INTRODUCTION:
A PARK WITH CONTENDING ACTORS

Nechisar National Park (NNP) is situated in southern Ethiopia in a region marked by a wet climate. It borrows its name from a white savannah grass that covers the undulating plains; it harbours 40% of all of Ethiopia’s bird species (Doku et al. 2007: 80; Biressu 2009: 1). NNP is rich in wild fauna such as Burchell’s zebra, Grant’s gazelle, kudu, bushbuck, hippopotamus, lion, leopard, Nile crocodile, anubis baboon, Vervet monkey, and colobus monkey. The land is composed of grasslands, thickets of shrublands, woodlands, and riparian forests, and above all, two lakes divided by a narrow strip of land called the ‘Bridge of God’ (Tsegaye, et al. 2017).

The formal creation of NNP in 1974 engendered the emergence of shifting arenas in which variegated actors with divergent interests competed over the control and use of the park and its resources. The Guji-Oromo agro-pastoralists and the Kore farmers were the contending ethnic groups claiming parts of the NNP land for farming, dwelling, and grazing, while the Gamo was the ethnic group claiming past administrative prerogatives over the present parkland. The Guji and the Kore areas adjoin the park to the north and the northeast. At present, the Guji occupy a contested village in the park,
Irgansa—which means ‘white grass field’ and is also used by the Guji to designate the entirety of the Park’s land. The NNP management considers Irgansa kebele⁷ an illegal settlement and obstacle to conservation practices. Local officials estimated that the total number of people living within the boundaries of the Park exceeded 7,000 in 2016. Socially, the Guji have a clan-based social structure, led by elders who are responsible for routine neighbourhood administration.

The Kore, for their part, cultivate crops and gather forest products within what Park authorities consider the boundaries of the NNP.² Both Guji and Kore claim to have been using the place for hunting, farming, pasturing, and dwelling long before the creation of the NNP. Like the Guji, the Kore also refer to the Park by specific names that reflect (or are an expression of) their claims—Mayino Shanka and Eenee, which mean ‘hunting ground’ and ‘wilderness’, respectively. The Kore claim parts of NNP based on the fact that it was carved out of their mythical ancestral king’s traditional farmland and ritual place. A third ethnic group, the Gamo, claim rights by referring to previously existing administrative divisions, cultural hunting excursions, and associated administrative mandates, as will be explained in subsequent sections.

An actor-oriented approach (Long 2003) was adopted to collect data from various actors situated at different socio-political scales. Claims and stakes of contending actors over time (from before 1974 to present day) were selected and documented by using qualitative data collection techniques. Accordingly, the bulk of the empirical data that informs this study stems from a two-phase fieldwork conducted between March and September of both 2016 and 2017 in and around NNP. Data were collected from various members of the communities and institutions to obtain an in-depth understanding of the meanings attached to NNP by the various actors who compete over land in the NNP, of the nature and history of the land claims, and of how they are formed and transformed across time. Qualitative data were collected through focus group interviews, on-site observations, and in-depth key informant interviews. Of the 57 informants, 23 were Guji from Irgansa village 19 were Kore from three villages surrounding the NNP, and 15 were officials from the NNP management. Gamo and Galana districts participated in the research and provided information central to this article.

Archival research was carried out, with attention to letters and memos exchanged about the struggles and claims related to land in the NNP. Additionally, 18 government officials from different structures of the two regional states were interviewed to learn more about their claims in the context of the ongoing people-park conflicts. I stayed with both Guji and Kore, living in and around the park for at least seven months during each phase of the fieldwork. In the sections that follow, we will first analyse the different governance approaches adopted for national parks, and define a point of departure from economistic solutions for addressing people-park conflicts to solutions that are situated in the understanding of the processes of state formation, land appropriation, and ethnic territorialisation in Ethiopia. We will then scrutinise how the formation of the NNP resulted in evictions of local communities, which later claimed and regained parts of the Park. In the final sections, we will describe how ethnic territorialisation, introduced as a principle of state reorganisation, has put the parkland in a difficult position by inviting various actors in arenas of land struggles. We will do this by analysing the different narratives that actors have mobilised since 1992.

**UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING PEOPLE-PARK CONFLICTS: FROM FORTRESS CONSERVATION TO MARKET-BASED APPROACHES**

Various management models have been used to sustainably protect biodiversity since the formation of the first protected area in the USA. The earliest model called ‘fortress conservation’ assumed that the areas that were protected were previously wilderness. If they were to remain so for the good of nature, they needed to be protected, often by a fence (Neumann 2001, 2002; Kubo and Supriyanto 2010; Blaikie and Muldavin 2014). Since then, conflicts between conservation agencies and local people are being witnessed. This model of fortress conservation often came to be criticised for creating social exclusion and depriving former land users of an important means to sustain their livelihoods (Brockington 2002; Igoe 2004; Dowie 2011; Brockington et al. 2012; Fletcher 2012; Mutanga et al. 2017). As a result, ‘fortress conservation’ gradually lost popularity.

