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# Dynamics of pastoral conflicts in eastern Rift Valley of Ethiopia: Contested boundaries, state projects and small arms

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**Abstract**

This article examines the conflict dynamics among the pastoralists in the eastern Rift Valley in Ethiopia. It focuses on the Ituu–Karrayuu pastoralists' conflict encounters with their neighbours, the Afar and Argobba. The article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the changing patterns of the relation of conflict and land use in the territories shared by these groups and how it is influenced by boundary-making within Ethiopia in the early 1990s. It draws on fieldwork conducted in the *Fantallee* district in the Oromiya region from March to June 2020. The source of data for this article relies on qualitative methodology and data collected through interviews, focus group discussion, observation and document analysis. The data obtained through recording and note-taking were categorised and organised into relevant themes and analysed thematically. The findings reveal that the current pastoralist conflicts in the study area have become more rather than less dynamic and intense. Unlike the recent works on conflicts across the country, we argue that most of the conflicts occurring among the pastoral communities of the eastern Rift Valley are not driven by the policy of ethnic federalism alone. Instead, our research shows the changing nature of pastoralist conflicts is a consequence of multi-layered causes/actors and evolving state policies—in short, a consequence of a wider political and economic context. The study suggests the need for placing the pastoral issues within the broader political and economic contexts to address the tensions across the rangeland economy.

**Keywords** Dispossession, Inter-regional boundary, Militarisation, Modern arms, State projects/policies

## Introduction

Pastoralists make up most of Ethiopia's total land area along the borders of Somalia, Kenya and Sudan. In Ethiopia, they are mainly found in its four neighbouring regions: Afar, Somali, Oromiya and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's (SNNP). Pastoralists inhabit 61% of the land mass (Mohamed 2019). Nonetheless, pastoralists are under pressure from many factors, both natural and man-made. Violent conflict in pastoralist areas, among other factors, is a source of concern among the wider public, including pastoralists and researchers. Looking at Ethiopia's pastoralist conflicts, it is a historical phenomenon. However, since the early 1990s, such conflicts have become dynamic and increasingly violent in much of Ethiopia's lowlands (Mulugeta and Hagmann 2008; Tadesse et al. 2015). The Rift Valley is a perfect example of a conflict-ridden pastoral area. The context of the study setting is described in the "Methodology" section.

Researchers from various disciplines have examined the causes of pastoral conflicts. We note various diverse perspectives on the causes of the conflicts in these research. We will go through each of these perspectives one more. Thomas Homer-Dixon (1994) noted the

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intricate relationship between resource scarcities and inter-group (pastoral) conflict in his prior studies. He discussed how environmental scarcities, such as a shortage of water, forests and particularly fertile land, could exacerbate (or perhaps induce) violent conflicts in many developing countries (Homer-Dixon 1994). Studies conducted in Ethiopia also showed rivalry among pastoralists for resources deepened conflict. The Afar–Karrayuu conflict in the Awash Rift Valley (Gebre 2001) and the Somali–Oromo conflict in southern Ethiopia (Beyene 2017) serve as examples. A rather different approach variant of the environmental scarcities tended to concentrate on how much a declining rainfall greatly leading to a prolonged drought-induced scarcity of grazing land and water ultimately fuelled conflict (Butler and Gates 2012).

Critical to the environmental scarcity is the institutional environment, which creates both actual and perceived resource scarcity, eventually exacerbating conflicts between groups (pastoralists). Such considerations are reflected in research conducted among the pastoralists in the upper and middle Awash Rift Valley, stating "the central role played by the Ethiopian state in reconfiguring contemporary pastoral conflicts" (Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008:21). Other pervious accounts of pastoral conflicts have also focused on the ritual aspects involving raids and feuds (Abbink and Young 1998). They found that violent conflict occupies an integral part of the herders' lifestyle, used as a means of regulating conflict and shaping individual and collective subjectivities. Still for others, it is the inherent nature of insecurity in pastoral areas and mobile animal husbandry that generate conflict among the herders (Markakis 1994). Cattle raiding is another driving force in violent conflicts between pastoralist groups in Ethiopia's Awash Valley (Hundie 2010; Mulugeta and Hagmann 2008). Mulugeta and Hagmann (2008) pointed out that cattle raiding is "a widespread and long-standing form of violence among many Ethiopian pastoral communities" (175).

Recent scholarly work on conflicts in general and pastoral conflicts in particular, in Ethiopia, has paid particular attention to ethnic federalism by examining links between ethnicity and conflict (Lenaerts et al. 2014; Markakis 1994). In the 1990s, Ethiopia began adopting a multi-national federal system of government, a system that structured the country into nine ethnic-regional states. A federal system became necessary for regions to be self-governing within their regional boundaries. However, regional boundaries may play a key role in intensifying "ethnified" conflicts, including (agro-) pastoral conflict that has dominated academic analysis of post-ethnic federalism in Ethiopia (Lenaerts et al. 2014). However, other studies have provided an alternative account. For them, the so-called inter-group (pastoral) conflict is the result of the weak bargaining power of the new regional political parties, whose power within the federal government is seriously constrained by the "dominant ethnic strategy" that characterises Ethiopia's history (Záhořík 2011).

Ranging from conflict over resources to boundary disputes to cattle raiding, all forms of pastoral conflict have now increasingly been accompanied by modern arms and militarisation. Research shows how conflicts are always likened to the proliferation of automatic weapons in pastoral regions, particularly in the borderlands (Eaton 2008). In Ethiopia, as pastoralists struggle to compete over resources, the militarisation of pastoralists has become increased around borders (Hundie 2010; Markakis 2003; Mulugeta and Hagmann 2008). This study therefore aimed to examine the dynamic conflict interactions of pastoral groups in the Eastern Rift Valley of Ethiopia. This article argues that the current pastoral conflicts in Ethiopia can be understood in view of multi-layered causes/actors and evolving state policies. Without negating the argument that "pastoral conflicts must be understood within the context of the historic and ongoing expansion of Ethiopian state from its central highland to the remote parts of its periphery lowlands" (Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008:21), we also aim to draw attention to the extent to which strategic inter-regional boundaries take into account the vested interests of local groups, regional states and federal state. The article thus adds new insights to the existing research on pastoral conflicts by positioning the existing ethno-politics in Rift Valley within both the continued state expansion and the current ethnic federal administrative setups. This study was conducted in the political context of the collapse of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) in 2018 due to the popular protests (Oromo protest). In the 1990s, the centralised socialist Ethiopian state transformed into a multi-national regional state, leading to inter-regional border disputes among regional states, as highlighted in previous studies. This study suggests that the post-2018 political dynamics have undermined central government power, leading regional states into an arms race to reclaim so-called lost territories in the 1990s and exacerbating existing border disputes.

