The making of dispensable subjects in the Simien Mountains National Park, Ethiopia: the relocation of the Gich community as an example

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Abstract

The Simien Mountains National Park's (SMNP) exoneration from the List of World Heritage Endangered is the recent story of the park. It is in September 2017 that the park has restored its place in UNESCO. Significant and sustainable reduction of human population within the park was one of the four basic standards set by the UNESCO World Heritage Commission in order to undo their decision. To fulfill UNESCO's standard, the local government undertook relocations but inconsistently. By employing anthropological insights, this paper narrates the tale of the relocated Gich and Arkwazeye communities in the SMNP. The research used indepth interview, discourse analysis and household surveys. Contrary to local government's discourse on compensations, the Gich community suffered both socially and economically as a result of involuntary relocation. All the problems attached to this community are the result of the government's non-participatory relocation plan which thus has created a dispensable subject. The Arkwazeye community, on the other hand, is experiencing a relatively stable life as they have maintained all social assets they have created as a community. The paper, therefore, recommends to the local government to individually take care of the lives of the Gich community.

Keywords Relocation · Gich · Arkwazeye · Simien Mountains · Ethiopia

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Introduction

In the 19th and early 20th century, scientists were too quick to assume that the best way to conserve nature is to keep people out in the form of relocation. The relocation of people has frequently been accompanied with poverty and dispossession to improve standards of environmental protection (Tessema et al. 2012). This, in turn, has a huge impact on the administration of protected areas. Human population relocation from protected areas has been attempted in numerous nations as a means of reducing human strain on wildlife (Curtin and Prellezo 2010).

As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) has become one of Ethiopia's most renowned tourist sites due to its remarkable biophysical features, which are mixed with the spectacular ravaged highlands (Menesha and Legesse 2016). For a long time, however, both manmade and natural causes have had a significant impact on the park's condition. The number of individuals living in the park has risen considerably over time. Ultimately, the park's status deteriorated and it was placed on the blacklist as a result of this reason (Iori 2012). In spite of the ongoing conflict between the indigenous residents of the park and the endemic animals that require a large area on the one hand, and the dispute between the park administrators and residents living within the park on the other, the people living within the park complain that wildlife receives more attention than humans (Hurni 2005).

Since its inception, the park has seen its share of ups and downs. Emperor Haile Selassie's attempt to make the park an international heritage was historically registered. Equally, all the disruptions during the armed struggle between the Derg and the northern insurgents that have created immense problems were also recorded. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) ascension to power ultimately cleared the air in the park and drew government attention, which was not enough to keep it from being listed as endangered by UNESCO in 1996. Recognizing the park's importance, the government, along with other interested parties, began taking steps to expand the wildlife corridor, which was UNESCO's major criterion for removing the park from the blacklist. To realize this, some villages located at the heart of the park (such as Arkwazeye and Gich) were specifically chosen for relocation.

Arkwazeye was a settlement of some 165 households in the SMNP (Hurni 2005). Residents of the area conducted productive meetings and settled on compensation plans before moving to the nearby village of Kayit in 2009 (Tessema et al. 2012).

Gich is also some two kilometers away from Sanakaber. The terrain is starkly different from the surrounding area, and the temperature is far too cold. The air smells different yet limited because there are a few eucalyptus trees. It is quite windy. Within the park's core region, 418 houses with a total population of 2508 persons occupy more than 3000 ha of land (Iori 2012). The oldest carbon 14 isotope sample for radioactive dating in the SMNP which comes from the Gich village showed signs of a farming system and deforestation 540 years ago (Debonnet 2006). As a result, agricultural productivity was low. The aboriginal communities of Gich village were compelled to look for other large agricultural lands for their children due to

widespread environmental deterioration and rising population density. They were at odds with the park's management.

