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Beyond Capital and Commodity: Exploring the Notion of Land among Indigenous Farmers and Land-related Conflicts in Addis Ababa Peri-urban Areas

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Abstract

One of the primary challenges in addressing land-related conflicts is the divergent notions of land held by various actors. In the modern urban context, land is valued as a crucial economic resource, serving as capital to invest in or as a commodity to buy and sell for profit. Most existing studies and discussions on land also view it as a resource for the economy, overlooking its social, cultural, political, and religious values. This paper explores the notions of land among Indigenous farmers in Addis Ababa peri-urban areas (AAPUA) and their implications for land-related conflicts. The study employed a qualitative approach and used key informant interviews and focus group discussions to generate data from the participants. The findings show that for the indigenous farmers in AAPUA, land is categorized into five types based on the notions and values attached to it as "qe'ee" (homestead), "maasaa" (farming land), "tifkata" (grazing land), "abdaari" (sacred land), and "bakka-awwala" (graveyards). As part of the larger Oromo culture, land is considerably more than just an asset, source of income, and commodities for the indigenous farmers in the study areas rather they have profound ties to their lands as sites of social, cultural, and religious significance; they also serve as repositories for ancestral spirits, sites for sacred rituals, and historical landmarks that bind an individual to a specific location. Land is a status symbol that goes much beyond its economic value for farmers. In the study area and beyond, the land is an instrument of political power and control for the government, while it's just capital and commodity for private business. Thus, the divergent notions of land amongst the key actors have caused and perpetuated land-related conflicts in the study area. The paper recommends that the appeal to end land grabbing and the displacement of farmers in AAPUA should go beyond ensuring the evicted farmers receive financial compensation. The government must enact a law that protects the indigenous farmers' rights while appropriating land for development projects and urbanization.

Keywords: Addis Ababa Peri-urban area; land-related conflicts; land; Oromo

1. Introduction

Land ownership and use conflicts are a global occurrence (Borras & Ross, 2007). Land disputes are the primary cause of most violent conflicts (UN Secretary-General, 2019). State violence and opposition from those impacted by the conflict are often present in these conflicts. Borras and Ross (2007) claim that in the process of obtaining land for urban development, both state and non-state actors commit acts of violence against impoverished peasants. There are many different kinds, levels, and intensities of violence. It can be as extreme as genocidal acts, as in Rwanda, or it can be as low-key as a landlord utilizing the state legal system and the police to intimidate peasants, as is the case in modern Brazil, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Egypt. The use of paralegal military force, as in Colombia, to kill progressive (agrarian) activists falls somewhere in the middle (Borras & Ross, 2007). Among the most frequent land-related human rights abuses are violent conflicts over territory and land, forced evictions from homes and land, loss of access to natural resources and livelihoods, and dispossession of homes and land (UN-Habitat, 2018, p. 9). Land conflict is connected to broader processes of material change, political power, and historical convergence, even while it is a local occurrence with deep roots in local histories and social interactions (Simmons, 2004, p. 187).

Land-related disputes in large cities' peri-urban areas are spreading throughout the world. The demand for land in peri-urban areas has increased due to the large cities, especially metropolises, boundaries into these areas with the fast rise of the urban population in the twenty-first century. Widespread land tenure changes in a particular system of institutions, rights, and connections are the outcome of this process, which runs against the idea that land is a finite and necessary resource. According to Dadashpoor and Somayeh (2019), there is a persistent risk of land conflicts in peri-urban areas due to these developments. These conflicts often result in complex, violent, and unstable livelihoods.

The different perspectives that different players have on land are one of the biggest obstacles to resolving land-related conflicts. The land is valued as a significant economic resource in the modern urban setting, either as capital to invest in or as a commodity to buy and sell for a profit. The majority of land conflict research studies see land as an economic resource. Most of the time, people ignore the land's social, cultural, political, and religious/ritual significance. Researchers and policymakers have a distorted understanding of the problem, which has led to the commoditization of land. According to Derman et al. (2007), land resources are more than just resources, means of subsistence, and goods; they are also places where ancestral spirits are kept, where holy rites are performed, and historical sites

that tie a person to a particular place. In Oromo culture, for example, land is considerably more than just a source of income; farmers have profound ties to their lands as sites of social, cultural, and religious significance. Land represents the connection between the current generation and their predecessors and is a status symbol. These attachments go much beyond the economic value of the land. The Oromo equate their physical bones to their land. Farmers being forced out of their land amounts to detaching them from their true selves, since the eviction results in more than just a loss of economic benefits. The previous studies tried to deal with the socio-economic impact of land dispossession in the peri-urban areas (Dejene, 2011; Firew, 2010; Teshome, 2014), also the most recent studies were limited to the issue of the Master Plan and related protests that led to the 2018 power realignment within the then ruling party (Abera, 2019; Bula, 2020; Gutu, 2019; Yonatan, 2020; Zelalem, 2018), without giving attention to the divergent notions and meanings of land for the farmers and other actors involved in land related conflicts in the area.