This is paper is based on a fieldwork conducted in Fantallee distinct in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master of Arts Degree in Sociology (Social Policy) at Jimma University. It also included a comprehensive review of recent publications on pastoral conflicts in Eastern African counties and existing sources related to the explanation of pastoral or inter-group conflicts.

We begin with a brief description of the fieldwork areas and research methodology. The "Findings" section

provides context to conflict dynamics in the Eastern Rift Valley by focusing on three key thematic issues: inter-regional boundary, development projects and dispossession, and militarisation. Next, the "Discussion" section provides the interpretation of the study findings with what was known about pastoral conflicts as well as the possible implication of the research. And, the last section deals with the conclusion.

## Methodology

### Fieldwork area and context

The study area, Fantallee district, is located on the Eastern Rift Valley in Fantallee District, East Showa Zone of Oromiya Regional state. It is situated between 8′ 45′ to 90′ 00′ north latitude and 3′ 45′ to 40′ 00′ east longitude, which is a tropical climate.

The altitude of the district ranges from 1500 to 2000m. Its climate is grouped as "hot-semi Arid, characterized by steep type of vegetation with less fall and more coarse grasses" (Etafa, Teshome and Beyene 2016:256). The monthly temperature of the area varies from the mean minimum and mean maximum of 12.80 to 21.90 °C and 28.0 to 36.70 °C, respectively (Mekuyie and Mulu 2021:9-10). According to the Ethiopian National Mythological Agency (NMA) climate data reports of 1989–2011, the district received mean annual rainfall of 400–572mm.

Pastoralism is the dominant practice for these two Oromo groups. Livestock production was the main source of living for the Karrayyuu and Ituu. They rear four livestock species: camel, cattle, goats and sheep. The main sources of livestock feed are open gazing land and browsing. Today, both groups also practise rain-fed agriculture and small-scale irrigation to support their livelihood. Due to this, currently, in some parts (Lower Awash) of the area, there is a gradual shift to agro-pastoralism, while the other parts (especially Upper Awash) still practise pure pastoralism (Gebre and Yirga 2004; Tesema and Musa 2019).

Land use of the area involves open grassland, reverie, mountainous, vegetation and farmland. According to the Fantallee District Pastoral Office (2012) estimation, dense woodland and shrubs accounted for 25.5% of the district land area, while degraded land and others cover 4.5%. The chunk of open grassland covers the areas located west of the district, the gently sloping areas at the foothill of the Fantallee Mountain and areas bordering the Matahara Sugar Plantation. The proportion of grass to shrub differs considerably among different places in the locality. Shrubs are predominant on the rock ridge. Acacia is the major species of shrubs.

Now let us turn to contextualising the study area. Spanning along the boundaries of two regional states, Afar and Amhara, the district provides unique features containing diverse pastoral groups, Afar, Argobba, Ituu and Karrayyuu. Let us briefly describe the groups who are also primary parties involved in the study. The Afar are the north-eastern neighbours of the Ituu and Karrayyuu Oromo and are considered autochthonous people within the Afar regional state. The Afar are largely practising pastoralism. Traditionally, the Afar control the north of Mount Fantallee whereas the Ituu and Karrayyuu control the land to the south. The Argobba are agro-pastoralists. They are the north-western neighbours of the Ituu and the Karrayyuu. The Argobba predominantly reside in Minjar-Shenkora Special District in Amhara regional state. The Special district borders the Fantallee district of Oromiya in the north-western direction. Given the unstable political atmosphere on the other side of the regional borders as well as the COVID pandemic, data gathering was restricted to the Oromiya side that the first author is familiar with.

The major ethnic groups that inhabited the Fantallee district are Karrayyuu and Ituu. The Ituu and the Karrayyuu are the two Oromo clans living in the eastern part of Oromiya. Genealogically, the two clans are under the five Bareentu Confederacies, called Shanan Bareentumaa. The Ituu is the original inhabitant of Carcar highland, which is historically known as Ona Ituu, the Ituu district. However, the Ituu century ago expanded westward and started to live with Karrayyuu. The Karrayyuu are the original inhabitant of Fantallee hill, in the present-day east of Shewa zone. This study confines itself to the Ituu and Karrayyuu living in the upper Awash (Hawaas) Rift Valley (Fantallee district in particular) of the east Shewa zone of the Oromiya regional state.

The political context of the Fantallee district is peculiar as it shares administrative boundaries with other ethnic groups residing in two regional states, Afar and Amhara. The district is bordered in the north-west by the Argobba ethnic group of the Amhara national regional state and in north and north-east by the Afar ethnic groups of the Afar national regional state. It is where the multi-layered administrative actors' (local, distinct, zonal) interests do coverage and diverge. Generally, the border is bringing together three regional states and a federal state to compete over resources such as land and water. Economically speaking, the Fantallee district has been the main expansion frontier for the modern Ethiopia state. State-backed conservation and development projects have expanded in the area since the Imperial time. These include the Awash National Park, Matahara Sugary Factory and Upper Awash Agro-Industry Enterprise. With some important changes, this dynamic continued under the Socialist regime (1974–1991) and the EPRDF (1991–2018). The state has maintained control of the valuable resources,

such as land and water that are so important for the pastoralist livelihoods.

### Methods

The study relies on a qualitative approach and descriptive design. We selected the qualitative approach since the aim was to deal with local dynamics issues that require the flexibility of instruments of data collection. Data collection methods consisted of interviews (in-depth interviews and key informant interviews), focus group discussions, observation and document review. During the fieldwork, we used these methods simultaneously.

We conducted twelve interviews (eight in-depth interviews and four key informant interviews). Interviews were supported by three focus group discussions, one with elders, one with community leaders and one with experts at the Fantallee district Peace and Governance office, and each group involved six to eight participants. The interviews ranged in duration from approximately 1 to 1.5 h. Conducting an FGD took approximately 2 h. While we used interview/focus group guides for the personal interviews and focus group discussion, checklists were used for observation and document review. Voice recorder was used to recode both the discussion in the one-to-one encounters and group conversations and was also noted down. We conducted the interviews in various places, around hamlets, on rangelands and at Fantallee district administration offices. At this juncture, we would like to note that our fieldwork exclusively focused on the Fantallee district.

