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'The land does not like them': contesting dispossession in cosmological terms in Mela, south-west Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The inhabitants of the lower Omo Valley, a lowland area of southwestern Ethiopia, are facing rapid and unprecedented changes due to the implementation of a large-scale development project along the Omo River. The Ethiopian government has undertaken the establishment of a sugarcane plantation of massive proportions and plans to make the local agro-pastoralists into out-growers settled in large, government-designed villages. This paper compares the discourses of the government on the value of local livelihoods with the internal discourses of one local group, the Mela, on the changes affecting the land. It demonstrates that the government and Mela discourses draw on radically different cosmologies and engagements with nature. Whereas the state discourses encapsulate a disenchantment of the world, Mela discourses stress the importance of propitiating mythical beings, held as the 'real custodians' of the land. In Mela's views, their successful engagement with these mythical beings means that they belong to the land, in contrast to the government which they see as neglecting these beings and thus to be doomed to fail in its developmental endeavours. The paper points towards the relevance of these discourses for Mela's sense of agency and autochthonous identity. In the context of an authoritarian state which bridles at open contestation, these discourses provide, in Mela minds at least, a means to subvert state power and to contest its legitimacy and efficiency.

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Large-scale development projects have forcibly displaced people around the world. Resistance movements organized at the grass-roots against projects associated with the displacement and resettlement of people have been well documented.¹ Little is known, however, about the ways local people understand and possibly contest the changes that are forced upon them when their political environment precludes any form of organized resistance to emerge. In this article, I consider the case of the Mela,² an agro-pastoralist society of the lower Omo River Valley in south-west Ethiopia. Part of their land has been transformed into state-run sugarcane plantations since 2012, and the government has already made attempts to villagize the entire Mela population. I analyse the cosmological references in Mela people's discussions of the dramatic changes affecting them. Unlike organized resistance movements aiming to reach an external audience and therefore appropriating

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external frames of references,³ Mela who have no connection with the local government, when talking among themselves, draw on their own cosmology, and revitalize it.

We know, notably from Scott's landmark studies, that dominated groups do not passively comply with their domination, even when they deem open resistance too dangerous. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott detailed the economic resistance of peasants, which the landlords may fail to notice but which, at the same time, undermine their power. He then focused on speech acts as ideological resistance which happens 'off-stage', unheard by the powerholders and which he calls 'hidden transcripts'.⁴ In his view, hidden transcripts are 'a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it'.⁵ The notion of resistance has since then been applied to a wide array of practices, and the literature shows a lack of consensus on its definition.⁶ In this paper, I refer to Mela discourses as contestation rather than resistance as such, for the outcome – when, for instance, 'millennial dreams' actually become 'revolutionary politics'⁷ – is for the moment unknown. Rather than pondering over the potential for open resistance contained in Mela discourses, I propose to focus on the creativity they deploy in them – the 'arts' of contestation, to draw from Scott's title.

Scott details the 'infrapolitics' of subordinates in long-established power relationships, such as slavery or serfdom, not in moments of critical changes when the dominants suddenly extend the scope of their power. But, in a later work, *Seeing like a State*, he argued that state-initiated schemes of social engineering, when cumulating four characteristics that are all found in the present case – an 'administrative ordering of nature and society', 'a high-modernist ideology', 'an authoritarian state' and 'a prostrate civil society that lack the capacity to resist these plans' – are bound to fail, because they ignore 'essential features of any real, functioning social order'.⁸ This article is based on the assumption that the exploration of the covert contestation of these grand schemes can possibly shed new light on their workings – and their failures.

The analysis of discourses of the Mela and of the government reveals that two different forms of relations to nature are at stake in this process of large-scale development. The construction of nature as a bare commodity is forced on people who hold the natural, human and divine worlds as inseparable. Unable to contest these transformations in the public political arena, Mela discourses are a means to reflect on and evaluate the power that the government exercises upon them and to compare it with an assessment of the nature of their own autochthonous power. These considerations are inextricable from a comparison of the state and Mela's respective engagements with their surroundings. In these discourses, state power is viewed as illegitimate, and ultimately self-destructive, because state agents neglect local people's knowledge and fail to recognize the divine presence in the land. Mela consider that they, on the contrary, have successfully engaged with the divine entities and as such hold power over those who have not; their engagement with divine entities also guarantees their survival. Through this view on the relative legitimacy and efficiency of power, Mela make sense of the changes in their own terms and maintain a sense of agency and permanence. These discourses do not surface during encounters with government officials – Mela then draw on a different register. They remain a 'hidden transcript', a critique of power that is not communicated to the people they seek to undermine.⁹ It is not the only form of discourse the Mela formulate among themselves in reaction to the changes (they also express despair or resignation), but, if the question of its leading to active resistance remains open, it is significant for understanding how Mela perceive and experience the profound changes taking place.