Other paradigms, to remedy the gaps of fortress conservation, began to appear (see Ghimire and Pimbert 1997; Berkes 2004, 2007) that proposed the involvement of communities, exemplified by participatory or community conservation approaches. Adams and Hulme (2001) emphasise that participatory approaches, apart from raising grassroots awareness on nature conservation, aimed to enable people who previously lived within the boundaries of the park and were now living around the park to benefit economically from nature conservation, which was increasingly phrased in terms of ecosystem services. This approach, however, was less successful in protected area management since it failed to deliver a workable strategy by which to ensure the anticipated win-win outcomes for both people and nature (Twyman 2000; O’Riordan and Stoll Kleemann 2002; Walker et al. 2002; Berkes 2007; Muro and Jeffrey 2008; Fletcher 2010, 2012; Tsegaye et al. 2017). These presumed win-win outcomes of community-based conservation were criticised by various researchers. First, Brown (2003) clearly showed the shortcomings of the so-called people-centred policies, stating that it remained “expert driven, undemocratic and autocratic”, and proposed the inclusion of not just conservation experts but also a variety of actors and interest groups, including decision makers from the government (p. 89). Second, empirical findings suggest that win-win outcomes are rarely realised in practice (Wells and MacShane 2004: 514).

What tends to be overlooked in these new paradigms, to an almost systematic degree, is the land-based political
economy of states and the way it manifests itself on the ground, particularly through the dynamics of land appropriation and the processes of territorialisation (which may take various shapes, such as ethnic territorialisation; Schlee 2013) as well as its effect on both research and conservation policy and practice. States, constituted by formalised political territories, embark on compartmentalising spaces into territories in which their power, legitimacy, and interests or goals are perceived, exercised, and negotiated (Lefebvre and Smith 1991: 281; Bassett and Denis 2014: 3–7).

The process of turning a space into a bounded geographic territory necessitates territorialisation—a key organisational strategy to regulate rights and to curtail access to resources through relations and behaviours of people (Sack 1986; Brenner and Elden 2009). Territorialisation, as an imposed process of “fusing a space with political authority” (Korf et al. 2015: 884), with the intent of appropriating and establishing firm control over land and its resources, took place in two major stages throughout the imagined peripheries in southern Ethiopia (Schlee 2013: 865; Korf et al. 2015: 886; Debelo et al. 2018; Regassa et al. 2018; Regassa and Korf 2018).

The first phase of land appropriation (from the 1890s to the 1970s) by the conquering feudal soldiers (called neftennya) in southern Ethiopia brought about a division of mainly pastoral areas and altered pastoralists’ mobility and rights over land. This phase was also characterised by the creation of protected areas and other enclosures as well as the formation of urban centres in the country. The second practice of territorialisation often took ethnicity as a mobilisation tool for state restructuring and set in motion the drawing of firmer ethnic boundaries, thereby resulting in stiff competition over previously shared land and resources. Boundaries became “blurred or negotiable” (Korf et al. 2015: 885) between various ethnic neighbours. Access to land and resources was highly important in a dominantly agrarian society as it was the basic source of status, power, and means of livelihood. Relations to land shaped group and personal identities, power structures, and status hierarchies (Boone 2007). Therefore, struggles over land in the NNP remain drawn out, often wrapped in various government policy frameworks, as will be shown in the final sections of this article. Within this broader context, this article tries to unpack how state-led land appropriation and later ethnic federalism, which introduced territorial limits to pastoralists and “miniatures” (Schlee 2013: 865) in and around NNP, ultimately pushed the NNP into a dangerous position.

Therefore, contrary to the economistic approach that reduces people-park conflicts to benefit sharing, as discussed previously, we will shed light on how the nature of the struggles over land in the NNP surpass eco-tourism solutions and remain rooted in the country’s political dynamics. Hence, rather than limiting our understanding to either the absence or presence of economic incentives for communities affected by conservation, our analysis emphasises the processes of contemporary land appropriation by the state and through the mobilisation of ethnic territorialisation.

**LAND AND RESOURCE CONTROL IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIAN HISTORY**

The geographic area discussed in this study has been subject to a succession of governance regimes over the past 150 years. It was first brought under the control of the state after its conquest by the Ethiopian Empire during the last decades of the nineteenth century. This imperial regime remained in place (with a hiatus in 1936/1941) until it was overthrown in 1974 and replaced by a revolutionary government (often referred to as the Derg regime), which, notably, nationalised all land. The Derg regime was overthrown in 1991, after which the new Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime introduced a federal system, whose constituent units were defined by ethnicity. Under this system, the NNP fell on the boundary between the Oromia Regional State to which the Guji belonged and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Regional State (SNNPRS), to which the Gamo and Kore belonged.

Land, obvious as it might be, is a vital living space with its individual and collective purposes of self-expression, satisfying survival needs, and providing locational and strategic values (Kolers 2009: 8). Since the feudal period, land in Ethiopia has been owned and controlled solely by the state (Crewett and Korf 2008) and any decision over land has been a state monopoly to date (Desalegn 2010). Sikor and Lund (2009: 10) contended that state formation and governance practices are processes whereby right to land and other natural resources are settled and contested as these processes bring about various rights and alienations. As a way of exerting state power over people, control over land was seen as a pivotal strategy during the state formation process in Ethiopia. The Imperial March to the southern parts of Ethiopia in the last decades of the nineteenth century, for example, was prompted by a strong ambition to control land and its resources (McClellan 2002; Regassa et al. 2018).