The main objective of this paper is to explore the notion of land among Oromo farmers in the Addis Ababa peri-urban areas and its implications on land-related conflicts in the AAPUA. The paper makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of land-related conflicts in the AAPUA by highlighting the importance of considering the diverse notions of land held by different actors. The focus on the cultural and spiritual dimensions of land use is a valuable contribution by connecting these notions to the specific context of the Oromo community in the AAPUA.

The remaining part of this article is structured into four parts. The first provides a brief review of the literature focusing on the land and notion of land in traditional societies. The second contextualizes the study by unveiling the background of Addis Ababa's complexities, while the third discusses categories of land according to farmers in the Addis Ababa peri-urban area. The fourth part analyzes the implications of the divergent notion of land on land-related conflicts in the Addis Ababa Peri-Urban Area. Finally, the conclusion and recommendations are provided.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Notion of Land, Urbanization, and Conflict

Land, according to Karl Polanyi, is a "fictitious commodity" that cannot be reduced to a factor of production or an item of exchange (Polanyi, 2001). Polanyi's definition of 'land' is broad, encompassing many aspects of nature. Polanyi argues, "Land invests man's life with stability; it is the site of his habitation; it is a condition of his physical safety; it is the landscape and the seasons." (2001:

187). As a result, it has significant non-economic dimensions, such as social, political, spiritual, and environmental. This implies that even if individuals or families buy land on the open market and secure private property rights, they will not necessarily treat it as a commodity subject to strict economic valuation. Thus, Goodwin (2021) shows that land has multiple non-economic dimensions, emphasizing the importance of the concept of fictitious commodities and cautioning against reducing land conflicts to purely material struggles.

As has been widely acknowledged, the land is unlike any other entity. Land, unlike a mat, according to Li (2014), is not portable. Because of this non-portability, land can have multiple uses, values, and meanings, including the ability to sustain human life (Li, 2014: 589). The land is profoundly social and inextricably linked to ingrained power, authority, and status relations. It is both a commodity with the potential to be exchanged in equivalence with other commodities or money and a highly potent marker of singularity vis-à-vis others, particularly those without land. It is materially distinct from other commodities in that it cannot be rolled up and moved, and it has multiple meanings and uses.

While there is a thriving market for land, as Majumder and Gururani (2021) argue, the meanings and value of land tend to exceed the registers of exchange. It retains an affective value that weaves notions of personhood into it, making it difficult to define land as a commodity in isolation. With significant de-agrarianisation and declining agricultural value of land, the historical value of land bestowed on landholding households and castes has decreased. The authority and control relationships that aided agricultural production have also deteriorated.

Traditional and modern societies have different notions of land. In traditional societies, the land is a common good that cannot be sold or alienated, whereas, in a modern free market economy, it is a commodity that can be exchanged; its value and price are determined by supply and demand, as well as an underlying sense of potential benefits (Verheye, 2009). Land, like labor and capital, is a factor of production that represents property for the latter. According to Santos (1993), land is life for indigenous peoples; it not only meets the physical needs of indigenous peoples. Furthermore, it serves as a link from the past to the present.

As Goodwin (2021) aptly argues, the development of capitalism in the Global North has encouraged perspectives of treating land as a commodity and subjecting it to economic valuation. According to Goodwin (2021), as a result of capitalist expansion, a hybrid land regime emerged, with landowning

elites, medium-sized farmers, and agro-industrialists primarily subjecting land to economic valuation and exchanging it at market prices, and indigenous peasants primarily assigning alternative meanings and values to land and circulating it primarily through family and community institutions.

In addition to serving as a habitat and a source of resources for African indigenous peoples, the land has a variety of cultural and social meanings (Moshoeshoe II, 1993). As Alao (2007) aptly argues, the land is without a doubt Africa's most important natural resource. Its significance extends beyond economic resources to include social, spiritual, and political implications. It is regarded as a place of birth, a place where ancestors are laid to rest, a place designated by the creator to be passed down to successive generations, and the final resting place for every child born on its surface.