Context and methodology

The valley of the lower course of the Omo River is home to several small ethnic groups whose livelihoods depend on a combination of some or all of these components: flood-retreat cultivation on the riverbanks, shifting cultivation in the bush, pastoralism in the grasslands, apiculture, hunting, fishing and wild-food gathering. Until the recent development projects, the valley remained at the periphery of the Ethiopian state. Together with the other lowland areas surrounding the central highlands that are the historical centre of power, it is one of the last 'frontiers' that has to be crossed to achieve the process of state building in Ethiopia.¹⁰ Its semi-arid lowlands did not permit the establishment of a class of landlords following its conquest by the troops of the Ethiopian empire in the late nineteenth century. It was governed through indirect rule: local figures of presumed authority were appointed by the state and held responsible for tax collection. Groups such as the Mela have therefore retained a strong sense of political autonomy and cultural distinction. Attempts at changing lowlanders' practices that the centre deems 'backward' really only came with the coalition in power since 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, which, ironically, had first promoted the right of self-determination within a federalist constitution.¹¹ But these campaigns have been followed with few impacts as these populations have been barely integrated in the structures of the state. In their encounters with state officials, the lowlanders' spokesmen dared more or less overt formulations of defiance towards the state, laying bare the 'uncertainty of power' in these little-governed peripheries.¹² Girke presumes that the recent state's interests in the resources of the Omo Valley 'has radically changed the texture of the political encounter'.¹³ Indeed, the large majority of Mela attending government meetings has since then resigned itself to adopting an 'open transcript' of quiescence.

Today, people from the central highlands who come in the lower Omo Valley as government officials or as workers in the sugar industry repeat the initial colonial encounter: 'savage', 'primitive' and 'animal-like' are characterizations that they use when talking about the Mela's livelihood and social organization.¹⁴ The Mela, perfectly aware that they are seen as little more than 'baboons living in the forest', in turn call them 'Su', a derogatory term for people without cattle, or 'Gama' when they are state representatives. I shall call them 'Northerners', for want of a better term, and bearing in mind that some were born in the towns of the southern lowlands. The small school-educated elite of Mela that occupy administrative positions sit in an uncomfortable position, looked down by the other officials and distrusted by the vast majority of Mela who never attended school.

The Northerners' denigration of the Mela as 'backward' is indicative of their own self-representation as 'modern'. In Ethiopia, the modernity narrative – that is the belief that society can be transformed through technical and scientific progress – has been closely associated with the nation-building project. The modernization of Ethiopia was first initiated by Ethiopian emperors even before the twentieth century.¹⁵ Since then, throughout the different regimes, the state elite has especially looked for models of development from abroad, often confident that 'once successful strategies can be transplanted, across time and place, to new contexts'.¹⁶ The regime of the Derg adopted the Soviet model and undertook the high-modernist endeavours that are resettlement, villagization and large-scale mechanized state farms. Centralised planning had an appeal to Ethiopian state officials, as it would increase their own power.¹⁷ Despite the overall failure of

these grand schemes to harness economic growth, the current regime is following a similar strategy.

Under previous regimes, no such scheme was conceived for the lower Omo Valley.¹⁸ But by the mid-1990s, a plan for the exploitation of the Omo River Basin had already been elaborated.¹⁹ The construction of a series of hydroelectric dams on the upper course of the river began even before that. It was not before January 2011, however, that the Ethiopian Prime Minister officially disclosed plans for large-scale plantations using the regulated flow of the river by the dams. The state plans to convert about 113,000 hectares of land on both sides of the river into sugarcane plantations.²⁰ Even before the completion of the most ambitious of the dams, the Gilgel Gibe III dam, allegedly the tallest in Africa, the vegetation east of the river was being cleared to give way to sugarcane plantations, which covered 6600 hectares of land as of late 2014.²¹ These plantations are located in Mela land, and the Mela are one of the first local people to be affected by the scheme. The government plans to resettle the approximately 8000 Mela and Chirim people scattered across the plain into four large villages located close to the irrigation canal. State development agents have already trained the first Mela and Chirim settlers in irrigated agriculture and, since 2013, these settlers have cultivated maize on their allocated plots with varying degrees of commitment. The ultimate goal, on the part of the government, is to turn the Mela into out-growers for the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation.²²