Hagmann and Mulugeta (2008: 24) assert that “during the imperial period all land that was not permanently settled or cultivated was owned by the state and pastoralists were legally dispossessed of their land”. Immediately after the conquest, the formation of garrison towns and the expansion of agriculture into these conquered southern territories resulted in the restriction of the pastoralists’ movements that were previously free (Babiker et al. 2002: 63). Hilland also states “At the time of incorporation, pastoral lands were granted as fiefs to the feudal retainers of Menelik II, in reward to their services, to ensure their loyalty and to secure them a source of income” (2002: 50). Lands subjected to the imperial land grants were found in the present day Gamo Gofa, Keffa, and Wollega areas, which, after their conquest, turned into state property and were apportioned to men of status, influence, and nobility (Adal 2002).

To worsen the situation, the rising global concern over environmental challenges added more pressure on developing countries. It demanded the expansion of protected areas on already scarce land, which consequently affected rural pastoral
and agricultural livelihoods (Boone 2007). It is reported that “70 per cent the protected areas worldwide are inhabited or regularly used by local people” (Peters 2004: 189). From the outset, the creation of protected areas involved the selection of wildlife-rich areas from what the state assumed as wilderness but were locally charged with multiple values and meanings. As indicated in the literature, pastoral areas have been fertile candidates for the formation of protected areas in eastern Africa (Homewood, and Rodgers 1987; Little 1996). Similarly, protected areas in eastern Africa and southern Ethiopia were created out of agricultural or pastoral lands, which the conservation agencies considered as vacant, less utilised, and wilderness (Asebe 2016). The introduction of rules of curtailment of communal landholding alongside the creation of new national parks, ultimately altered land tenure and power relations to land (Krishnan 2009; Holmes 2013). Consequently, conflicts over land inside protected areas mushroomed progressively in Africa (Brockington 2004).

Even if the Guji did not suffer systematic or direct land alienation as a consequence of nineteenth century and early twentieth century imperial expansion, “the neftenya [settler soldiers] forced the Guji to herd livestock while assigning the Gedeo4 for horticultural activities” (McClellan 2002: 181). The conquest and incorporation of pastoral and agricultural areas exerted four major land use pressures on the conquered Guji people (Donham et al. 1986; MacClellan 2002: 176): fleeing of Gedeo farmers to Guji pastoral areas in the lowlands; formation of urban centres and institutions resulting in the dispersal of the Guji over different territories such as the present day NNP; formation of Amaro district in 1944 which brought the Guji under its administration; and the establishment of large state farms over occupied lands (Desalegn 2010: 37; Regasa and Korf 2018). Desalegn argued that many landlords in the 1960s “were encouraged by the government policy to promote mechanized farming”, which seemingly resulted in the establishment of several state farms in the present day South Omo zone and towns in present day Gamo Gofa zone. Formation of the Arba Minch state farm (in 1958) and Arba Minch town (in 1962) particularly introduced a territorial squeeze on the Guji pastoralists’ seasonal movements. One of our key informants explained the establishment of state farms on previously pastoral corridors as the spoiling of “land culture”:

The land practically escaped the Guji custom immediately when Dejazmach Aeymero-Selassie came to Gamo Gofa and established the state farms of Arba Minch and Sile and the town of Arba Minch. Those Guji who chose to stay were confined to the state farms and the town and started farming, abandoning their culture of herding. That was how the culture of that land was spoiled (Cari Gamisa; at Haroressa; August 2016).

As per the claim of my informant, the changed “land culture” rests in the relation of the Guji to land and the altered rights of these pastoralists over land. Land tenure among the Guji before the occupation could mainly be considered as having the rights to access and use resources. Gebeyehu (2011) stated that a communal landholding system characterised the entire pastoral area in Ethiopia. In this communal modality of land tenure, people freely accessed and used resources, only regulated by traditional institutions, which varied from place to place and included village elders (in advising and supervising where and when to move and graze), families, and lineage groups (Tsegaye et al. 2017). Following the forceful expropriation of communal land and the formation of state farms, local pastoralists lost the right to free grazing over what they claimed as ancestral lands previously accessed and regulated by the communal rules.

This progressive effort of territorialisation as a means to assert power over a space includes what Peluso and Lund (2011) understood as “drawing boundaries around the objects and people within those boundaries” (p. 673). One form of sanctioning control over spaces, as argued by Peluso (1993), is through the formation of protected areas. Formation and governance of protected areas requires territorialisation—legalisation of spaces involving inclusion and exclusion of access and use rights over enclosed resources. Thomas and Gautier defined territorialisation as “specific territorial projects in which various actors deploy territorial strategies (territoriality) to produce bounded and controlled spaces (territory) to achieve certain effects” (2014: 2).