Participants of the study were largely elders who are believed to have accumulated knowledge and experiences about the territorial conflicts in their areas and were purposively selected. The bulk of data were collected from the members of the pastoralists having direct conflict encounters. Furthermore, participants included agriculture extension workers and pastoral development officers. These are believed to have experiences of pastoral activity.

The primary data analysis draws on the recently concluded MA thesis research. Data collected through oral interviewees were transcribed and translated into their nearest English version. The translated data were organised into thematic areas. We also made a comprehensive review of recent publications on pastoral conflicts in Eastern African counties and existing sources related to the explanation of pastoral or inter-group conflicts.

## Findings

### Contextualising the conflict dynamics in the Eastern Rift Valley

In the Eastern Rift Valley, the conflict between the Oromo clans (the Ituu and the Karrayuu) and their neighbours—Afar and Argobba—is historical. Over the past two decades, however, the conflict has become more dynamic and complex where episodes of violence have increased in intensity and number. The conflict between the Ituu–Karrayuu and Argobba and Afar follows different patterns. According to the Ituu and the Karrayuu elders, Argobba are different from the Afar, by their expansionist tendencies. Unlike the Afar, the Argobba are largely sedentary agriculturalists. In what follows, we like to discuss the conflict between the Ituu and the Karrayuu Oromo and the Argobba and the latter turn to that of the former and the Afar.

According to the study participants, the Ituu and the Karrayuu have conflict encounters with the Argobba throughout the different regimes of Ethiopia. During the Derg regime (1974–1991), occasional conflict was the preserve of the Eastern Rift Valley. Increasing competition for access to water and dry season grazing was marked by an outburst of violent conflict. After the collapse of the Derg regime, the situation changed when the Argobba started to expand their territory and increase their herd sizes. The declining fertile arable land in their region seemed to cause the eastward expansion of the Argobba displacing the Oromo clans from their homelands in the Eastern Rift Valley. In the early 1990s, conflicts were still occurring occasionally and found to be less intense.

The cause of the conflict and its intensity completely changed starting from 2011. Since then, the Argobba have had frequent conflict encounters with Ituu–Karrayuu. It has occurred in a locality called Arrolle and is located in the Ganda[1]Haro Qarsaa (Haro Kersa) of Fantallee district (see Fig. 1). According to the elders we spoke with, the Argobba's 2013 occupation of Arrolle and the nearby villages, particularly Iddoo Qalloo and Iddoo Guddoo, had a profound effect on the nature of conflict dynamics. How did the Argobba come to be in control of Iddoo in the first place? Why were they so interested in Arrolle in general and Iddoo in particular?

To being with the first question, the elder informants said this was a time of the Ituu–Karrayuu's reconciliation with the Afar during 2010. Following the reconciliation, the Afar relocated the Ituu and Karrayuu territory with their herds moved to. All the same, many of Ituu and Karrayuu pastoralists had to move along with their herds to Afar leaving behind their hamlets and belongings on Arrollee, particularly Iddoo. At the end of 2003, the Argobba moved into those villages left behind and began to camp nearby by taking advantage of Ituu–Karrayuu's movement. In the mid

[1] Ganda is the smallest administrative unit in Oromiya regional state.