I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork regularly in different parts of Mela land since 2007. I have therefore witnessed the reactions of my Mela friends and acquaintances to the announcement of the project and its gradual implementation between 2011 and 2016. I have lived with Mela who experienced villagization and with others who have not yet been reached by the southward advance of the plantation. More often than not, the cosmological references were overheard in conversations between Mela, rather than communicated to me in particular. Mela people are trying different strategies to cope with the dispossession of their resources, but I have chosen to focus on the cosmological allusions, because they point to a way to relate to the land that had not been as salient to me before. Most of the talks that I report here are from men, because my research took place primarily among them.²³ Although my presence made me necessarily part of the audience of these conversations, they differed significantly from the discourses directly addressed to me as a representative of the external world. I then asked for explanations in recorded interviews. Men with oratory skills were more able to articulate this kind of discourse, but cosmological references were also casually made by those who wield no particular influence in Mela political life. These talks did not occur in the presence of Mela who have a connection with the local government or have adopted the Northerners' lifestyle: certain representatives to the administration, police officers and school-educated young adults, whose commitment to the autonomy of the Mela polity is deemed doubtful by the others. Given the highly political nature of the development scheme, the authoritarianism of the ruling party and my long-term association with the Mela, I had extremely limited access to the government's side. I have relied on Mela's accounts of it, corroborated with the work of researchers who studied the project primarily from the state agents' perspective. The sensitivity of the topic also justifies the anonymization of all the informants.

Local conceptualizations of power

Students of the people of the lower Omo Valley have already compared the divergent views held by different actors in the region on its conservation or modernization.²⁴ Turton notes that state planners and conservationists alike perceive the land they intend to ‘develop’ or ‘protect’ in a way that is purely visual,²⁵ contrary to its inhabitants who are thoroughly engaged in their environment. The ‘disengaged look’²⁶ of state agents is the corollary of a view of nature that can be traced back to the Enlightenment: thought of as strictly separated from society, nature is seen as a resource that can be dominated and controlled. On the ground, during the implementation of a development project conceived by the central government, this means that state agents routinely discard any other view on the relations between humans and the natural world. The way in which the state builds a space ‘emptied of social and cultural meaning’²⁷ is explored further below.

Through questions of governance and state building, power emerges as a central dimension of the ‘collision’²⁸ of these different ways of imagining, not the least for Turton who makes use of Appadurai’s concept of ‘locality production’.²⁹ Locality – or ‘sense of place’, as Turton interprets it³⁰ – stands in relation to other places or ‘neighborhoods’ where social life is produced. Its production ‘involves a kind of power struggle, in which different groups compete to create localities which other groups then have to recognize and take account of in their own locality producing efforts’.³¹ The merit of this relational approach is to insist that power is inherent to any form of place-making: ‘all locality building has a moment of colonization’.³² Hence, the Ethiopian government exercises its power on the Mursi people³³ when it converts their land into a showcase for industrial monoculture; but the Mursi themselves have also wielded power over other people. The Mursi did not dwell in a land empty of inhabitants when they first crossed the Omo River from the west. They found people who had their own claim on the land, and a power struggle ensued in which the Mursi had the upper hand, and whereby autochthonous clans chose to be incorporated into the Mursi polity or to leave.³⁴ Girke notes the same irony concerning the Kara: the latter remember that the mythic Moguji, whom they found at the Omo River, were ‘unable to utilise the river’, much as today the government pictures the inhabitants of the valley as barely acquainted with agricultural techniques and unable to make a living for themselves.³⁵ Thus the government, through its modernization projects, imposes its power on the lower Omo Valley inhabitants, who had thought of themselves as having (still) the power to define their sense of place in relation to other populations. The point has often been made in resistance studies: those who resist power within a system of hierarchical relations may well impose their own power within a different system; or, in other words, the dominated group may have a hierarchy of its own.³⁶