As territorialisation ultimately produces differential access to resources, struggles over territories arise with multiple actors and sites. Sack (1986) argues that territorialisation is a process in which specific forms of relations with space are conceived and enforced. Such relations could be asymmetrical, especially when seen in the realm of protected area creation and management. Unequal power relations inevitably trigger struggles due to the specific interests of each group claiming rights over territorialised spaces. As will be discussed in subsequent sections, institutions and people involved in the struggles over territorialised land (in NNP) have diverse interests in the organising principle of space.

The result of incorporation of the land that the Guji had lived on by the then established administrations of Gamo Gofa province and Amaro district resulted in immediate contestation over land and the dispersal of Guji throughout different administrations, and current inter-group tension. The formation of the town of Arba Minch under Dejazmach Aeymero-Selassie also entailed competition over the present parkland. Amaro district claimed its boundary to be beyond the ritual stone called Santaka Dingay (a huge rock found in the western part of the NNP, at which some Kore men perform annual rituals). This marked the boundary between Amaro (which by then was the district administering the Guji) and Gamo Gofa. Clearly, the appropriation of land and seeking of land tax from willing subjects had been a point of contention since the 1940s. Broadly speaking, the most significant implication was a conflict over land among the neighbouring Amaro, Gamo, and Guji populations, all of whom claimed the same piece of land because of a previous use, prior to the entry of the neftenya in the late nineteenth century. The formation of the park in 1974 should be understood in the context of these local land disputes as...
they transcend to the present-day conflicts over land inside the park.

Generally, struggles over land access and use rights constitute a chronic problem (Shipton and Goheen 1992) that has been resulting in tense conflicts across Africa (Whitehead and Tsikata 2003; Moyo 2005). The land question in Ethiopia is also crucial for both pastoralists and farmers as more than 80% of their livelihoods are tied to it. The mounting struggles to regain access to, and exercise control over, dispossessed lands due to the formation of protected areas have been gradually incapacitating these protected areas (Holmes 2007).

**FORMATION OF NECHISAR NATIONAL PARK**

The formation of the NNP in 1974 was followed by its placement under the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation (EWCO; Debelo 2012; Kelboro and Stellmacher 2015). This organisation mandated that it be administered by Gamo Gofa province (Figure 1).

The contested boundary between Gamo Gofa province and Amaro district was later resolved by the interference of the central government. Capitalising on that, Gamo Gofa province later reinforced its claims in the 1960s by expanding further into what is the eastern part of the present-day NNP territory. From 1974, the then Gamo Gofa province started administering the Guji living in almost all parts of the Park.

Gradually the NNP and consequently the administrative boundary of Gamo Gofa province expanded further east. The Guji came to be included under Gamo Gofa province in 1978 and were evicted in 1982 by Gamo Gofa province from what was claimed as parkland. The Guji had lived in most areas of the NNP without knowing it was enclosed until 1982, when they faced the first bitter eviction (Biressu 2009). Gamo Gofa province established authority over this space and later used this authority to justify the eviction of Guji and Kore in the name of ‘securing the protected area’. Bassett and Denis defined territorialisation as a “polycentric process” marked by the frequent production of conflicts and violence over the control of territories (2014: 3–7). The process of excluding both the Guji and Kore communities from the claimed territory involved the burning of Guji houses in the NNP and the killing of their cattle, thereby putting the Guji at odds with the Park authorities and those who were involved in enforcing the eviction. The Kore also lost much of their enset (Ensete edulis is a staple food crop widely grown in south-western Ethiopia) farms in parts of Sermelle valley and the NNP (Assoma 2016). In one of my focus group interviews at Golbo (a village in the eastern part of the NNP), Guji informants narrated their problematic encounters with Park managers and decision makers as follows:

Men coming to this land [villages in and around the park] holding a pen and paper seemed good at first. They kept asking about our problems with the NNP, they told us how we had been harming the NNP, and they shared with us what they call a better government plan concerning the future fate of the Guji and the park. After some time, they themselves or their agents

![Figure 1](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/Un-ethiopia.png)
came back with matches and guns to burn our villages. This is the truth we have learned from our experience since 1982. [The NNP management and the police] burned our villages three times. Look, how can Guji homes be considered a park? We have been here since the older days. This is how we happen to live a dark life under the NNP management (Guye Halake; Golbo; July 2016).

The change of regime in 1991 brought the Guji and Kore back to their “lost” homes and farmlands, respectively. The process of their return involved mass killings of wildlife inside the Park, signifying the revenge of the Guji and Kore for the previous, unjust attacks on their livelihoods and homes (Abraham Mariye; see also Jacobs and Schloeder 2001). Campsites for scouts in the NNP were also burned during the relatively lawless period between 1991 and 1992 (Abraham Mariye; NNP headquarters; June 2016; see also Biressu 2009; Jacobs and Schloeder 2001; Kelboro and Stillmacher 2015; Debelo 2016; Tsegaye et al. 2017). Apart from reports like these, there is no specific inventory of wildlife affected due to attacks.