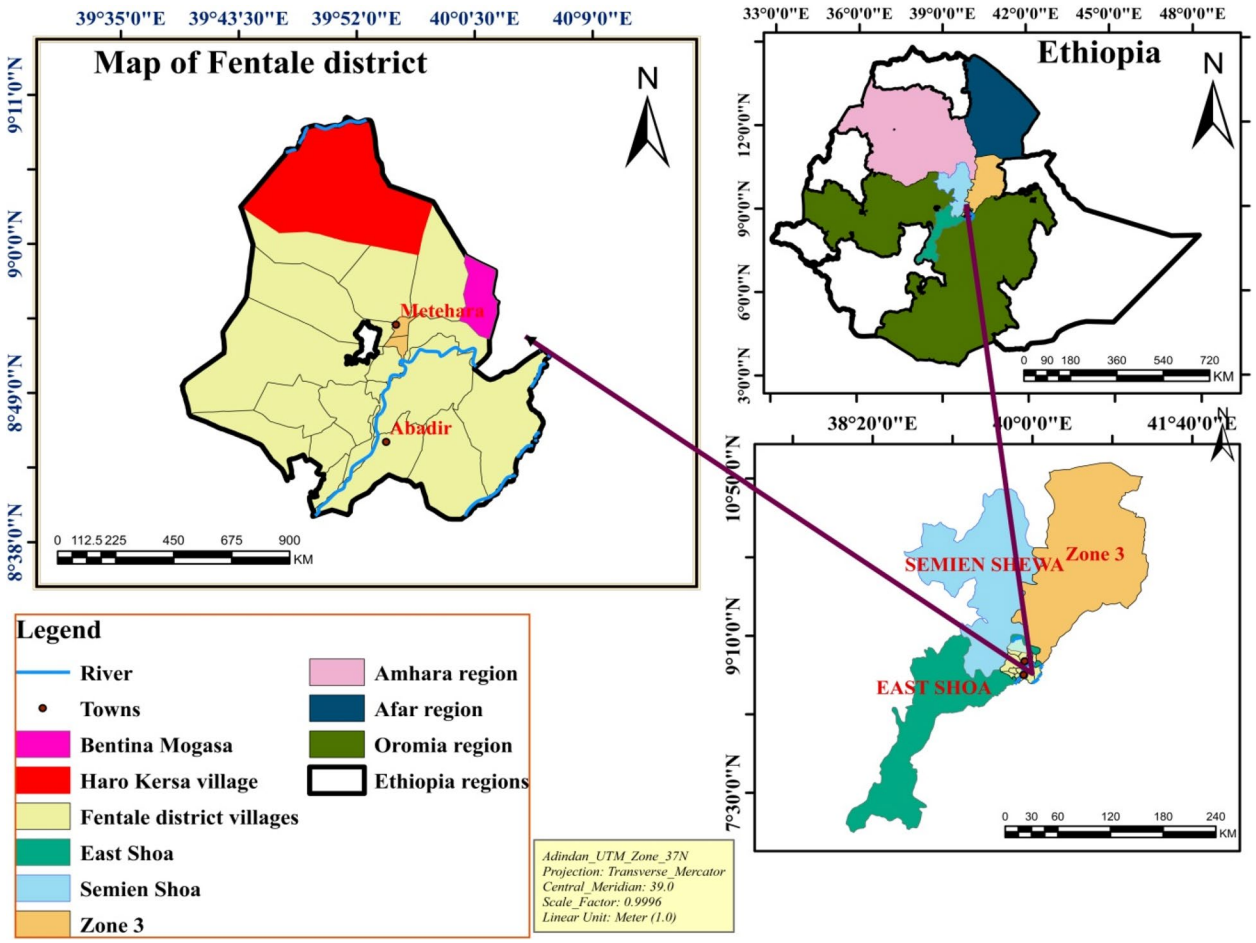


**Fig. 1** A map of the study area extracted from the Ethiopian GES (a map made by Gemechu Debesa)

of 2011, they were able to retake their villages from the Argobba after a bloody conflict. In 2013, the Argobba again bolstered their capacity, did all they could to capture the villages and finally expelled the Ituu and Karrayuu. The Argobba "were not alone" while carrying out all of these tasks, according to an elder in Iddoo. Indeed, the Amhara officials have become the main implicit supporter of the Argobba's expansion. Not only Amhara officials, Amhara farmers also support. The Argobba then built well-established concentrated villages in Arrollee, Iddoo site. The number of corrugated iron houses has increased in these villages. The villages joined together and began to develop into a full-fledged neighbourhood. The Argobba used this settlement practice as a tactic to maintain control over territorial areas of Arrollee. Correspondingly, permanent land occupation now represents the hallmark of conflict between the Ituu–Karrayuu and Argobba.

Why is Arrollee such a big deal? There are two types of topography in the Fantallee district: plain land and mountainous terrain. The district is dominated by the flat expanse of land which includes Arrolle. According to our observations and the views of the key informants at Fantallee district administration, Arrolle is an open, plain, productive land that is capable of being ploughed as well as growing an abundance of pasture. The Argobba have grown fond of Arrolle since it receives more precipitation than the plains at lower elevations. Streams run toward the plain on the Cophaa terrain that stretches across Arrolle. As a result, the Arrolle grows abundant pastures. Similarly, the presence of salt lick "Haya" in the Arrollee area makes the area an important site for both the Argobba and the Ituu and Karrayuu pastoralists. While drinking the water, the Ituu and the Karrayuu cattle commonly lick a mineral salt found there. The Argobba wanted to use this advantage for themselves. Best of all, Arrolle has everything that helps your livestock thrive and reproduce: plenty of pasture, water and Haya. All these make Arrolle an important herding site. But there is also a more important reason why the Argobba wanted to earn a living in, settle in Arrollee.

In general, Argobba farmers have faced a shortage of fertile agricultural land and had to seek potentially arable land outside the Amhara region. They continually migrate to Oromiya and struggle to permanently occupy Arrolle and beyond, especially in order to take advantage of fertile agricultural land that is accessible. Especially, during the summer season, the land of Argobba is mostly cultivated and covered with crops. As a result, grazing land for livestock is limited. This forced the Argobba to migrate to the border of the Ituu and the Karrayuu. These make the area the major point of contention between the Ituu–Karrayuu and Argobba. An 87-year-old elderly man had the following opinions:

> *The farm size in Argobba is dwindling fast. The fertile pasture land used to keep livestock has now changed to farmland. Every year, they trespass on to our boundary in search of pasture. They have a particular interest in occupying the fertile land of Arrolle, which is our main grazing area. I think they want this fertile land, not merely for herding purposes, but they would rather want it for farming. We do not let them occupy it least, because no land is as important asArrollein our district. Arrolle is endowed with tremendous natural resources: water, haya, and pasture. If Argobba do not stop encroaching upon the fertile land of Arrolle, conflict continues to exist. The conflict seems to be continuing, recurring and is becoming severe than it used to be. We predict it to be worse than it is now. Or let the government intervenes in the case.*

The Ituu and Karrayuu elders complained that the Argobba were being supported by the Amhara regional state, driving the Oromo out of their home villages and taking over their possessions. Today, large tracts of land (pastures and potentially arable land) around Arrollee, especially around Iddoo, are under the control of the Argobba agro-pastoralist. They need land that they can cultivate and use to grow their crops. The area is still contented, with the Ituu and Karrayuu still claiming control. With this regard, an elder man pondered and said:

> *We lost a large chunk of our land to Argobba. Huge land is now invaded. They do not stop taking one part of the pasture side. Once they made sure they could now settle on the invaded land, they started to plough it. And go forward with their livestock to reside on it, to in turn plough it.*

The above cases illustrate that with its rich pastures, major water points and potential arable land, Arrolle has been the site of ongoing conflicts between the two groups.

Now, we turn to the dynamics of conflict between the Ituu and Karrayuu, and the Afar. These groups have had friendly social and economic ties. These were manifested in shared pastures and shared settlements. During the dry season, it is no surprise that there are conflicts between these groups. Conflict could intensify during the dry season due to competition for scarce resources, study participants said. The interviews and focus group discussions held with elders demonstrated conflicts often broke out in the Afar territory when the Ituu and the Karrayuu Oromo pastoralists were moving into their territory. The latter would face a shortage of grazing land on their side during the dry season. And so is the former. Conflicts between these pastoralists can only arise when both sides are uncertain about the fate of the lands left behind as buffer zones and/or protected areas. The conflict would help defend enclosed pastureland against competing groups. Ituu and the Karrayuu elders noted that if the Afar did not encroach on recognised buffer zones and/or protected areas, violent conflict would not erupt.