When local communities are involuntarily removed from protected areas, or when the relocation package is inadequate to meet their livelihood needs, there are always disputes between local communities and park officials (Mombeshora and Le Bel 2009). Even after the relocation, the relationship between the two parties continues to deteriorate. There have been attempts to reclaim their prior location or return to their previous economic activities. The best example is the Sariska National Park Tiger Reserve. Forced relocation was attempted, but was failed since residents returned to their homes after a year. Various complaints via different media witness the existing dissatisfaction in the minds of the displaced people (Kumar and Shahabuddin 2005).

Background

This research constitutes a comparative analysis of the *Gich* and the *Arkwazeye* communities from the socio-economic perspective they have been experiencing since relocation. The area has often been referred to as "the roof of Africa", which is, undoubtedly, a gem to all Ethiopians. The plateau is part of the Simien massif, which includes the highest peak in the country, *Ras* Dejen Mountain (4550 m altitude according to a DGPS survey in 2007 by a French-Italian) (Tessema et al. 2012). Despite being close to the equator, the highest points have snow and ice, and the nights are frequently freezing. The impressive rocky massif of the SMNP is carved by streams and canyons and flows down to grasslands (Puff and Nemomissa 2001).

In 1978, it was the first natural world heritage site designated in Ethiopia by the good effort made by Emperor Haile Selassie I (Tayachew 2016). Its magnificent landscape and its endemic biodiversity were some of the attributes of the site that attracted the attention of UNESCO to grant it recognition. Later on, various endemic fauna and flora were discovered, which elevated the worldwide significance of the site (Puff and Nemomissa 2001). Final approval of the SMNP's expansion to include the Silki, Mesarerya, Limalimo, Kidus Yared, and *Ras* Dejen Mountains within the interconnecting pathways occurred in 2007 (EWCA 2014), increasing the park's area coverage from 136 to 412 km^2. However, after the national park was labeled as an endangered site in 1996, one of the benchmarks set for the local government was to expand the territory of the park to create sufficient space for the endemic animals, including the Walia ibex (Ejigu et al. 2015).

Other than the multiple strategies and tools suggested by the management plan subsequently developed, the relocation of people is a radical measure and thus highly controversial (Menesha and Legesse 2016). A team of national and international experts on the ground in the year 2000 recommended shifting park boundaries and relocating four villages (such as *Gich*, Islam Debir, Adarmaz, and Muchila) from within the SMNP (Debonnet 2006). A joint WHC-IUCN reactive monitoring mission in 2006 recommended the *Arkwazeye* village be relocated where it would no longer block the critical wildlife corridor (Debonnet 2006). The relocation of *Arkwazye* residents in the SMNP in 2009 was successfully done and was rated good

by UNESCO and other international organizations working on the conservation of protected areas (Tessema et al. 2012).

Regarding the management of protected areas, there should be a continuous process of regional intervention and due community participation (Endeshaw 2016). The park authorities, both at the federal and regional level, have to be permanently in charge of initiating, promoting, communicating, and fostering processes designed to bring about the required changes regarding the management of the park. Developing a management plan and working for its materialization is one of the activities oftentimes carried out by the park authorities (Tessema et al. 2012). Therefore, researching the realities that encountered the *Gich* community after being relocated from their "sacred" village, as compared to other villagers relocated inside the park, is of great personal interest to me. It is also my way of contributing to the local government and to the people to rectify the mistakes committed so far.

Methodology

This research employed qualitative method using in-depth interviews, systematic observation and document analysis, considering that the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals can only be fully understood through the application of qualitative research methods. Through in-depth interviews the researcher attempted to understand the real life challenges they have been encountering since they began their new way of life in the urban. *Kebele* administrative members have been interviewed concerning those who have been relocated from their original settlement with the belief that they could understand their feelings and cultural shocks. In-depth interviews are useful for eliciting respondents' honest reflections about their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. The interviews have been conducted face-to-face in or around their homes. About 50 semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews used interview guides. All names mentioned as informants are changed names.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is another important technique used in this study for both villages and has been conducted separately. FGD is a carefully selected group of people with certain common interests and similar level of experiences for group discussions on broad public issues (Bryman and Cramer 2005). This technique is intended to offer data through open discussions and debates on the type of challenges they have been encountering while they tried to adapt themselves to the new environment. In conducting the discussions, the researcher selected few people purposely. Open-ended questions were prepared for guiding the discussions. In this case, numbers of FGD sessions were distributed equally in the selected informants. The number of FGD sessions was determined when it reached saturation level. Based on the rule of thumb, the number of people participating in each FGD varied between ten and twelve.