**FORMATION OF NEW DISTRICTS, FAILED RESETTLEMENT, AND EMERGENCE OF STRUGGLES**

Following the ratification in 1995 of the current Federal Republic of Ethiopia’s constitution, new districts were created, meant to administer the Guji as a way to realise self-governance for ethnic groups. This was followed by the establishment of a new zonal administration in 2016. This is in line with the assertion of Lefebvre and Smith that “each new form of state, each new form of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space and about things and people in space. Each such form commands space, as it were, to serve its purposes” (Lefebvre and Smith 1991: 281). The formation of a new zonal administration, by restructuring the Guji-inhabited district administrations previously instituted under Borena zone, was considered by the Gamo Gofa zone as an attempt of territorial expansion of the Oromia regional state. This same move, however, was proclaimed by the Oromia regional state as an effort at “ensuring good governance to serve its purposes” (Lefebvre and Smith 1991: 281). The change of regime in 1991 brought the Guji and Kore back to their “lost” homes and farmlands, respectively. The process of their return involved mass killings of wildlife inside the Park, signifying the revenge of the Guji and Kore for the previous, unjust attacks on their livelihoods and homes (Abraham Mariye; see also Jacobs and Schloeder 2001).

The newly established West Guji zone claimed to administer territories where the Guji had lived “since the seventeenth century” (Abebe Diko; Tore; August 2017). Thus, the status of the Guji living in the NNP continues to remain an area of contention between West Guji and Gamo Gofa zones.

As a result of the land claims between these two zones under two different regional states, resettling communities living in and using parts of the NNP led to conflict among various actors. Lund argues that natural resource management is always politicised and is, hence, an object of power struggles (2011). Competing and often overlapping land tenures create competition or conflicts. The inclusion of the Irgansa Guji under the newly instituted Galana district resulted in overlapping interests with the NNP management and rejection by the Gamo Gofa zone, who also claim parts of the land that the Guji live on. The federal government contrated the administration of the NNP between 2005 and 2008 to a conservation NGO, African Parks Foundation, to settle the struggles between local and regional contesting actors. African Parks Foundation is a non-profit conservation organisation that “aims to rehabilitate each park, making them ecologically, socially and financially sustainable long into the future, for the benefit of people and wildlife”.

As a way to materialise their promise to hand over a human-free park to African Parks Foundation, the “Gamo Gofa police evicted and burned” some Guji villages in the eastern corridor of the NNP in May 2005, and ‘successfully relocated’ Kore households to Abulo and Alfecho, about 15 km from the park (Debelo 2012; Kelboro and Stillmacher 2015). The resettlement site was one which their regional government had chosen or where the community itself had agreed to move, “in order to make the park attractive for tourists who will pour foreign currency the country yearns to have” (Abreham Mariye; NNP office; June 2017).

The Kore who joined the resettlement included “landless households from distant places, and from villages adjacent to the park” (Tariku Abule; Kelle; August 2017). These adjacent villages were found to be at an average distance of 4–12 km from the park towards the east and north-east. Dealing with the Guji in the remaining adjacent villages of Gode remained a challenge for the African Parks Foundation. Hence, the African Parks Foundation presented a park management plan and a land use proposal to the two regional states. However, these were rejected by the SNNPRS. The efforts by the African Parks Foundation to reach an agreement with the Guji to grant them seasonal access to grazing (along the buffer areas in the eastern corridor in the NNP) were also viewed with suspicion by the Gamo Gofa zone administration and considered as a hidden strategy “confirming the land transfer deal” and completely rejected (Kebede Chinkilo; Arba Minch; June 2016). On this matter, Vlissingen and Pearce describe the competing interests during the relocation: “The wish for resettlement springs from an ethno-federalist fixation harboured by the local authorities. The Guji are an Oromo people, and according to the southern regional government they belong in the adjoining Oromia province, not among the Gamo and Gofa peoples of the Southern District, where the park is” (2005: 49). As a result, representatives of the Federal Government and the two regional states jointly visited the NNP, including some Guji villages inside the NNP in 2008 (Cari Gamisa; Gode village; June 2016). Their visit and onsite ‘oral decisions’ approving the Guji settlements—though without any formal endorsement—caused confusion during the later implementation of the decision by the Gamo Gofa zone administration and African Parks Foundation. Sikor and Lund asserted that “people attempt to consolidate their claims to land and other resources in various ways, often in pursuit of turning their access to resources into recognized property”
Similarly, the Guji utilised their prior presence in the parkland and strengthened their claim by forming the lowest level government structure known to its regional government since 2005.

Consequently, representatives of the Gamo Gofa zone brought the matter to the public’s attention. This was followed by demonstrations opposing their onsite decision at Arba Minch town in 2007–2008 (Tariku Guyo; Arba Minch; June 2016). Unable to implement its plans and caught in a trap between contesting regional actors, the African Parks Foundation terminated its contract in 2008. The NNP was then placed under the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority. The failure of African Parks Foundation to effectively implement its market-based objectives by bringing local contending actors aboard for negotiations was borne out of the prevailing, often problematic, ethnic territorialisation, which resulted in overlapping land claims between divergent administrative structures. The Gamo Gofa zone and the SNNPRS have consistently justified the relocation of Guji and Kore from parts of the NNP by arguing that they are contributing to the effective realisation of the country’s tourism development policy.