The studies of land tenure and resource management in peri-urban contexts reveal complex interactions between urbanization, customary practices, and formal governance structures. Peri-urban areas, characterized by the transition from rural to urban land use, present unique challenges regarding land tenure security, resource access, and social equity (Dadashpoor & Ahani, 2019; Simon, 2008).

The Customary land tenure systems, deeply rooted in social and cultural norms, often clash with formal land administration systems in peri-urban areas. This can lead to land disputes, tenure insecurity, and challenges for urban planning (Ahani & Dadashpoor, 2021; Ansah & Chiqbu, 2020). Studies in African countries such as Ghana (Akaateba, 2018; Akrofi, 2013) highlight the complexities of navigating customary land tenure in rapidly urbanizing areas.

Urban expansion often results in the acquisition of peri-urban land, displacing local communities and disrupting traditional livelihoods (Achamyeleh, 2020; Adigeh & Abebe, 2023). This process can exacerbate existing inequalities and create new forms of social vulnerability (Fraol & Dagnachew, 2023; Hendriks, 2008). The peri-urban areas are characterized by competing demands for land, including agriculture, housing, industry, and infrastructure (Bonye et al., 2020; Simon, 2008). This competition can lead to environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and social conflict (Wubie et al., 2021).

The studies examine the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping land tenure and resource management practices in peri-urban areas (Laquinta & Drescher, 2000; Simon, 20225). This includes analyzing the interactions between government agencies, traditional authorities, and local communities (Geyer, 2025; Johannes, 2023). These studies also explore the power dynamics that influence land

access and resource control in peri-urban areas (Achamyeleh, 2020). This includes examining the role of elites, developers, and other actors in shaping land use decisions.

2.2. Unveiling the Background of Addis Ababa's Complexities

The Addis Ababa city was established in 1886. Its name, Addis Ababa, literally means 'new flower', and was widely believed to be named by Empress Taitu after the flower of mimosa trees she found around *Filwoha* (hot water) springs, where the earliest settlement of the city was started (Pankhurst, 1961). Currently, Addis Ababa city is the political capital and the most important economic center of Ethiopia. It's a contested city whose historical, demographic, geographical, political, and socio-cultural issues of the city are subject to contradictions and conflicts. The conflict over the city begins with its nomenclature; while the settled urbanites call it *Addis Ababa,* the Oromos call it *Finfine*. As Yonatan (2020) argues, those nomenclatures are not neutral designations; rather, it is rooted in the contestation over ownership of the City. Those who opt to refer to the City as *Finfine* claim that it belongs to the Oromo, while those who call it Addis Ababa reject the language of ownership. Indeed, the use of the name 'Addis Ababa' in this study isn't intended to endorse such a position. Long before it became the capital city of the Ethiopian Empire, the area was inhabited by the Oromo peasants. Different Oromo clans, such as Galan, Gulale, and Eka of Tulama Oromos, inhabited the area (Getahun, 2000). The making of the capital city involved the dispossession and eviction of the Tulama Oromo from their *land*. The Oromo clans, who were indigenous occupants of the area, disappeared. The Addis Ababa city was created and expanded by displacing and dispossession of Oromo farmers, through 'frontier making in or from Addis Ababa' (Asebe & Teshome, 2023). Such historical injustice is the source of grievances that call for the restitution of the Oromo to their rightful place (Milkessa, 2021).

Demographically, the population of Addis Ababa is estimated to be above 4 million, out of which close to half of the population (47.5 percent) belongs to the Amhara ethnic group while the Oromo account for just under 20 percent of the population followed by the Guraghe that account for about 16 percent of the population (Central Statistical Authority, 2007). At the national level, the Oromo are the largest ethnic group, accounting for 34.49 per cent of the population, followed by the Amhara (26.89 per cent) and the Somali (6.2 per cent), and the Tigray (6.07 per cent). Given the fact that the Oromo are the largest ethnic group accounting for about 35 percent of the Ethiopian population; the Oromo being the indigenous inhabitants of the city and also from time to time as the city expands it

includes (assimilates) Oromo farmers into the city; and on the top of that the city being surrounded by the Oromo communities that were conventionally expected to attract many Oromos to flow to the city from nearby rural areas; the Oromo remaining so low in the city speaks loudly that there is some form of contradiction between the City and the Oromo nation.