The irony of the present situation – former colonizers being in their turn colonized – was not lost on the inhabitants of the Omo Valley themselves. As with the Mursi and the Kara, the Mela, according to their oral traditions, had to subdue the Kwegu people when they started to settle in the land east of the Omo River, more than three centuries ago. A Mela man once told me that they, the Mela, are not as bad with their subordinated Kwegu as the government is with them. Unlike the government, the Mela were not taking the land of the Kwegu, he argued – referring only to the contemporary period³⁷ – and they acknowledged that the Kwegu had power over them, namely power over the crocodiles

that represent a real danger by the river.³⁸ For him, the power relations between the Kwegu and the Mela, contrary to the relation between the Mela and the state, is not unidirectional. He stressed here a point that becomes significant to the analysis below: that Mela recognize the ritual powers and connection with the land of the first occupants, something that they feel the state fails to acknowledge.

Scott has shown the wealth of discursive practices of subordinated groups, which amount to a counter-discourse to the ideology of the powerful. What do these discourses draw from, when the power relations, which were once loose and ‘unresolved’,³⁹ tighten up? I argue that in the case of the Mela, such discourses centre on an evaluation of state power, informed by a conception of power based on the local cosmology. For although Appadurai makes clear that place-making practices always involve the exercise of power, whether in an agro-pastoral society or in an authoritarian state, this view can be refined by the recognition of different conceptualizations of power. Taylor, notably, explains that in the Rwandan case, interpretations of state power depend on ‘religious, cosmological and ontological determinants’.⁴⁰ In Ethiopia, in witnessing the chaotic destruction of the bushland to make way for sugarcane plantations, Mela make discursive references to the mythical beings that they believe preceded them in the land. The Mela believe they succeeded in propitiating those beings by carrying-out appropriate rituals, and so they now see themselves as belonging to the land – in other words, they have become autochthones. Mela’s invocations of the mythical beings recall their power as autochthones, a power that, according to their cosmology, exceeds the power of the state.

The destruction of local livelihoods and social relations

It cannot be stressed enough that, when measuring how radical the changes that the Mela face are, the current developments in the lower Omo Valley constitute an irremediable blow to local livelihood strategies. First, the regulation of the river flow by Gilgil Gibe III has made flood-retreat cultivation impossible since 2015, thereby depriving the locals of one of their most productive and reliable sites of cultivation.⁴¹ Second, the clearing of the bushland to make way for the plantations has destroyed sites for shifting cultivation, important plants for dry-season grazing and medicinal plants; honey production, an important economic asset, has already decreased and the wildlife has been significantly reduced. Third, the plantations impede easy access to the water and the shade of the riverine forest, which allowed weak cattle to endure the dry season.⁴² Fourth, the changes are being accompanied by a drastic shift in the demography of the valley, which turn the local inhabitants into minorities in their own land – a process that was already initiated by the resettlement of about 6500 Konso people⁴³ in Mela and Chirim’s dry-season grazing areas a decade earlier. Thousands of migrant workers, coming mainly from Wolayta or other southern highlands, are already working in the sugarcane plantations.⁴⁴

The planned villagization of the total population will conclude the break-up of current Mela society by disrupting their forms of sociality and their territorial and political organizations. Mela have been living in cattle camps of several families distributed across the plain, moving seasonally to their cultivation sites at different locations, and occasionally changing the place of their cattle camp in order to meet the best living conditions for cattle and humans. Villagization has been a preferred method of social engineering by current and past regimes, despite a persistent record of failure in Ethiopia and elsewhere.⁴⁵

The official aim is to ease access to services and infrastructures; it also serves purposes of legibility and control.⁴⁶ A few hundred Mela have lived temporarily in the new villages.⁴⁷ Local government officials put considerable pressure on them to settle there,⁴⁸ although some have been successful at evading the villagization scheme entirely, and others have returned to their cattle camps – their movements between the camps and the new villages recalling their movements to one of their cultivation sites. In the irrigated fields prepared by the Sugar Corporation, however, their agricultural skills become inappropriate. They are transformed, just as the peasants resettled in a vastly different environment under the Derg, ‘from [...] agricultural expert[s] to [...] unskilled, ignorant laborer[s], completely dependent for [their] survival on the central government’.⁴⁹ The competition over the trickle of irrigation water that they obtain from the Sugar Corporation has, in addition, led to conflicts within their own society.