The NNP land remained at the centre of the contestations, as witnessed during the formation of the newer Guji kebele in the contested areas of the NNP. The refusal of the Gamo Gofa zone to endorse the African Parks Foundation’s proposal to handle Guji claims, through land use zonation and creation of buffer areas, further strengthens the argument that land in the NNP is the ultimate prize for which each actor is competing. Hence, the crux of these struggles is a claim over land that has been territorialised under different administrative and use statuses (Figure 2). The conflicts have also been revisited in various pretexts, such as the need to ensure biodiversity conservation and the right of self-administration (discussed in subsequent sections).

**TERRITORIALISING LAND AND PEOPLE LEADING TO ONGOING STRUGGLES**

From as early as the 1940s, the area of the NNP has undergone different processes of territorialisation which have affected land use systems and the movements of pastoralists such as the Guji. These territorialisation processes took place in four phases. The first phase involved the establishment of Amaro district in 1944 (after liberation from a brief Italian occupation from 1935 to 1941). This resulted in limiting grazing to corridors such as the present-day areas of Segen and Boreda. The second phase involved the formation of Arba Minch town (1962) and the creation of two state farms (1958) to the north and south of the present-day Arba Minch. This resulted in large pieces of land being fenced off, thereby preventing the Guji...
from crossing with their cattle as they were used to, thereby limiting their movements even more (Biressu 2009). The third phase involved the formation of the NNP in 1974, without the knowledge let alone consent of or any negotiation with the Guji pastoralists and the Kore farmers who traditionally had been living, farming, and grazing in the spaces designated to be the NNP. As discussed previously in Section 3, a state-led territorialisation of pastoral and agricultural areas in the present day NNP affected the Guji and Kore communities profoundly. In 1992, the change of regime brought about a more complex form of territorialisation, which introduced ethnic federalism and a restructuring of administration on an ethnic basis. This was done to keep one ethnic group under the same administration. Empirical evidence in the past, however, shows that heterogeneous groups inhabited territories that marked the borders between regional states or administrations.9

As Adugna (2011) argued, the new mapping of the administrative boundaries between new federal units (regional states) subsumed claims to administer not only ethno-linguistic groups but also vital resources and land. It set in motion a competition over land on which these groups had been living (see also Asnake 2010).

Territorialisation equally affected protected areas, such as the NNP, the Awash National Park, and the Mago National park, which were already highly contested areas torn between different ethno-regional groups (Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008). Lund further stated that “each group sees its interests best served by a particular reading of the past and particular conceptions of space” (2013: 14). This perfectly correlates with the way the Gamo, Guji, and Kore groups fall back on their past narratives about the present day NNP. The Guji argue the past of the parkland as their home and grazing land. The Gamo claim that the parkland and part of the present-day Guji population were once under their administrative territory. The Kore from their part claim that both the Guji and the present day NNP were under the administration of Amaro district before the formation of the NNP. More importantly, all these competing interpretations of the past of the parkland developed as a result of the post-1992 political restructuring of the country along ethno-linguistic lines.

The country’s ethnic territorialisation not only complicated already existing contestations that characterised many national parks, including the NNP, but also altered the character and the stakes of the claims. While initially, prior to 1992 at least, only land was at stake, the ethnic territorialisation engendered a change in focus—now people were also being claimed. As Scott (1988) stated, “a common goal of territorialization is to govern people and resources located within and around the territory”. These claims of people and ethnic groups were, once again, camouflaging claims over land and control over resources.

**MULTIPLE FACES OF STRUGGLES**

Peluso (1993) asserted that one form of sanctioning control over space is through the legalisation of the space to which different actors have different levels of access. Differential access involves the inclusion and exclusion of some actors and often triggers struggles. The recent face of the contestations also puts arguments for and against the eviction of people from parts of the NNP in a different light. As will be shown in this section, various tactics were used to legitimise different arguments and were used by the multiple claimants of the NNP land. The NNP management itself has become a strong actor in the debate, in turn legitimising its position based on the conservation regulation of 2008.