The Afar have had enough grazing in their territory throughout the autumn (Badheessa/Afraasaa) season. This is due to the fact that the Afar region receives sufficient rain before the Ituu and Karrayuu areas. How could the Ituu and the Karrayuu access pastureland they required for their livestock given the current shortage of pasture in the Fantallee district? How do they manage this situation, in times of the absence of pasture? It may be worth mentioning that during the autumn, the Ituu and Karrayuu men must relocate deep within the Afar territory for better grazing. Migration with herds to pasturelands for grazing is by far the most common adaptive strategy. This migration was frequently observed early on, when a pastoral community struggles with a shortage of pasture and was often seen as a form of resource sharing by which one group would trespass another territory and vice versa. When summer arrives, the Afar begin to move toward the mountainous area that stands between them and the Ituu and Karrayuu. The Ituu and Karrayuu protect the mountainous areas during this time, keeping their livestock on plains inside their borders. The Afar pastoralists' march into the Ituu and the Karrayuu lands serves as a cue for them to gradually make their way back to Fantallee Mountains. The Ituu and Karrayuu would prefer mountainous areas after the summer season ended over the plain that lay on the doorsteps of the mountains. The plain is a large area of land with more and fresh forage on it. For both the Ituu and Karrayuu Oromo clans, and the Afar, mobility is, therefore,

a collective action that is understood to be rooted in resource sharing.

Over the past 25 years, the nature of collective action has changed. Since 1991, according to the study participants, pastoralists have had a tough time moving about. Those pastoralists who really heavily relied on mobility have been severely harmed by ongoing disputes over inter-regional boundaries because they are no longer allowed to move their livestock into "others" territory. Today, narratives of conflict encounters with the Afar are widespread among the Ituu and the Karrayuu. The Ituu and Karrayuu often define their interactions with the Afar in terms of recurring conflicts sparked by rival claims to grazing land and water. Elders have observed that the recent conflict has occurred on grazing territory known as Raaree Summaa in Ganda Bantii (Bentina Mogasa) in Fantallee district (see Fig. 1), a north-eastern border area inside Oromiya's regional boundaries.

The lush pasture ground on the outskirts of Raaree Summaa is now being claimed by the Afar pastoralists, according to the Ituu and Karrayyuu elders. Raaree Summaa is a place where the Awash National Park is established. It is a plain environment where there is sufficient growth of browsers and grass, both of which are very important for livestock. Elders reported that Afar pastoralists, the Wa'ima clan, in particular, which dominates the Awash-7 (Awash-sebat) town, are reportedly gradually encroaching on Raaree Summaa. One of the informants from the Fantalleee district office reported that although the Afar know that Raaree Summaa is under the Oromiya region, and the Ituu and the Karrayuu Oromo are the rightful owners of the area, they have claimed its ownership. The informant added that this claim emanated from the fact the Awash National Park is owned by the federal government. This creates a lope of hole for the Afar to think that what is owned by the federal government is not under the administration of the Oromiya region.

#### The inter-regional boundary as a place to fight

Inter-regional boundaries are one of today's conflict encounter spaces that are most readily visible. When discussing about inter-regional boundaries, the people we spoke with expressed similar worries. In order to enhance the self-administration of nations within their regional jurisdictional boundaries. Ethiopia saw the structuring of the country into nine ethno-regional states in the 1990s. This made the Amhara and Afar regions share borders with the study area, the Fantallee district of the Oromiya region. In the Amhara region, Minjar-Shenkora district shares a boundary with Fantallee, whereas in the Afar region, Awash-Fantallee shares boundary with Fantallee both in the east and north-east (see the map).

The people in Fantallee were aware of boundary issues and were able to explain the link between how boundaries were drawn and the conflicts in their area. The FGD participants stress that the main reason for most of the conflicts they are currently experiencing is related to border issues and claims and counterclaims against territories along the regional boundaries. The link between inter-regional boundaries and conflict is not new in Fantallee or anywhere else. There has always been a link between border politics and resource politics. After all, the rule of inter-regional interaction—the politics of self-administration—is tied to the administration of resources. In fact, boundaries define, include or exclude people from ownership of land and land-related resources. Laying claims to inter-regional boundaries is now believed to have been one of the factors causing conflict among pastoralists inhabiting both sides of the boundaries.

According to our key informants, the new multinational federal state structure introduced in 1992 is believed to have changed the face of the conflict in the areas ranging from resource competition to administrative issues. This can be considered as one of the current drivers. However, this does not mean that there were no conflicts over territorial claims before the introduction of federalism. Already in the Derg period (1974–1991), the study area was already in a situation of tension between different groups. For example, in 1976, the Derg officials developed a plan to incorporate the Fantallee district into Minjar-Shenkora Special District. (This is now a district that lies in Amhara regional state and where the Argobba reside predominately.) It was part of the Derg plan to restructure the old administrative system. Government officials had asked the Ituu and the Karrayuu elders that the Fantallee district would be incorporated into Minjar-Shenkora. Officials tried to come up with a justification for their plan. First, Fantallee district was supposed to be far from the administration centre Yerer–Karrayuu Awuraja. During this period, the present-day Minjar-Shenkora district was under Minjar-Bulga Awuraja. Second, the largest proportion of Fantallee landmass, along with its north-western (Bulga area), lies to the south-eastern part of the Minjar-Shenkora district. [Bulga is the name of a river streaming from the Amhara region and flows eastward crossing between the Ituu and Karrayuu and the Afar pastoralists.] Put it differently, Minjar-Shenkora is completely surrounded by Fantallee in the west and north-west. The Derg officials wanted to use proximity as a justification for classifying the latter under the former.

Ituu and the Karrayuu elders reportedly opposed the plan. They were believed to have been deeply dissatisfied with the new administrative arrangement plan. However, the regime had collapsed before the plan came to fruition.

Regardless of how the change of the regime put the plan on hold, from that time onward, the tensions were growing between those Oromo clans and the Argobba ethnic group. Nevertheless, the elders on both sides made little attempt to resolve it. Furthermore, government officials have paid little attention to the ongoing tensions.

Even after the fall of the Derg regime, the demand to incorporate the Fantallee district into Minjar-Shenkora resurfaced. In the meantime, incorporation took place and was announced on the media in November 1992. The main explanation provided for the incorporation was the lack of a potential town in Fantallee district, which can be used as an administrative seat. The Awash town, which was the former administrative seat of Fantallee, was taken over by the Afar region during the regional making. The suggestion was that the best thing about the Fantallee's location is its proximity to the administrative centre of Minjar-Shenkora district and thus the suggestion that it should be part of it.