Most importantly multiple discourses have been analyzed from various sources. Documents like reports from the park office, magazines, discussion minutes between the Gich community and the park officials, archival records in the park office and the park management plan documents have meticulously been utilized in order to triangulate the data. The media discourses (both printed and social media) have been

used to investigate the government stance vis-à-vis the resistance from the communities under discussions. Finally, the data collected through different methods were carefully examined, cross-checked, analyzed and interpreted.

Conceptual framework of the study

The tenure security of the Gich and Arkwazeye communities in the SMNP is the main emphasis of this conceptual framework. In the context of this study, tenure security refers to the problem of resources utilization and associated conflicts in the SMNP. Local people and the government or outsiders clash frequently in national parks. Numerous reasons, including population growth, environmental deterioration, and most significantly, a government-designed and enforced relocation plan contributed to the conflicts. It is believed that local communities in the SMNP have similar characteristics (e.g., social norms shaping relationships and the degree of heterogeneity related to wealth) that strongly influence the way their members interact with one another regarding natural resources utilization.

This conceptual framework, adopted from Dorward and Omamo (2009), comprises external variables that influence situations and behaviors of actors, leading to outcomes, which then feedback to modify both the external variables and the actors and their situations.

External variables influence different decision-making actors, who interact with the environment in the SMNP. All actors have some direct and indirect interests and goals concerning the national park and play a role in tenure security. They may be direct users of the resources (the Gich and Arkwazeye villagers); they may represent an institution regulating the use and the management of the SMNP (federal, regional or local governments and UNESCO), and funding institutions. The Amhara nationalists and activists are also in the forefront when it comes to the SMNP as ethno-politics is heightening in Ethiopia. They are linked to authorities that establish guidelines for the distribution of park management and use responsibilities. Each of these institutions can operate as either a barrier or a springboard to achieve its goals, and the degree to which each rule is enforced is partly determined by the power of the institution with which it is associated.

Each actor has a specific place in the power structure as well as in a set of institutionally prescribed rights and obligations. Their rights and obligations rely on the rules, as well as each actor's capacity to influence the formulation and application of the rules. Institutions are formal and informal norms that set up a system of incentives to control how local communities behave. The interaction between institutions and actors is dynamic.

The ability of a relevant actor to ensure these rights and responsibilities is upheld, which will determine whether or not these rights and obligations are put into practice and enforced as a pattern of interaction. The degree of the compliance of actors with institutional regulations is a different but connected pattern of interaction. The actors' chosen approach determines the level of conflict, cooperation, and group activity. These aspects of interaction patterns might be viewed as objective indications of tenure security. If rights are not upheld, the likelihood that the right holder

will exercise such rights is very low, and the consequences are quite detrimental. The patterns of interaction are expected to have general outcomes in terms of perceived tenure security in the SMNP which, in turn, will transform the environment and the action arena.

Community involvement

In recent years, an enormous amount of literature has been produced on the broad subject of community involvement in natural resource management (Heltgerg 2002). One of the major areas of concern has been collaborative management of protected areas such as national parks (Quazi et al. 2008). Pluralist approaches to natural resource management in general and the management of national parks in particular are also getting researchers' due attention (Brown 2003). The move to involve people in the management of protected areas began with the assumption that if aboriginal communities are part of the problem, then meeting some of their needs and involving them in the management activities are part of the solution. Since the 1970s, people-oriented approaches have emerged and matured across the world (Brown 2003). The initial focus on involving communities in government programs for reforestation and forest protection has gradually evolved towards more devolution of decision-making power, though there are problems in practice. In contrast to the policy discourses on the concept of power distribution and genuine involvement of local communities, more recent studies show that it is far from devolving management authority to the people who actually use and need the ecosystem at the local level (Weaver and Lawton 2017).