Although the Gamo Gofa zone and the NNP management both agree that local communities have to be resettled from the NNP, their discourse is different. The NNP management tries to materialise the rhetoric of an ‘intact park’ or a ‘human-free park’ (Abreham Mariye; NNP office; June 2016). The Gamo Gofa zone states that they want to remove ‘illegal settlers who are destroying nature’ in order to secure the eastern side of the zonal boundary from ‘these encroaching others’ (Mihretu Manaye; Arba Minch; June 2016). An additional argument was forwarded by the tourism and culture office of the Gamo Gofa zone, who explained their concerns: “lots of NGOs worked with the zonal government and the park administration, but most of them withdrew after becoming aware of the presence of the Guji in the park. The Guji have been obstacles in the rehabilitation of the park since their re-entrance in the park in 1992” (head of the tourism and culture office of the Gamo Gofa zone; Arba Minch; June 2017). The Gamo Gofa zonal administration alternates between different rhetorics depending on the audience — in a political context, they emphasise that they are ‘removing people from their zonal administrative territory’, and when talking to conservation NGOs they claim that they want to realise a ‘human-free national park’.10

**POLITICO-LEGAL AND POLICY ARENA OF STRUGGLES**

Sikor and Lund stated that “to understand how access claims become property it is necessary to examine the process whereby authority is formed, strengthened, and challenged” (2009: 13). Authority in the case of the Irgansa settlement of Guji—a settlement inside the park—was formed in two stages. The first stage was when federal representatives, presidents of the two regional states, and other delegates—all members of the highest-level authorities—approved their settlement orally. The second stage was when Galana Abaya district constituted Irgansa as its legally recognised local kebele in 2005. Legitimacy of occupancy was strengthened further when local political parties—including those in Irgansa village—were able to register and compete for political power in the elections of 2005. Presenting a voter card to any person in any regular national election at any place in the country was considered as an equivalent identification card. Hence, by transitivity, the card justified recognition in the eyes of the law. Since the NNP had still not been gazetted, other actors like the NNP management and the Gamo Gofa zone challenged this
political and natural right, and considered the Guji in Irgansa illegal settlers on parkland.

Sikor and Lund argued that “institutions will generally seek to legitimate their exercise of power with reference to the law, custom, precedence, property, or administrative expediency” (2009:13). By the same token, the NNP management mobilised the Conservation Law of the Ethiopian federal government against the status and practices of the Irgansa Guji. The Conservation Law clearly prohibits activities such as “undertaking agricultural activities or preparing land for cultivation; allowing to graze and water domestic animals; and establishing housing units for permanent settlement” in any protected area (Council of Ministers, Regulation No. 163/2008).

The NNP management also tried to defend the formal land size of 514 sq. km, which still has not been demarcated on the ground, and opted to uphold the environmental regulation’s principles. The NNP warden whom I interviewed, argued:

Politicians only know politics; they do not want to understand conservation values. They do not know behaviours of wildlife—how and where they live and breed better. For example, zebra love to stay on flat fields during daylight, browsing and prefer to stay on hilly areas at night. However, our politicians always prioritise human security, while when they are in office, they sign international agreements on biodiversity conservation protocols (Abreham Mariye; NNP office; August 2016).

The same regulation, however, hints at the possibility of negotiating the boundaries of wildlife conservation areas: “The existing boundaries of national parks, wildlife reserves, wildlife sanctuaries, wildlife controlled hunting areas shall be maintained or be re-delineated by the federal and regional governments to improve their management” (Council of Ministers, Regulations No. 163/2008). Informants from the Galana district administration of Guji frequently refer to this provision in the regulation to defend the co-existence of wildlife and the Guji. On the one hand, the regulation’s provision also clearly states the possibility of negotiating and deciding resource use and the ultimate fate of the pre-park population: “seasonal utilization of natural resources such as bee-keeping and honey harvesting, cutting and taking of forage and collection of medicinal plants.” On the other hand, the regulation explicitly asserts that “persons who were inhabitants of a wildlife reserve prior to the date of its establishment, [can] continue residing therein” (Council of Ministers, Regulation, No. 163/2008, No. 5, sub-article 3(B)).

Contrary to this provision, the NNP management and the Gamo Gofa administration openly promoted the wilderness argument about the land’s pre-park status and advanced it to legitimatisate their decision to remove all forms of human settlement.

Struggles over the parkland also draw upon wider political spaces, and in some cases, include those situated in the federal government policy on tourism and development. The SNNPRS claimed that the regional government was committed to implementing the federal policy formulated and adopted in 2015. Dawit Dana emphasised that “The government is

vigorously trying to put in place the goal of making Ethiopia a middle income country by 2020, through collective development programmes” (June 2016). The purpose of this development ‘goal’, as stated by the government official interviewed, is to ensure biodiversity conservation, environmental protection, and effective resource utilisation, thereby leading to sustainable development through which the country can generate robust benefits. The tourism sector is one of the top focus areas in realising this development ‘goal’ by harnessing foreign currency earned by developing and protecting the country’s tourism sites. A special committee, organised as per the information secured from the official at the regional office, chaired by the then prime minister (H.E Hailemariam Desalegn), involved both the concerned stakeholders and the regional state representatives. The committee was empowered to conduct a strong follow up and support the effective protection of protected areas, cultural sites, and archaeological sites, and recommend possible solutions to challenges facing the tourism sector. Thus, regional states and federal authorities pushed the protection and development of protected areas, including the NNP, through the relocation elsewhere of “problematic pastoral communities”.