One of the latest phenomena that revealed the complexity of conflict over land surrounding Addis Ababa is the problem that occurred following the introduction of the new master plan of the city in 2014. The radical attempt in the history of Addis Ababa city's expansion was made in 2014 when it announced its readiness to implement what it called the "Addis Ababa Integrated Regional Development Plan"; known as the "Master Plan" which proposes to integrate most of the city's surrounding areas within 100 km radius into Oromia. The Master Plan that was meant to expand the capital city by encroaching into the territorial jurisdiction of Oromia by potentially dispossessing and displacing the people residing in the peri-urban areas of the city, who are mostly farmers whose livelihoods depend on access to land, has led to one of the major deadly popular protests against land dispossession in the modern history of the country (Bula, 2020). If implemented, the Master Plan would have fundamentally reconfigured access to land. This would have immediate implications for the livelihoods of the people while promoting contentious and long-term demographic and socio-cultural changes in the region. The master plan was viewed by some as a program for 'ethnic cleansing' (Aberra, 2019). Similarly, others described the Master Plan as a "Master Killer" (Gutu, 2019). Bula (2020:73) argues that the Master Plan is "politically motivated land grabbing". Competing conceptions of land, property rights, and resource control between the federal state and settlers in the city, on the one hand, and local agricultural communities on the outskirts of the city and the Oromo people generally, on the other, are at the heart of the dispute (Asebe & Teshome, 2023).

The cumulative effect of the events set in motion by the protest over the city expansion into surrounding peri-urban areas ultimately forced the government to declare a state of emergency in October 2016, after which the protest subsided but never stopped. The chain of events prompted by the Oromo protest triggered by the Master plan forced the government to impose another state of emergency in 2017. The popular protests and uprisings instigated by the expansions of the city have exposed the fragility of peace and stability in the country (Gutu, 2019). Also, the conflict over land in Addis Ababa following the master plan conflates multiple political, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental questions. Following the deadly protests, the master plan was shelved. However, shelving of the Master Plan did not stop the continuing conflict over the land around the city (Bula,

2020:72). The resistance against the Master Plan mobilized people from far beyond the territorial reach of the Master Plan. One of the dominant slogans of the protesters was "*lafti keenya lafee keenya"* (Our land is our bones). In the analysis of the conflict related to land in the study, one of the missing links is the attention given to the notion of land by various actors in the conflict in general and by the farmers in particular.

3. Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring complex social and cultural meanings associated with land. Both primary and secondary data sources were collected. This study is based on data collected from Addis Ababa Peri-urban Areas -Tulu Dimtu, Koye Fache, and Bole Arabsa areas- selected purposively due to the areas' unique features as the city's main expansion areas where farmers' land dispossessing, government appropriation of land, and urban informal settlers land occupation happens simultaneously. These areas are found at southern, and southwestern part of the city which is the main expansion areas of the city due to the mountainous ranges, deep gorges and the hills raised in between the gorges in the northern, western and eastern border of the city that have played a decisive role in restricting and shaping its' expansion direction (Dandena, 2008). The key informant interview and focus group discussions were conducted with Indigenous farmers, local government officials, cultural experts, house developers, and land brokers who were selected purposively. The study used in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions to generate primary empirical data from these sources. A total of forty interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted with purposively selected participants based on information richness about the cultural values and engagement in land-related business. The collected data were transcribed, translated, and thematically coded and analyzed. Finally, the secondary data were collected from published and unpublished sources, including government documents and academic literature.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Categories of Land According to Farmers in Addis Ababa Peri-Urban Area

The land in the Addis Ababa peri-urban areas is categorized into five by the indigenous Oromo farmers based on their functional values. These are "qe'ee" (homestead), "masa" (farming land), "tifkata" (grazing land), "abdaari" (sacred land), and "bakka awwala" (graveyards). Let's look at each as follows;

The "qe'ee" is a dwelling with its land and buildings, occupied by the owner, or any dwelling with its land and buildings where a family makes its home. The homestead is the focal point of socioeconomic activities and traditional cultural heritage for the Oromo nation in general and indigenous people in Addis Ababa's peri-urban area. The *"qe'ee"* is a symbol and lifestyle of self-sufficiency and independence of a given household in the study area. An informant explained the nature of "qe'ee" by comparing with condominium housing in the area emphasizing self-sufficiency as follows; "*Kondominiyeemin kun bakka bultii yoo taate male "qe'ee" hin taatu. Raafuu dhabbanna haa ta'u iddoo asheeta hin qabdu. Xeena addamini dhumallee eechaa dhaabbatu jarana?*", literally translated as "The condominiums may be a shelter to pass the night at but cannot be *"qe'ee"*. It has no plot to plant cabbage and neither plough seeds consumption. Where do plant even medication plats?" (Abebe, Interview). In the view of this informants the condominium lacks every quality of the *"qe'ee"*.