There are differing views on who should be involved in collaborative management. One dominant view holds that the main partners should be local communities and the state authorities legally responsible for park management (More 2005). Despite the traditional claims of the people who live in and around the park, park administrations in Ethiopia normally have functional legal jurisdiction over all protected areas (Flach 2000). The Ethiopian management plan for protected areas reflects this form of collaborative management (Daniel et al. 2012). It is critical to acknowledge that different actors' goals may be irreconcilable, and that management of protected places is essentially political. Political procedures are primarily about mediating between opposing goals and achieving effective solutions. So, the existence of conflict should not be a cause for despair (Young et al. 2007).

Such community-based approaches are being perceived too restrictive as the constituencies involved in the management of protected areas become increasingly diversified. Stakeholders may include non-local parties with direct economic interests in the national parks, as well as those with less immediate interests, such as conservationists and the general public who rely on environmental services and tourism revenue. Although different interests are critical to modern protected area administration, there are legitimate concerns that appeal for pluralism and the national interest could be exploited as justifications for disempowering marginalized stakeholders, especially local communities whose rights have long been overlooked (Abbink 2012).

Calls for pluralist park management have raised questions about the need to develop processes and fora that permit stakeholder negotiation, and at the same time empower weaker stakeholders within these processes (Fisher and Jackson 1999). Despite worries about numerous conflicts of interest, it is assumed that better collaborative learning will lead to better and more sustainable administration of protected areas. Traditional management systems, on the other hand, make a significant contribution to the conservation, protection, and management of world heritage properties in the region (Fisher and Jackson 1999), and local communities should be actively involved in these activities to ensure the properties' long-term viability.

Collaborative management aims to find better approaches to assist different stakeholders involved in the management of protected areas in making collaborative decisions (Fisher et al. 2007). It is about providing the big players the most leeway possible in deciding the fate of the protected region. It would be more sustainable if local communities are involved in establishing the management plan, endorsing it, and monitoring its implementation (Li 2014). UNESCO has the upper hand when it comes to managing world heritage sites and advocates for genuine aboriginal community engagement in the area' sustainable and effective administration.

The Gich community

Gich is a Muslim-populated community, its resettlement has been a problem for four decades (EWCA 2014), but it grew more serious after UNESCO declared the park an "endangered" cultural site. Following UNESCO's decision, the prescribed restoration package boldly seeks to relocate the communities residing in the park corridor, where Walia ibex and other rare animals have been abundantly populated. The Gich village was originally offered for relocation when the Park was gazetted in 1969, but they rejected the idea when adelegation from their community visited the region and saw how unsuitable it was for their needs (Tayachew 2016). The case for its second relocation was tiresome and was accomplished in June 2016 against the will of the people and the international resettlement standards. The Gich resettlement committee was established from different groups in the government organizations to facilitate the relocation program (Iori 2012). The problem is that the committee did not win the support of local communities. Local communities are those who have been living in the Gich village before the area was established as a national park by employing their traditional ecological knowledge in natural resource management (Stori et al. 2019). The committee was established, as some argue, without their knowledge and without their full participation.

The benefits to the local population and the participation of local industry/commercial actors are rated as poor in Gich. Communities are occasionally consulted on management matters but rarely given a voice in the actual decision-making process. Where it is relevant, indigenous peoples' participation is often inadequate. The social and economic benefits that local industries may create are only partially felt by local communities. Many properties have mentioned that the development pressures could be reduced if local industries were involved (Fisher et al. 2007).

