ethiopia, sugar remains scarce and is not currently available in shops, and its price was higher than it is in Addis Ababa, forcing rural populations to depend on government-operated shops that demand identity cards before they will sell people sugar. Meanwhile, political dissidents are being intimidated and warned that their sugar supplies will be rationed if they continue to display anti-government sentiments.

When the resentment of people in Oromia regional state against the federal government was at its height, rumors began to spread accusing the ruling party of clandestine distribution of sugar among its loyal members. A participant I interviewed by phone from Fincha, where the sugar factory is located, claimed that sugar produced there is regularly transported to other regions even though the community in Fincha has nowhere to buy sugar because of its scarcity. Plans by the government to move sugar from the Fincha Sugar Factory in western Oromia Regional State to other parts of Ethiopia in a fleet of heavy trucks was circulated on social media (Bogale 2017; Maasho 2017), and when the trucks were about to set off from the Oromia town of Ambo, frustrated residents demonstrated, blocking the road out of the town. The township opposed the transportation of the sugar to other regions when they had no sugar of their own, and demonstrators began to unload and store the sugar in a state storage facility in the town with the intention of selling it to locals at a fair market price (Bogale 2017; Gardner 2017). The government security forces responded quickly and brutally, resulting in the killing of demonstrators that become headline news in many international news outlets, further eroding the relationship between the government and the people of Oromia and escalating a popular uprising that eventually led to a reshuffle of officials within the ruling party. As a result, Ambo town's perception of sugar has changed, and some have described the incident as a catalyst for the political reforms people have been demanding.

Discussion

This article has highlighted the recent increases in sugar consumption in Ethiopia and its intended and unintended socio-economic and political consequences. As discussed above, the reference for sugar is stronger among younger people, and there is a higher tendency toward sugar consumption in urban areas than in rural regions. Differences in rural-urban taste preferences identified in Ethiopia align with the FAO (2016) report linking rising sugar consumption with growth in urbanization, and the rise of sugar consumption in Ethiopia is also associated with the improving economic circumstances that the country has experienced over recent years (Ethiopian Investment Agency 2012). For the growing urban population, adding sugar to food and beverages is considered a new and modern trend, and the commodity is now used as a token of modernity and sophistication, especially by the younger generation who can afford the extra expense. In Ethiopia, the primary cause of urbanization is migration from rural areas to cities. As one moves from rural to urban conditions, sugar quickly replaces salt and honey. This aligns with a case study by Jamel et al. (1996: 1882) in Iraq which showed that individuals in urban Iraq crave sweetness more than their rural counterparts, and that Iraq's urban population consumed much more sugar.

In response to the crisis prompted by the gap between supply and demand (and to earn foreign revenue through export), the Ethiopian government has initiated the construction and development of more large-scale sugar projects across the country. One of the largest of these was the Kuraz sugar factory in the Lower Omo region in southern Ethiopia, an area that is traditionally home to semi-pastoral nomadic communities. The construction and operation of this project has involved the displacement of many of the Omo Valley's indigenous people, who were promised better economic opportunities and modernization through 'sedentarization' and villagization. This has effectively meant that former smallholders from the valley are now forced to work as daily laborers for the sugar conglomerates at low levels of pay and with no employment security, effectively reducing them from independent farmers to a dependent workforce (Fraser and Mousseau 2019). They have lost their customary rights to the land (farming, grazing livestock, and fishing) along with their cattle, and with them their hope for a better future – a promise they were given by the government when they were displaced and resettled in the planned villages. The perception of small-scale agriculture and pastoralism as being less productive and as not being viable for national economic transformation has persisted in Ethiopia since the twentieth century (Bondestam 1974). According to Behnke and Kerven (2013: 3), Ethiopia's first sugar plantation in the Awash valley replaced pastoral nomadism with agro-industry, resulting in the displacement of Afar and Karrayyu Oromo pastoralists. The sugarcane plantations continued to expand during the military regime, reducing pastoral nomadism through further displacement and marginalization (Buffavand 2016; Getachew 2001; Turton 2011). In a country where land has traditionally been public property, the government has now effectively taken ownership and is able to relocate

landholders any time it is considered necessary, particularly in return for lucrative investment opportunities (Rahmato 2009).

It is also necessary to consider the roles of internal historical processes and the global political economy in shaping the nature of the agricultural investment in the lower Omo valley that left the region's smallholders with so few choices. According to Lavers (Lavers 2012) and Regassa et al. (2018), large-scale investment in the Ethiopian lowlands, which are predominantly occupied by the pastoralists and semi-pastoralist communities, was prompted by a desire to consolidate the power of central government in the region and establish control over local people and their resources. It is believed that land grabbing resulted in the transformation of local agrarian environments through displacement of small-scale farmers, resulting in the "global depeasantization" and the "proletarianization" of dispossessed peasants (Adnan 2013; McMichael 2010). Ethiopia's continuing development, which is transforming previously self-sufficient farmers into a dependent workforce under an agenda of economic transformation in fact represents a localized example of state-instigated land grabs.