Reaching a consensus and effecting relocation decisions remain a matter of controversy among multiple actors, as mentioned previously. One of the other problematic policies of current government is the objective of “ensuring food security through effective utilisation of land and land-based resources across the country”, as stated in the country’s official rural development and food security strategy. This specific programme was selectively mobilised by Oromia regional state officials and militates against the Gamo Gofa zone’s eviction proposal, arguing that the eviction would result in human and livelihood insecurity of the previously food secure Guji in the NNP (Jarso Bakalo; Tore; August 2017). Local officials of the Galana district substantiated evidence that the “Guji are making tremendous efforts to defeat poverty through the effective use of the Sermele river and the introducing magnificent irrigation schemes without the support of the government; they should therefore be supported by the local government to continue living in the place” (Tolosa Demise; Adama; September 2017). Against this position, the Gamo Gofa zone officials argued that the “Guji have been receiving food aid from us since 2002, and have never been food secure” (Aysa Ayts; Arba Minch; March 2016).

Both regional state officials and local authorities rally against each other on whether to relocate people from the NNP, by mobilising different interpretations of the same government policy programme. The crux of the various struggles discussed here is not only a matter of ensuring a human-free park or of protecting communities from eviction but also a register of claims and contestations over land in the NNP that are promoted and manipulated under various pretexts.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has discussed how the progressive territorialisation of land and the land-based political economy of successive
Ethiopian governments have resulted in increasingly ‘trapped land’ in the NNP. NNP has been claimed by various groups with different narratives and views about the parkland. Regime changes have also affected territories of protected areas by inducing remapping and boundary making projects by state actors which, ultimately, resulted in overlapping maps that reflect the conflicting interests of the contending actors regarding a single protected area. Resource use claims shifted dramatically to political claims to lands in the eastern part of the NNP, jeopardising the conservation administration and the existence of the protected area since 1992. A market-based approach adopted by the African Parks Foundation to solve the struggles over the park proved to be ineffective and was crippled shortly. Evictions and resettlement proposals, camouflaged in the rhetoric of ensuring ‘effective conservation’, show the faces of the territorial competition between regional state actors, aiming to add more patches of land to their respective regional political administrations and therefore facing resistance from the other actors. Compensating people affected by conservation in kind alone cannot be the much sought after panacea, to which this case study stands witness. Since the government itself is a party to the struggles, an easy resolution is far from realisation. It is therefore fruitful to include the complex historico-political dynamics and parallel state restructuring in understanding park-people conflicts. Finally, picturing people-park conflicts as caused only by economistic drives appears less relevant when explaining the nature of conflicts in contested areas such as conservation areas.

NOTES
1. A kebele is the smallest formal administrative unit in Ethiopia, which is usually further subdivided into several ketena.
2. The NNP has still not been gazetted and its actual size is still disputed. While the NNP management and the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority maintain that the size of the NNP is 514 sq. km, some authors estimate the size of the NNP to be only 450 sq. km (Tsegaye et al. 2017: 292). It should be noted that parts of Lake Chamo (48 sq. km) and Lake Abaya (30 sq. km)—which are separated by a narrow land passage called the ‘Bridge of God’—are considered to be inside the park.
3. Sack (1986: 26) defined territorialisation as “a process of setting places aside and enforcing degrees of access meant that individuals and groups have removed some activities and people from places and included others”.
4. Gedeo is the name for people currently administered under the Gedeo zone of the SNNPRS and the adjoining West Guji zone to the north.
5. Freeman (2002: 37) mentioned the formation year was in the 1960s.
6. https://www.africanparks.org/sites/default/files/uploads/resources/2018-11/20181029_African%20Parks%20Booklet_Update_V18_General%20Booklet_Web_English_Single%20Pages.pdf.
7. It is common to hear Guji and Kore mention the Gamo Gofa police when explaining the process and nature of the previous evictions from parts of the NNP. The NNP and the Gamo Gofa police claim it was “a support for law enforcement as asked by the park”.
8. The kebeles are located at an average distance of 10–15 km away from the NNP’s claimed eastern boundary.
9. For details on how fusing territory with ethnicity remains problematic in Ethiopia’s current state structure and has resulted in heated struggles over territory, see Hagmann and Mulugeta (2008), Kefale (2010), and Adugna (2011).
10. Personal observation: I participated in two different gatherings on sustainable resource management and tourism at Arba Minch town, with a team from Ethiopian Tourism Organisation (in August 2016) and with the members of the House of People’s Representatives (in May 2017). As a researcher, I was formally invited by Arba Minch University to contribute to the discussion and to share my preliminary findings about the people-park conflicts in the NNP.
11. Of the Hawassa office of the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM; a political party affiliated with EPRDF and representing the SNNPRS).
12. See detailed provisions of the forest development conservation and utilization policy and strategy in the document (in Amharic) published by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) in 2008.
13. Personal communication: Muluken Shewakenaw of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority; Addis Ababa; May 2015.
14. The 2001 official document (in Amharic) on the food security strategy by the FDRE was accessed at Galana wereda, Torit.
15. During my fieldwork between March and September of both 2016 and 2017, I observed a few traditional canals in the Sermelle valley, which the Guji and the Kore dug for a maize farm and that watered a pastureland for seasonal grazing. I could not confirm the “magnificent” irrigation schemes claimed by the local officials.

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