In *Gich*, agriculture was a pillar for survival, coupled with rearing animals (Hurni 2005). In the village of the main Walia ibex corridor, the local agricultural practice became a tough task as the issue of relocation came into place. They have been here since time immemorial, practicing agriculture and harmoniously co-existing with the park animals, including the Walia ibex. In relative terms, they were comfortable with the life they have been experiencing in this region due to the fact that this is the only place they know and have inherited from their ancestors. According to my informant, Biruk Gedlu, they frequently declined the call for resettlement during the Derg regime, because they have special attachment to the land where they were born and grew up.

As with many of the other sites the Walia ibex exist, wildlife is threatened by excessive livestock grazing, firewood collection, agricultural expansion and wildfires (Ejigu et al. 2015). There is an increasing pressure on many areas of the park, including the Walia ibex. There is a long tradition of raising livestock in the region, and the numbers of animals owned by local communities have been increasing. Amhara Credit and Saving Institution (ACSI) is also funding them to raise animals and support their life, and the market prices of animals are also rapidly increasing. It was found to be the most lucrative field in the region until the decision for relocation is in place.

"The park is our clothing and bread", says one informant who had been living in Gich for four decades and above. "We have no problem with animals living here and we quitted hunting years ago because we know that their existence determines the status of the park. It would have been good to see more investment in the village as a result of our efforts. However, our efforts to negotiate with the park officials did not bear fruit and our tenure security in the park is ruptured at the expense of wild animals."

They stated that they had avoided poaching because they understand that it harms the number of wild animals and would have negative impacts on their life. Though there has been subsistence poaching, the youth, Leul Maru, informed me angrily that "we have gone from rampant poaching to nearly nothing because our community leaders provide us with information that helps us find the culprits. The park officials, on the other side, admired it as well, but claimed that it was not enough. It took a long time to get to this position. It is the outcome of the team's continuous community awareness-building operations, which include park officials and opinion leaders."

However, life in the urban areas is becoming so difficult and hard to adapt to for this group of people who did not have any alternative livelihood experience except agriculture. In household surveys, the researcher observed many individuals being bed driven since they stay at home without work day in day out. This resulted in their falling down in physique and being liable for diseases. Debark, a recently blossoming town, filled with local and international tourists, is famous for its crowdedness, and has been criticized as everything has skyrocketed. Informants say that the market seems established for tourists. In the FGD, it is found that there are no open spaces, unlike the countryside that enable them to hold performances and experiences of all kinds, especially during holidays. This really resulted in frustrations of

most of the relocated people. One of my informants in Debark, Endale Tiruneh, told me his affection to his village that he has recently and unwillingly abandoned:

There are numerous reasons why I prefer my hamlet, Gich, where I previously stayed. I'm always amazed at how convenient its surroundings are. My food and drink is the air itself. In Gich, I can go days without eating, but not in this place. I regret abandoning my emotional and psychological ties to my forefathers and mothers. Another cause is the optimism of my village neighbors who do not worship money. People can be seen murdering you in the middle of the town at midday if they see stuff in your pocket. No one intervened. My people are known in sharing a loaf of bread and sacrificing themselves for others. I can't wait to go back where my dreams are made.

Because their arrival in the town was unplanned and dispersed among unfamiliar groups, they found it difficult to find an organization through which they could effectively serve and be served. What they have developed over many years as a community is damaged, and their common existence in the village is uprooted (Endeshaw 2016). They are now trying to establish a new *kebele* and to integrate themselves with the people in the town, who are unfriendly to them. During the FGD, one of the participants, named Berie Misganaw, explained that they are experiencing terrible life in this recently becoming "suffocated town". Due to the ongoing conflict in the region between the federal government and the Tigray Regional State, tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDP) are temporarily sheltered at Debark that heightened their daily cost for subsistence and created cultural shocks. He claimed that "it is the former Gich villagers who suffered most due to lack of other livelihood strategies". He even went far to criticize the urban culture pertaining to celebrating big religious holidays. In Gich everyone was accustomed to invite others for either lunch or dinner at home and was rotating for less than a week. Berie blamed that "people here are eating locked at home", which is not an acceptable behavior. Despite the government's commitment, alternative livelihood methods have yet to be implemented for ex-Gich villagers in their new settlement. ECWA administration has repeatedly said that alternative livelihoods are being identified and action plans are being developed (EWCA 2014), yet nothing has changed. This ultimately forced them to rethink how they accepted the relocation proposal.