The researcher's field experience notes that a typical *"qe'ee"* consists of single or several houses for single or joint families, as well as gardens ('*oddoo*'), yards for communal activities, cattle shed (*moora looni*), threshing ground ('*ooddii*'), ponds ('*eela*'), fruits and/or shed trees, and is separated from other homesteads or other lands by fences. They can be found in a linear, cluster, or individual pattern. The average *"qe'ee"* size in the area is very small, and it varies greatly depending on family size and the socioeconomic status of the households. The agricultural products in the "qe'ee" Oromo of Addis Ababa peri-urban areas such as vegetables and fruits (e.g. cabbage, banana), root crops (e.g. carrot, potato etc), crops (e.g. maze,), medicinal plants (e.g. *tena adam*), spices (e.g. *osobilaa*) etc are primarily intended for the family consumption. These vegetable, fruit, and spices cultivation is particularly important in overcoming seasonal food availability and promoting household self-sufficiency. As observed while data collecting in the field and heard from informants, the products in the garden within *"qe'ee"* provide a variety of benefits to the household and meet a variety of needs such as food and medicine by producing a wide range of fruits, vegetables, and spices. Occasionally, the sale of vegetables and fruits also contributes to household income. The practice of planting trees surrounding

"qe'ee" and trees for the shed in front of the *"qe'ee"* also contributes to sustaining/preserving plants and forestation efforts.

The second category of land in the Addis Ababa peri-urban area is known as "*maasa (oyiruu qonnaa*)" or farming land. The "*masa"* land in the study area refers to plots of land used by farmers to cultivate cereal crops. The size of the "*masa"* a family owns varies from household to household. The last time the redistribution of "*masa"* was made was based on the 1975 rural land proclamation (Proclamation No.31/1975). Common crops cultivated in the area are teff, wheat, and oilseeds (nugi). These crops are a common stable food in the area. The farmers also use these crops for sale. The notion of *maasa* for the farmers is primarily economic. One can lease for a limited years (maximum for three years) from other farmers, cultivate crops based on a share mechanism ("irbo, siso, hirta/qixxee" or quarterly, half, or equal respectively). Thus, those farmers who lack labor to work on farming, oxen to plow, or seeds to sow can rent their land or hand it over to other farmers through shared mechanisms. Therefore, the "masa" is considered a source of food, income, and status for the farmers. Terecha argues, "Our maasa is where we produce cereal crops to feed our children, we also cover our various expenses by selling the crop. What other income do we have other than it?" (Interview). Ashanafi also adds that "our source of income and subsistence is dependent on products collected from maasa since we don't have many livestock to sell and to feed ourselves from their products" (Interview). Several informants agree that the farmers who control more maasa have higher social status in the society. Another related type of land in the study area is *tifkata* (grazing land). The grazing land is used to feed livestock by villagers. Rarely do households own private grazing lands except when farming land is converted to grazing land for one or few years to increase the fertility of the land by not plowing for a few years (field notes).

The fourth category of land in the Addis Ababa peri-urban area is the land known as *abdaari* (sacred land). In the Oromo belief system, known as *Waqqefanna*, specific natural landscapes are considered to be sacred, which stems from *Waaqa*'s (literally, God's) requirement for humans to preserve nature (Sinha et al., 2011). The *Waqqefanna* religion is the indigenous religion practiced by the Oromo ethnic group. A believer is referred to as *waqqefata.* They believe in Waaqa (literally, God). Waaqa, according to the Oromo worldview, created the universe. He is eternal and the ultimate cause of everything in the universe. Waaqa is the self-existent and immortal Being. In other words, He is eternal. The Oromos perform religious ceremonies, which are frequently held near springs, large trees, and other spiritually significant natural

sites. Though an exhaustive explanation of *Waqqeffanna* is beyond the purpose of this paper, it is aimed to indicate the role of sacred places (lands) that are indispensable to perform the religious ritual in the study area. Gemeda, the elder in Fache area, explains "*abdarii nu bata, isheerra baane-galla kanaf abdariin ulfoodha Oromoon ni kabaja*" (literally it can be translated as "abdarii carries us; our getting out and coming in is supported by it. Thus, abdaari is sacred and respected for Oromo") (Gemeda, Interview).