According to our informants, the Oromo elders were concerned about a political plot to incorporate Fantallee into the Amhara region. The elders had not sat idle and allowed their home territory to go to the Amhara region. The *Gummii*[2] elders comprising eight members of the Ituu and the Karrayuu clans presented their complaint to the then-president of the Oromiya region, Hasan Ali. In 1994/1995, Hasan decided the whole parts of Fantallee, which may have been under the control of then Minjar-Shenkora Awuraja, should be returned to the then Yerer–Karrayuu Awuraja, which named later as Fantallee District. Fantalleee eventually became an independent district and part of Oromiya. More recently, border claims and accompanying land-based disputes have gained new momentum. As mentioned earlier, in 2011, there was a violent confrontation that sparked off between people from the Minjar-Shenkora and Fantalleee districts over land that was controlled by the latter. This land-based conflict was part of wider boundary claims between the Amhara regional and Oromiya regional states.

#### Development projects and dispossession

Fantallee distinct has a profound relationship with the dynamics of state projects. Two important consequences ensued. First, land dispossessions made by the projects dislocated pastoralists from their resource base. Second, these dynamics become powerfully clear after pastoralists have increasingly engaged in conflicts.

Since the 1960s, development projects and conservation have involved the expropriation of large areas of Ituu and Karrayuu rangelands. Examples include the establishment of state-backed projects such as the Matahara Sugar Factory and the Awash National Park in the Awash Valley. These projects entailed the relocation of the Ituu and Karrayuu away from rivers and the dispossession of their land, not to mention the effects of similar projects undergoing on the Afar side.

One of these projects is the Matahara Sugar Factory founded in 1965 by a Dutch company called Hangler Vondr Amsterdam (HVA). Originally built on a relatively small piece of land, the factory has gradually expanded in all directions, leading to the evictions of the surrounding Ituu and Karrayuu pastoralists. The size of the land the two groups depended on for herding is shrinking from time to time. Our Ituu and Karrayyuu elderly informants noted large tracts of land now used for the sugary factory were taken over during the FDRE regime. According to available data, the company holds around 14,733 ha of land. In some localities like Galcha, Tuuroo-Baddannoota, Saaraa-Weebaa, Faatee-Leedii, Gaara-Diimaa, Dirra-Sadeen and Goolaa, the scale of land expropriation has increased from time to time. The elders say the district's plain land (now occupied by sugar cane plantations) and the Fantalleee mountains were previously used for rotational grazing. The elders reported their communities use plains until the part of the mountains regenerates. This is the method the Ituu and Karrayyuu used to manage resource use for their livestock. However, after the plain land has been taken by the factory, they were forced to migrate to Argobba territory or locations under the control of the Afar. Migration caused by excessive land-grabbing practices associated with agribusiness has exacerbated conflicts between them and their neighbours. The elderly informants stressed that if their vast and fertile land had not been occupied by the sugary factory, they would not have moved their cattle to graze on land occupied by other groups and engage in conflict.

Lack of access to the only source of water, the Awash River, was the biggest problem facing Ituu and Karrayyuu, but not the only challenge they faced, according to study participants. Perhaps equally challenging was the effect of the sugar plantations on the flow and volume of the Awash River. The Awash River runs through the fields used for growing sugarcane next to the factory. Awash is the main source of irrigation for sugarcane plantations on over 10,000 ha of land. The irrigation scheme is believed to have greatly reduced the natural flow of the river that the pastoralists relied on to water their livestock. Elders accused the factory of creating a water-scarce environment, which not only led to increased competition, but also conflicts among pastoralists over access to water.

[2] An Oromo term which refers to an assembly of elders getting together for discussion over an issue and make decisions over the issue.

The Awash National Park is the second project which the Ituu and Karrayuu have commonly accused expropriating of their land. Established in 1966, the Park is the first state-run park in the country. It is located in the Fantallee district, spanning the north-eastern part of the East Shewa zone of Oromiya. The Awash River, along with the park stretches, is its southern boundaries. Locally, the original name of the area where the park now stands is Raaree Summaa. According to local elders, Raaree Summaa was the finest herding site before it became a park. When first established, the park covered 750 $km^2$ of land. Since its inception, the park has expanded beyond its original territory and now covers about 850 $km^2$ of woodland and grassland, according to an informant working at Fantallee district administration.

The establishment of the Park has not only endangered the livelihoods of the Ituu and Karrayyuu Oromo people, but also caused conflict between the Ituu and Karrayuu and surrounding groups and Park's authorities. The park brings conflict in two ways. On the one hand, conflicts between the local pastoral groups and the park authorities are not the focus of the investigation, as the park encroaches on their grazing land. And the other is the conflict between the local Oromo clans and the Afar ethnic group. The Afar pastoral on the north-eastern boundary of Fantallee district wants to claim the eastern edge of the park as if it were their own. Also, the Afar do not want the Ituu and the Karrayuu to keep their livestock on areas situated in the fringes of the park.

#### Military-like conflict along boundaries

It is becoming increasingly clear that the proliferation of modern weapons is contributing to more violent attacks among pastoralists in the Rift Valley area. A local arms race has been going on for years. The ownership of automatic rifles such as Kalashnikovs by young men is on the rise. This situation has greatly changed the nature of the conflict and increased violence between pastoral communities. These days, violence and militarism seem to be inherent in pastoral conflict.

One of the most striking differences between the traditional pastoral conflicts and the newly emerging pastoral conflicts is the involvement of regular military training. The elders noticed the young men appeared to be preparing for a conventional war. Of course, not all pastoralist groups did the same trainings. According to the Ituu and Karrayuu elders, in recent times, the Argobba and the Minjare Amhara have sent their young people out for "military-style" training in the Minjar-Shenkora district. The district's youth today are now being trained as local militia forces on border areas adjacent to the Oromiya region. The initiative to train local militia units is part of the Amhara regional state's broader ambition to consolidate the territories it said were lost during the demarcation of the region. Young Argobba men with the support of the Amhara regional police force or Special Forces had to undergo the necessary military preparation before joining any conflict. Conflict now involves a regular planning process. The elders interviewed reported that they had captured Argobba men, armed with the latest weapons, just like the regular government military forces.