The Arkwazeye community (Fig. 1)

Arkwazeye was a small market place located in critical wildlife corridor areas of the park between Bwahit and Silik Mountains. In 1985 when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) arrived in the region, the battle between the government and the insurgents began. The local population started to settle in this market by taking advantage of the political unrest. According to archival sources, the market saw the permanent settlement of roughly 300 households starting from 1985. In addition to this, a sizable number of visitors came from various places on each market day. The expansion of the market place and settlement in

Fig. 1 The Arkwazeye market during the rainy season. Source: Park Office Gallery, 2022

Arkwazeye highly affected the natural resource of the park as the livelihood of the community depended on it. This led them to be a subject of relocation.

The residents of *Arkwazeye* village have thus been relocated to Kayit, which is within a few kilometer radius of the old village in the same geographic area with the same altitude, facing no threat of malaria or any strange diseases. Moreover, the people who are found in the new village have the same culture, religion, and language as the relocated people, and the norms, social organizations, and many cultural and social set-ups as well (Tessema et al. 2012), which cause no cultural or identity crisis for the relocated people.

The relocation of *Arkwazeye* people into *Kayit* has had a positive social impact on the people. Almost all the respondents to the survey replied that there are better social services in the new village than in the previous one. Some of the social services that were mentioned by the respondents included education, health, and water. There is one elementary school in the new area, one health post, and one hand-drilled well. According to the residents, school-aged students are now able to be enrolled and learn up to grade eight. Residents are now provided health services from their nearby health post, which enables them to maintain their personal and environmental hygiene and get clean drinking water (Teshome et al. 2021). The lesson that can be drawn is that as long as we provide a good option to the people who live around the park, there is no reason why they should become obstacles to this park (Abebe 2018). The problem is that the mechanism engineered to make people stay away from the park seems like a temporary solution. If they make people settle a bit away from their original place, they should not be denied at least something similar to their previous standard of livelihood. Continuous awareness is also another means of protecting this park.

Conflicting views on the Gich relocation

As there are multiple stakeholders in the park, divergent views have been developed in the day-to-day discourse of all stakeholders.

The government positions

The Ethiopian government has indicated a comprehensive and absolute commitment to adopting the UNECO recommendations for the park's exoneration through competent park management mechanisms. They claim that proper conversations and agreement on the relocation's objective and compensation for the people have taken place. However, there has been no public debate over the necessity for relocation outside of the park, with the exception of how to accomplish the regional government's relocation plan without true community input. Local residents' interests appear to be unimportant, and any problems that arise as a result of the forced removal can be resolved through compensation. It is, according to detractors, an instance of classical governmental arrogance. The regional government stated their positions on numerous occasions. In 2017, *Ato* Gedu Andargachew, the then president of the Amhara Regional State, vowed the successful relocation of the Gich community based on their will. In his message through the regional Bekur Magazine in October 2017, he congratulated all who had been involved in the process. His piece of message is cropped in the magazine as follows:
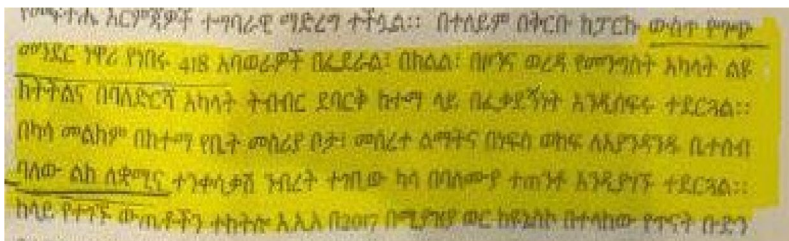
Lit. With the active cooperation of all stakeholders, ranging from the federal government to the woreda level, those who had been inside the park in the Gich village, a total of 418 homes, have voluntarily been relocated to Debarak. According to the study, compensation is provided in the form of a suitable sum of money for house construction in the town, infrastructure and financial compensation for fixed and mobile assets. UNESCO has removed the park on the blacklist as a result of this effort.