The places identified as abdarii among the Indigenous people in the Addis Ababa Peri-urban Area, particularly around Koye fache area, are Tullu Fache, Melka shano, Booranticha kilinto, to mention a few, according to the informants. When explaining the notion of *abdarii,* elder Keteme elaborates, "*Abdariin bakkee Oromoon itti irreefatu, ooda itti baasu, Waaqaf galata itti galchudha,*" literally translated as "Abdarii is where Oromo gives thanks to the Creator, performs redemptions, and glorifies '*Waaqa*' (God)". Thus, *abdarii* plays a spiritual function in performing different indigenous religious practices in the study area. The Oromo farmers in the Addis Ababa peri-urban area combine or integrate the indigenous *Waqefanna* religion with Orthodox Christianity. Thus, abdarii in the study area are under pressure due to encroachments from the Orthodox Church. Some of the *abdarii,* where the Indigenous people perform their traditional rituals, started to be used to perform religious festivities of the Orthodox Church, such as Meskel festivity (finding of the true cross or *gubaa maskala*) and Epiphany celebration. For instance, a place near Tullu Dimtu Condominium where the indigenous people perform *Irrecha* (Oromo's thanksgiving ritual) in late September has started to be used for Epiphany celebration by the Church, according to the informants. Such activity, if not properly handled, can lead to religious-based conflicts in the area.

The last category of land in the study area is old graveyards or burial land known locally as '*Bakka awwala'*. Before the expansion of Christianity in the area, the Oromo people used to bury their dead in their locality. Although the practice of burying one's dead family in the local area is banned and exclusively performed at religious sites, the old graveyards or the burial of ancestors are recognizable in the area. Farming the burial place is '*hirmii*' (taboo) i.e., considered as eating the flesh of the dead in the views of the local people. It won't be destroyed for any purpose in traditional Oromo perspectives. It's protected land. In addition to their functions, the above categories vary in terms of their ownership. While *"qe'ee"* and *maasa* are owned by the household, *abdaari* and *bakka awwalaa* are owned by gosa or *balbalaa* (sub-clans or clans).

4.2. The Implications of Divergent Notions of Land on Land-related Conflict in Addis Ababa Peri-Urban Area

The Oromo use the symbolic connection between *lafee* and *lafa* to illustrate how impossible their existence would be without their land. Also, the relationships between '*Waqaa fi lafaa*' (God or sky and earth) are popular within Oromo expressions and daily conversation. The metaphoric use of the word 'lafee' (bone) in Oromo culture is deeply rooted in explaining 'serious' or 'fundamental' issues. Expression such as "*lafee cabe*" is used to mean "faced serious challenges or problem"; "lafee nyaate" to mean "violated fundamental ethnics", or "did something completely unacceptable". For instance, one of the informants said "*ergan lafa keenya dhabnee lafee cabne*" literally mean "we faced serious challenges since we lost our lands" (Fayise, interview). Therefore, equating land to bone implies the issue of land is very serious matter. Thus, the motto during Oromo Protest "*lafti keenya lafee keenya"* (Our land is our bones), as a body without bone (skeleton) is formless and cannot stand, Oromo believes a nation without its land cease to exist. The lived experience of the informants also attests to this, since there were many families, clans, and sub-clans already disappeared due to the alienation/denial of their ancestors' land.

In Addis Ababa's peri-urban area, just like many areas of traditional societies, neighbors are not just neighbors bound by geographic proximity; they are also tied by bloodline and common inheritance. The extended family, lineages, and clan live contingently, occupying a certain area. As Wake (2019: 8029) aptly explained, "customarily in rural areas, the Oromo people live as family or relatives or clans close to each other. They developed their social webs of communal identity from family to ethnic group and from local to national as a nation. Their social capital and group identity are often attached to places where they live". Therefore, the displacement of a community or villagers in the area not only affects individuals' lives it also eliminates the lineage or collective identity.