But even more problematic is the length of the conflict and the lack of promote intervention. Historically, Ituu and Karrayuu Oromo's conflicts with the Argobba and Afar took the form of hit-and-run tactics. The Argobba is used to avoid a full engagement with the Ituu and Karrayuu. There were short surprise attacks and withdrawals from both sides before the other side was able to respond with force. In some cases, the exchange of fire can last one and a half-day. Violent attacks were causally carried out by groups of untrained cattle keepers. The cattle keepers, particularly of the Argobba, were interested in stealing cattle. (What is new now is the long journey many travel to join the conflict from remote areas) More recently, for the Argobba, cattle raids become secondary in form, whereas seeking territorial expansion has become the dominant factor that drove and sustained the armed violence in the area.

The use of small arms has significantly increased the duration and fatality of conflicts. Recent armed attacks aim to destroy villages and kill females. FGD discussants emphasised that the Argobba unlike the Afar pastoralists are now increasingly involved in the destruction of Ituu and the Karrayuu hamlets and committing homicide. The killing now targets females. In the past, it was the men who were involved and were affected by conflicts. Killing women was considered taboo. The Ituu and Karrayuu elders say that they have not seen an incident of women herders throughout their historical conflicts with Argobba. When the men Argobba captured the women herders of the Ituu and the Karrayuu, they refrained from killing. The Ituu and the Karrayuu also did the same. But these days, killing women herder for the Argobba is becoming commonplace. They can also bring women with cattle to their villages.

In the past, conflicts were occurring around herding sites and over the defence of the pasture. These days, conflicts are aimed at occupying specific territories. According to the informants at Fantalleee district, conflicts are mainly used to expand territories and hold strategic locations. The informants, for instance, accused the Argobba of driving many of the Oromo clans into the present-day Fantallee. Their current conflict encounter looks like a conventional battle. Conflicts become more and more recurrent, with both groups erecting boundary markers

to indicate the end of their borders. According to elders, previously, conflict breaks where they meet each other on buffer zones. They exchange weapon fire for a day or a half. Either group then return to their boundaries. It is more of hit and runs. In this case, battles of conflict are not constant. It may be long-distance entering to their boundaries or distances entering to Argobba boundaries.

In particular, young armed men involved in border patrol are reported to have affected all the pastoralists living along the regional borders. The uniqueness of recent conflicts is their politicisation. Our participants, in all the FGDs conducted, told us that the Argobba armed men have always carried the flag of the Amhara region during the conflict. They also waved the flag in front of them, warped it around ahead or tie it around their guns. Even after the conflict ended, Argobba flew the flag over the occupied lands. This could mean conquering the occupied land.

A group of young men called Salfaa were involved in "enemy" patrols around the border, according to elders and key informants. They are primarily responsible for keeping an eye out for potential attackers who try to approach them. They often trek along with herding men who move with their herds towards the territories of Argobba and Afar. They set out early in the morning and continued moving until they found enough pasture in the border areas of neighbouring groups. After making sure the borderlands are free of "enemies", the Salfaa return home leaving behind the herder men who should look after livestock. The Salfaa are armed, but not trained like the youth of Argobba and Mijare.

But nowadays Salfaa need to spend nights on the border. They even cross into the border of the Argobba to pre-emptively defend themselves from distance. Unlike in the previous time, according to elders, they occupy strategic places and dig a trench where they stay even during the night. These had not been an issue previously.

## Discussion

This article explores and presents the dynamics of pastoral conflict in the Eastern Rift Valley of Ethiopia. Researchers offer several explanations for why the conflict between groups occurs, including pastoral groups (Beyene 2017; Galaty 2016; Kradin 2019; Mengistu 2017; Mohamed 2019; Pas 2018). This study demonstrates that the occupation of territories and the control of the resources found within them are causes of pastoral conflicts. A lack of resource sharing has enormously contributed to conflicts. In the past, the actual shortages of resources such as pasture and water could lead to conflicts among pastoralists by disrupting the existing mutual resource-sharing practices. Research evidences show a possible linkage of conflicts between groups and competition for resources (Homer-Dixon 1994). Of course, there is a consensus between Homer-Dixon's findings and some early studies on the conflict in Ethiopia that access and control over resources are important underlying causes of conflict among different pastoralists (Gebre 2001; Gebre 2009; Hundie 2010; Kefale 2011). This study is more consistent with the understanding that modern-day conflicts among pastoralists in East Africa are not solely due to scarcity of natural resources (Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008; Hundie 2010). Furthermore, a review of Kenyan–Ethiopian frontier conflict episodes showed that scarcity of grazing and water resources does not consistently fuel conflict (Galaty 2016). Analysts and scholars disagree, however, as to whether the ultimate cause of this conflict is the competition for access to resource or the power dynamics that shape it. It means, we argue that there is also a problem with taking the notion of resource scarcity as the cause of violent conflicts for granted.

We therefore suggest that particular attention should be to the power relation of the actors, that is, the state structure and policies that enable (constrain) pastoralists to access resources. For example, there have been the observations that regional states made groups aware of the inevitable scarcity of resources in their area, eventually leading groups to look for available resources outside of their traditional territory. While the shrinking resource base should not be underestimated when describing pastoral conflicts, it was not the only reason pastoralist groups were compelled to claim resources outside of their region. For example, in order to size the territories they claim, Amhara officials used perceived scarcity of resources and land disputes to provide the Argobba with the justification they needed to foment local conflict. The conflict between Ituu–Karrayuu and Argobba has been politicised, especially since the 1990s. It is underpinned by a strong demand for territorial expansion of the Amhara regional state beginning in 1992/1993.

During this time, this region wanted to incorporate Fantalleee distinct into the Menjar-Shenkora district. The issue is probably not all that new and was a major cause of conflict between the Ituu–Karrayuu and Argobba. According to this study, the Amhara regional state considered it obligatory to expand its regional territory to occupy more land in the Fantallee area. Land-based disputes are not uncommon in the pastoral area. However, the current land-based conflict has been further exacerbated by Amhara regional officials with the regional militias and by locally trained armed youths, steered to justify their expansionist tendencies. In order for these conflicts to occur, they use identity to mobilise the Argobba against the Oromo and what they perceive as a scarcity of resources at their disposal. Research has found how such

conditions led to conflict between ethnic groups (Azarya 2003; Debelo 2016).