Meanwhile, preferential EU trade agreements gave developing nations access to European markets so that they could export sugar at a better price (van Berkum et al. 2005). Encouragement by the World Bank in the substitution of subsistence crops with cash crops (Barghouti et al. 2004) also played a role in Ethiopia's decision to expand its agro-industry sector. According to Solomon (2019), the Ethiopian government claims that the Omo Valley Dam and its attendant sugar projects, which caused a global outcry, are primarily intended to transform the peasant economy of the indigenous people in the area, although some organizations are very keen to help indigenous people remain where they are. The reality is, however, that the projects are not transforming the economy of the indigenous people of the Omo valley – at least for now (see also Fraser and Mousseau 2019).

More than three-quarters of Ethiopia's new sugar projects have failed to be completed as scheduled, leaving Ethiopia burdened with foreign loans as well as displacing tens of thousands of smallholders from their land in favor of projects that are not working properly. These failures are mainly due to corruption scandals involving ESC and MetEC, state-operated companies that oversaw the construction and operation of the new sugar refineries (see also Rahman 2018). According to Bogale (2017) and Kamski (2016), the sugar project in the Omo Valley suffered setbacks because there were insufficient human and capital resources to operate it efficiently. The government now claims that the country has decided to sell this vast state-operated agro-industrial enterprise to national and international private investors in order to increase productivity and enhance development. Meanwhile, the immediate measures adopted by the Ethiopian government to address home consumption shortages by supplying sugar to households based on a rationing system has not been without challenges. With a mixed agenda of political motivation and mitigating the soaring price of sugar, the ruling party began to control the distribution of the commodity throughout Ethiopia, using it as a political lever and as a means of silencing dissidents. The use of scarce resources and economic tensions for political leverage is nothing new to Africa. It has been identified that in the Sahel region, governments

have also manipulated economic tensions prompted by conflict over resources (Turner 2004). Meanwhile, in several other areas of Africa, economic incentives including food aid have been used as election platforms to gain political recognition (Caeyers and Dercon 2012; HRW 2010; Ikpe 2009; Ilorah 2009). As such, Ethiopia's sugar plantations – which arrived hand in hand with packages of foreign capital flow, the dispossession of peasants, and government involvement in regulating sugar distribution – have played a significant role in shaping Ethiopia's political economy and its social relationships.

Conclusion

Public craving for sugar in Ethiopia and the government's plan to modernize the country's economy through emphasizing the agro-industrial sector has had both intended and unintended socio-economic and political consequences. Since its introduction, sugar has become inextricably linked with Ethiopia's traditions and has brought changes to the traditional use of sweeteners as well as overall taste preferences. In the country's public discourse, the soaring price of sugar and government involvement in its rationing has affected the public's relationship with the government, leading to accusations of corruption towards government officials. This aligns with previously reported connections between politics and state-controlled resources as well as the accessibility and delivery of services in the country (Caeyers and Dercon 2012; Nunzio 2014). The sugar crisis has helped to erode public confidence in the country's government because of its association with corruption, human rights violations, and the forcible displacement of smallholders. Sugar development projects are one of the major causes of land dispossession in lowland Ethiopia, and have led to the forced displacement of tens of thousands of people who would otherwise have continued to practice their traditional lifestyles of pastoralism and small-scale crop cultivation. These were instead considered as an obstacle to the realization of Ethiopia's economic transformation (Regassa et al. 2018; Turton 2011). The displacement can therefore be seen as part of an ongoing global process of depeasantization and modernization, which is effectively reducing independent smallholder farmers to dependent daily laborers, depriving them of their traditional lifestyles to benefit profit-driven private and state agencies (Bondestam 1974; Hall 2011; Woldemariam 2002).

In the final analysis, displaced people who were assured a better future have been left dispossessed and offered none of the better opportunities and services they were promised. The government agenda to transform the livelihoods of pastoralists by settling them in planned villages to enhance their "modernization" has failed (Behnke and Kerven 2013; Fraser and Mousseau 2019). More importantly, while foreign investment in sugar projects is still attracting the interest of the Ethiopian government, it appears that less attention is being paid to the more vital production of cereal grain, other than encouraging the country's remaining smallholders to modernize their farming systems, and the country has now become a net importer of wheat and other cereal crops (Carlos 2021). As a result, the recent capitalization of sugar production in Ethiopia can be seen as failing to prioritize the immediate needs of the

country's citizens at the expense of fulfilling the Ethiopian government's long-term ambition of economic development through the transformation of traditional farming. It can therefore also be considered as a failed attempt to replace traditional means of production with mechanization and agro-industry under the influence of international financial institutions like the World Bank, which encourages the substitution of subsistence farming with cash crops.

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