In Oromo culture, the *"qe'ee"* is normally inherited by the children from their parents, especially the senior son should inherit it. An interviewee explained this issue by saying "*Utuba ilma angafatu dhaala,*" literally translated as "senior son inherits *utuba* (house)" (Begna, interview). Such inheritance is a symbolic continuation of the generation rather than an economic. Hence, displacements due to urbanization lead to the discontinuation of that symbolic connection between generations. That consequence is very painful for farmers who face such ill fortune. Kebede, who is one of the many former residents displaced from the area, regrettably explains how he is being hurt due to the complete

loss of his *"qe'ee"* that he inherited from his father. He said, pointing to his former "qe'ee" now occupied by Koye fache condominium, "*Qacce nu kutanii. "qe'ee" qaccen citti ormi dhaala.*" literally translated as "they [government] cut our lineage. It's disappeared/eliminated family's *"qe'ee"* that outsiders inherit/occupy." (Interview). For the likes of Kebede, current existence is a total loss not only economically but also spiritually and culturally.

Several hundred thousand Indigenous people in the study area are now without *"qe'ee"* as a result of the denial of ancestral land by the oppressive system set up by the Ethiopian government to take the large-scale land in the name of development projects in the area. For the government, land is an instrument of political power and control, while for private business, it's just capital and a commodity. For peasants, their land is their identity, ritual, bond of connection from birth to death as well as among the past, present, and future. Land has generational values among the Oromo farmers in the study area. It was inherited from ancestors and must be handed over to offspring. Several interviewees affirm their stand by saying "*Hortee irrra dhaalle ilmoo keenyatti dabarsina,*" which translates as "We inherited from the ancestor and must hand over to our children". Thus, "qe'ee" connects the past, present, and future generations. As Wake (2019:8025) aptly argues in the Oromo world view, "land belongs to the living, unborn and dead".

Despite such a deep-rooted notion of land among the farmers in the AAPUA, from the viewpoint of urbanites and the government, land is a profitable resource that can be commercialized through leases and sales, bringing in money while also fostering political patronage and allegiance (Asebe & Teshome, 2023). In particular, the EPRDF government exploited land in AAPUA as a political tool for both enforcing patronage and punishing opponents. Through legal and illicit land acquisition activities, the Ethiopian government exploited land as a tool to gain political support and amass wealth.

The existing land regimes or understanding overlook the multiple non-economic functions of land. For the indigenous farmers in Addis Ababa's peri-urban area, such lands are not reducible to a commodity or even capital. Terecha, a farmer in the area, says, "Even if they give us billions of birr, that won't be equivalent to our land, because their money cannot be *'qe'ee'* or *abdarii* for us." The customary value of those lands is not convertible to money to sell at the market price. Therefore, the value of land should not be treated as the same for all categories of land in the Addis Ababa peri-urban area. Land such as *"qe'ee"* abdarii should be protected as a mechanism of preserving the identity and culture of the society in addition to economic resources. The land types that have primarily

economic values, such as '*maasa',* can be given monetary value and compensated, while land types that have values beyond economic should be protected as much as possible. The compensation process must take into account the inflation rate and the current price of land in the market.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The indigenous Oromo farmers in Addis Ababa's peri-urban area see land as much more than a source of income. Farmers, on the other hand, have deep attachments to their lands as sites of social, cultural, and religious significance. For these farmers, the land represents a link between the current generation and their forefathers, as well as a status symbol. These attachments go far beyond the land's monetary value as capital or commodity. While the farmers are being forced out of their land for different urban uses of the land, such as residential housing, industrial park development, and government development projects, it amounts to detaching them from their true self, since the eviction results in more than just loss of economic benefits (as many perceive). They are losing their social, cultural, and ritual values, as well as their ties to their ancestors. The finding of this underscores that the incompatible and divergent notions of land amongst various actors can cause and perpetuate land-related conflicts in peri-urban areas and beyond.

As a result, the demand to end land grabbing and farmer displacement in Addis Ababa's peri-urban areas and elsewhere should go beyond ensuring evicted farmers receive financial compensation. It is critical to consider the inherent associations that people have with their land. At the very least, retaining land with direct links to people's identities and histories, such as *"qe'ee"* (homestead), *adbaarii* (sacred sites where religious rituals take place), and *awwala hortee* (graveyards of ancestors), should be regarded as matchless values beyond being an economic resource. The government must enact a law that protects the indigenous Oromo farmers' rights while appropriating land for development projects and urbanization.

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