The rest of the message promised that their active participation will gradually solve all of the challenges related with the relocation. There is no mention of opposing viewpoints and alternate relocation sites within the park in this well-intentioned official briefing, as with the Arkwazeye village. People's aspirations and narratives

are not taken seriously since they are deemed as uneducated and uninformed peasants, and they are also not yet benefiting from national economic progress, which is largely thanks to tourism-generated cash. All state institutions and the ruling party follow suit. The state media and the pro-government websites simply applauded the government's stance. The Amhara Mass Media Agency has attempted, in a limited way, to address the views of the locals.

The Simien Mountains National Park scouts

The scouts' job is to keep an eye on what's going on in the national park, conserve the species and biodiversity, and educate the locals about conservation, sustainable resource management, and tourism hospitality. When it comes to the Gich community's relocation, they support the local community. They have more information regarding the budget allocated for this initiative as well as the amount it has decided to offer to the people. They are informally complaining about the regional government's "mischief". For the past ten years, Fekadu Girmay (not his real name) has worked as a park scout. In the SMNP, particularly in the Gich village, he claimed that "the government is gambling with the lives of hundreds of homes by withholding the fair portion of these people assigned by UNESCO. At the sacrifice of hundreds of lives, the government diverted the funds to other uses."

The Amhara nationalists and activists

The most serious objection against the government's activities comes from this group. The internet is the major site for debate and opposition, mainly the social media. Though they did not bring any practical changes, they have amassed a large number of followers and frequently asked the *woreda* administrators to organize a peaceful demonstration for the justice of the *Gich* community. This group has a balanced view that demands the *Gich* community to calm down and try to adapt to the life in the new area for the advantage of the park, while asking the government to fully compensate and grant alternative livelihoods as promised. The extract from the Facebook page proves that this group has been doing their best to protect the rights of the *Gich* community.

The paradox is that in 2018, the park was fired and immense damage has happened. The temporary evidence collected by the police officials shows that the fire was caused by those who had been dissatisfied by the involuntary relocation. Due to the livelihood pain the people are experiencing in the town, they have gained the attention of the Amhara nationalists and activists on social media. In September 2018, a call to resistance was circulating on social media, instigating that all Amhara communities should take the case as a serious one and contribute to the struggle for justice. The call was made not only to the Amhara compatriots, but also to the Gich community, urging them to wait for the outcome of the campaign and abandon their plans to return to their village, which would benefit no one.

The position of the Gich community

The position of the *Gich* community was discussed last, because, characteristically, little is known about their opinions, whether their exact relationship to the area they have been living in for a long time or their view points. They were not asked about other alternatives, and yet, no one speaks for them. They are the major stakeholders, in terms of both numbers and influence on the natural environment. Though many consultation meetings were organized again and again, all were fruitless due to the prescriptive agendas the government brought to the community without any room for taking the views of the locals. It is simply a top-down mode of consultation that denies the relevance of the views of the locals. They are not even recognized as natives by the government when it comes to translating UNESCO's recommendation. Their views as aboriginal communities on the land are not listened too.