The conflict between Ituu–Karrayuu and Afar could also be seen as the result of a critical scarcity of resources. Studies indicated that the Ituu and Karrayuu often refer to the Afar as their "long-standing or "eternal" enemies and disputes between the groups are fuelled by competing claims to water sources and rangeland resources (Mulugeta and Hagmann 2008:75). However, our research shows that the link between conflict and resource scarcity is dynamically linked to the historical and ongoing Ethiopian state expansion and evolving policies. The state has not only maintained its historical expansion (Donham 1986; Zewde 2002), but has also strengthened over the decades through "development" projects in pastoral areas (Regassa, Hizekiel and Korf 2019). This dynamic creates a critical demand for water points and grazing land for herds, pushing the pastoralists into direct and violent conflicts with each other. Our findings are consistent with previous studies showing how the deterioration of the pastoral resource base as a result of the Ethiopian state's large-scale land confiscation programmes adversely affected peaceful relations among pastoral groups (Gebre 2001; Hundie 2010; Regassa, Hizekiel and Korf 2019).

The reconfiguration of Ethiopia into regional states in the 1990s took a new turn in relations between pastoralist groups. It is important to emphasise that the intensity, frequency of conflict and actors involved in it have increased over time. It is important to note over the past two decades ethnic entrepreneurs have dominated Ethiopia's political landscape, entwining inter-group and inter-regional relationships. However, our findings do not fully support previous studies, suggesting that with the new ethnic-based administrative boundaries, ethnic groups are inevitably dichotomised through identification, and resource-based conflicts presuppose an ethnic dimension (Abbink 1997; Berisso 2009). Indeed, the post-1991 period in Ethiopia of "territorialising ethnicity" (Schlee 2013) has disrupted the established and customary mutual use of resources such as rangelands and water points (Berisso 2009). The study found that this disruption, which is inseparable from both the regional states and the federal state interventions, exacerbates conflicts in pastoral areas. To understand why territorial disputes are so frequent in Ethiopia, the causes must lie not only in the immediate aftermath of multi-national federalism, but also from a historical perspective. Apart from trying to understand the territorial disputes as a post-1991 phenomenon, it would be also interesting to see the pre-1991 boundary claims in the Awash Valley to see if these claims still influence the dynamics of the current conflict. The conflict between Argobba and Oromo is a particular example. It started in 1976. It is caught up in the practice of government actors manipulating administrative boundaries and their governance.

Boundary disputes are a continuation of historic claims, now embedded in the state-driven territorial expansion. Recurrent boundary-based conflicts were aggravated by regional government structures that in turn created "expansionist tendencies" that the public could finally learn from. It was Amhara political actors' (ethnic entrepreneurs) support of the Argobba and the use of both their ethnic and regional identity putting claims over the resources located in contested territorial areas along the inter-regional boundaries. The issues recurring in conversations with elders showed how conflicts were linked to the Amhara politicians with vested interests in the territories located in Oromiya. This issue is more in line with what Asebe calls "people in the politics" (Debelo 2016:68) rather than ethnic federalism itself causing inter-group conflict Moreover, the current research does not support the debates since that 1991 that paid more attention to ethnicity in explaining all conflicts occurring with the country. Asebe further contested that "inter-ethnic conflicts, [including pastoral conflicts] in Africa is related to the fixation on ethnicity as a key trigger of conflict" (Debelo 2016:67). Conflicts between groups are partly influenced by ethnicity, but their fate depends largely whether people effectively provide the ethnicity with effectively mobilise their ethnicity. Rather, our findings suggest that the territorial dispute in Ethiopia is a historic one, largely driven and underpinned by both visible and invisible state policies.

Another underlying factor behind the increase of pastoral violence is the widespread armed conflict and the supply of automatic weapons. Other studies likewise recognised how small arms have complicated pastoralist conflicts in East Africa (Mkutu 2005). Some pastoralist groups are more heavily armed than others, but all pastoralists have deliberately been armed to ensure protection over the last two decades. The militarisation of the pastoralist groups in the Rift Valley has now become a pervasive reality. Research has already shown how the militarisation of pastoralist societies is associated with increased violent conflict (Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008; Markakis 2003; Mkutu 2005; Wild, Jok and Patel 2018). Militarisation in recent years has taken an alarming turn in the regional cross-border conflicts. First, there is an increase in the military-like training, especially for young men. Second, regional cross-border conflicts are becoming more prominent and wider regional demission, beginning to shift from hit-and-run tactics to a full-scale engagement. Third, an even more important dynamism is the increase in attacks against unarmed civilians, especially women, and the destruction of villages.

## Conclusion

The article has illustrated, in the context of the Eastern Ethiopian Rift Valley, the pastoral conflict has become more rather than less dynamic and intense over the last two decades. Our argument in this article has been to show how a network of actors and evolving policies built upon a state structure may underpin pastoralist conflicts. As such, we have tried to uncover that the pastoral conflicts are often manifest in contested boundaries between regional states, land dispossessions by state-backed projects and militarisation of the pastoralists. The corollary to the present episode of conflict in pastoral areas could perhaps be, in shorthand, inter-connectedness. The causes of conflicts in Rift valley are no longer local but created by the intervention of the multi-layered state actors. Far from "neutralising" local politics, both federal and regional state actors negatively affect pastoralist interactions. The dynamic relationship between the central government and the pastoralists described in this article raises serious concern about the prolonged existence of such types of local conflict. This is because local conflicts emerged in the centralisation context where the state was considered as particularly expansionist. Ironically, it was the Ethiopian state apparatus itself, which caused the transformation of the environment of the pastoralist area into "resource scarcity", which might essentially change the mutual sharing of resources to competition and ultimately conflict. Our findings also explicate the peculiar interactions between regional states that seek to claim territories along inter-regional boundaries through the forceful occupation of territories that lay outside one's jurisdiction. At the same time, the uneasy interactions between regional states reinforce some of the long-standing boundary and resource-based pastoral conflicts that ethnic federalism is intended to solve.

To sum up, pastoral areas have continued to become a frontier of expansion. We have argued that expansionism is embedded in the policies of successive Ethiopian regimes and the sources of violence in pastoral areas. The conflict dynamics in pastoral areas are now shaped by policies that have been built into the country. The new ethnic federalism simply creates new regional centres and frontiers of expansions, thereby connecting pastoral areas with multiple actors that let the actors complicate the existing conflict in pastoral areas.

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BM conducted the fieldwork; transcribed, translated and organised the data; and wrote a draft. AG systematically reviewed the draft and put it into a manuscript format, and DT gave feedbacks. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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