Before considering the discourses of Mela who have lived with these radical transformations, I present the government’s own discourses. At all levels of administration, officials dismiss local livelihood strategies and relations to place. The state forces upon local populations a disenchantment of the world, as it strives to systematically empty space of any social constructions that exist within it.

The ‘taming’ of space

Makki notes that notions of *terra nullius* are employed by the Ethiopian government as well as by the World Bank and foreign investors, in order to define land open for investment as ‘empty and underutilized’.⁵⁰ The director general of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation prior to October 2013, for instance, once confidently declared, referring to the sugar processing plants to be built in the South Omo zone: ‘We are building these factories in areas where there is no activity. Those areas are scarcely populated and you don’t have to displace many people.’⁵¹ The lower concentration of population in the lowlands as compared to the highlands only reflects the ‘spatially extensive’ organization of agro-pastoral societies.⁵² The Ethiopian state officials’ blindness to the logic of the utilization of pastoral lowlands has often been put on the account of their highlander, and therefore agrarian-focused, origins. However, the clear imprints of human activities that the lowlands bear (the regular burning of the grassland to produce new shoots of green grass for cattle, the clearing of bushland and riverine forests for cultivation) remain illegible to the state agents because they do not serve the state’s interests of resource extraction.⁵³ As Turton aptly notes, these purposes imply a particular ‘way of looking’ at the land, which objectifies it, turns it into a commodity and, ultimately, ‘marginalizes locals, even to the extent of making them invisible’.⁵⁴ Nothing exemplifies more this disengaged look than the view from an aircraft, a view from above and absolutely detached from local realities. At the onset of the sugar development project in the lower Omo Valley in 2011, planes or helicopters regularly surveyed the area at low altitude, much to the concern of the Mela, who had not yet been informed of the transformations to come. Rumours among local government people had it that a high-level state official, upon seeing the Omo River valley from above, said: ‘so, here is the land where there is no work?’ Accustomed to the view over the highlands which suffer land shortage and where virtually every tract of land is tilled by ox-drawn plough, the state officials, upon seeing from above a land shaped by a different form of land use from which the state has extracted little revenue, dismiss it as unproductive.

This attitude, however, is not simply naïve and misinformed. The negation of the productivity and adaptability of local livelihoods is actively communicated by government institutions.⁵⁵ Agro-pastoralists of the lower Omo Valley have been persistently described as ‘people who have been wondering [*sic*] from place [to place] in search of grazing and water for their cattle’,⁵⁶ thereby discarding their careful use and maintenance of an ecologically varied environment and recasting them as people who are always short of natural resources that they cannot properly use. The contempt for agro-pastoralism as it is practised in the lowlands is ‘a prelude to a project of reconstituting them as emptiable spaces’.⁵⁷ And although the focus on the presumed inadequacy of agro-pastoralists might appear to suddenly propel them onto centre stage, it is only to hide them better thereafter. Hammond explains how the resettlement of people from food insecure regions of Ethiopia in the early 2000s has withdrawn them from the attention of aid programmes, although they often became poorer after resettlement.⁵⁸ Similarly, the villagization plan, designed to uplift people’s lives, renders people invisible to public concern and mutes the dispossession of their resources.⁵⁹

Local government officials cannot ignore the effects that the construction of an ‘empty’ place carries when it is implemented on the ground. Bulldozers, as they clear roads and prepare land for plantations, enter local cultivation sites, destroy trees supporting beehives and pass over graves. The local populations protest, prevent the drivers from continuing their work, and local government officials try to mediate, dealing with the problems as they arise on a day-to-day basis. The mediation often consists of imposing the view that further resistance would only bring more coercion. Mela also protested against the location of the new government-designed villages, on the grounds that it disrupts their ritual geography. The villages are in the western part of their land, where the ritual ivory horn (a symbol of the ruling generation-set and an instrument of connection with divine forces which inhabit the land) should not touch the ground. Likewise, Mela never dance their New Year ceremony so close to the Omo either.⁶⁰ Government officials simply brushed these protests aside and told them to abandon these beliefs.