They themselves claim that they have significant emotional and psychological ties to the location because of the legacy left by their forefathers, who founded the community and the region. They finally and hopelessly say that "at least we need enough compensation". My informant, Ayanaw Mamo, told me that "I don't think the government likes these people, so they are going to destroy us as a community." My interviews conducted in 2016 revealed their great apprehension about the uncertain future, with a rejection of the government's promise to enable them to start businesses in the town and even fears of family disintegration as a result of poor livelihood in the town. Their fear of urban life becomes true as they are seriously struggling with the social shock and the absence of appropriate social institutions that could accommodate their customs.

The park may benefit this community after benefiting the national government from tourism income through a trickle-down effect, but the discourse of belittling the people and seeing their sacrifices unquestionably as necessary for the greater good recalls the long historical experiences of suffering that rural Ethiopians have endured (Rahmato 2009). This condition of suffering may enter a new phase, affecting aboriginal communities in the protected areas. The different groups of proponents rarely meet in a shared discursive space, despite the efforts to redefine and reshape reality. Neither is there a legal process for negotiating the plans and adapting to or confronting customary laws and local practices that have been resilient for so long: state policy is a non-negotiable space. The most serious limitation on the government' side is that it failed to take lessons from the previous attempts at relocation in the SMNP. Their lack of interest in doing so and shortcomings in analyzing the lessons are now backlashing against the park.

The making of "dispensable subjects"

The Ethiopian state, which calls itself a "developmental state", confirms the aboriginal population as a barrier to growth and a skeptic of change. They are thought to have little or no unique input to make. As Scott (1998) puts it, their practical or metis knowledge is regarded irrelevant. Displacement, re-education, and training

might be used to improve their status and purported socio-cultural "backwardness", allowing them to "partake" in modernity and development. Because their customary livelihoods have been declared "unsustainable" by state leaders and policymakers, there is no tolerance for them.

In return to his pioneering analysis of "seeing-like-a-state mechanisms" (Scott 1998) while discussing the creation of "dispensable subjects", Scott claimed that four characteristics are typically recognizable in state efforts at social engineering and making subject populations "legible" to the state: (a) a simplified, administrative ordering of nature and society; (b) a high-modernist ideology geared toward the expansion of production, the use of a "scientific-technical" approach and planning, and a quest to master nature; (c) an authoritarian state willing to use coercive power to achieve its aims; and (d) a prostrate civil society incapable of effectively resisting those plans. There is no exaggeration to suggest that these prerequisites have been met in Ethiopia. This will also underline the disempowerment of local people (who are not enabled to take the lead in rural development) and thus confirm their subject status. The concomitant result is that the state' subjects are, in a way, dispensable, or as Li (2014) suggested, "surplus": they have little political autonomy and are accorded only marginal agency – at least in the SMNP constituencies.

Conclusion

Relocation is a common practice in Ethiopia for a variety of reasons, one of which being conservation. The relocation process in the SMNP was clearly stipulated by UNESCO. The attempt to negotiate and secure the support of local communities was constantly at the forefront, as shown in the community relocations of Arkwazeye and Gich. However, in the former scenario, the consequences of continual discussion and negotiation bore fruit, whereas in the latter one, they did not. The relocation of the Gich community to Debark and other surrounding settlements was arduous and did not happen overnight. It eventually satisfied the regional government because it was followed by the park's exoneration, but has not yet satisfied the community. They accuse the government of providing insufficient compensation and, more importantly, of forcing them to leave a location to which they have an inexplicable attachment. The former Arkwazeye residents were less apprehensive about transferring due to improvements in services and infrastructure. For the Gich villagers, it is the inhospitable urban socio-economic environment that causes discomfort and frustration.

Therefore, while relocation is a necessary evil that the government must do, this study suggests that post-relocation measures and promises of alternative livelihoods be carefully reexamined and financially secured. The Gich community should receive all feasible life skills training in order to make a successful transition to urban life. The government should keep a close eye on the lives of those who have been relocated and provide considerable assistances.

Availability of data and materials Not Applicable.

Declarations

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Consent for publication Not Applicable.

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Comments