When pressed on the issue of ritual places, however, local officials dismissed the existence of fixed places of ritual significance in Mela. Researchers Tewelde Woldemariam and Fana Gebresenbet enquired about what measures the government would take in the event that the plantation would encroach on ritual places. The Speaker of the Zone Council rejected the problem by stating that Mela’s ritual places were ‘not associated with any particular location. Thus, after the right procedure, the ritual leader can *deconstruct*, *transfer* the old and *reconstruct* a new ritual place’.⁶¹ This state agent may just have been trying to evade the researchers’ questions, but her answer reveals the state’s attempt to ‘tame’ space,⁶² claiming it as a plain surface, empty of meanings, ready to be exploited and divided into regular plots.

As I show in the rest of this paper, the government officials deny the relevance of beliefs in relation to places and thereby undertake ‘a process of cultural erasure and disenchantment’,⁶³ but Mela contest the transformations in this very domain. The development processes impose a separation between nature and culture, including the sense of the sacred, upon communities for which ‘living, non-living, and often times supernatural beings are not seen as constituting distinct and separate domains’.⁶⁴ They break the continuity between these domains, and Mela react by reaffirming it. The Mela appeal to mythical beings while the government appears to obliterate all indigenous meanings attached to

the land. Two mythical creatures are discussed to illustrate these processes: *olome*, the giant Serpent whose body is of all the colours and whose breath is the rainbow,⁶⁵ and *kirinkabul*, the white Giraffe that hovers over the ground. Very few people say they have met these creatures, and if they have, they had to sacrifice cattle in order to survive the encounter.

Lifeless nature or home of divinity

Mela cosmology is profoundly different from the cosmology undergirding large-scale development schemes. The latter draws on a radical separation between nature and society (or culture). This modern cosmology was forged over a long period through the convergence of different ideas, discoveries and technologies, and became salient in seventeenth-century Europe.⁶⁶ The primacy of sight over all senses – the disengaged look already evoked above – eased the objectification of the natural environment: ‘[n]ature, now dumb, odor-free, and intangible, had been left devoid of life’.⁶⁷ The separation became a domination of humans over nature, and was part of the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment whereby humanity would free itself from the vicissitudes of its natural environment.⁶⁸ Classical political economy harnessed this ideal to the structures of market exchange that would promote a utilitarian view of nature.⁶⁹

The detachment from the natural world fostered by the modern cosmology is in marked contrast with the engagement with the world of local communities such as the Mela. As Ingold argues, the latter’s cosmology ‘provides the guiding principles for human action *within* the world’, whereas the dependence on technology of the modern view gives ‘principles for human action *upon* it’.⁷⁰ More precisely, ‘[t]raditional cosmology places the person at the centre of an ordered universe of meaningful relations [...] and enjoins an understanding of these relations as a foundation for proper conduct towards the environment’.⁷¹ For Mela, the land is alive with powerful and threatening forces with which they have to enter into relations. Firstly, Mela think of the earth as the repository of powers which send affliction and death.⁷² If they do not perform the rituals that punctuate each step of the cultivation cycle and the use of pastures and water points, diseases or accidents are likely to strike them. A Mela man thus explained:

If you cultivate without doing the rituals, the machete will cut your knee, *tus!* This being who is in the earth, he will take the machete and cut your leg: ‘This land is mine and you didn’t pay for it. Why not?’ he says.⁷³

The rituals, which this man compares to a payment, are a form of acknowledgment of the powers that inhabit the land and that are considered its real custodians. Secondly, earth is ultimately the place of the divine. ‘This being’, the man continued, ‘is death, [earth] is the home of death and it is there. The home of Divinity’.⁷⁴ Mela believe that there is a single entity, a ubiquitous creator of all things. It is readily associated with the sky, rain and thunder,⁷⁵ but It is actually everywhere. Mela communicate with Divinity through diverse rituals, especially to call forth rain. But their relations with Divinity as It is present in the land rather than in the sky is directed towards the extraordinary beings Mela invoke, such as the Great Serpent and the Hovering Giraffe. These beings stand as Divinity because Divinity is thought to manifest Itself in a variety of ways. Lienhardt captures a similar ontology in the case of Dinka religion with the phrase: ‘Divinity is manifold as human experience is manifold and of a manifold world’.⁷⁶

Mela's cosmology carries two implications for their understanding and appropriation of the new developments imposed on them. The first is the expectation that the neglect of local rituals by the state-owned Sugar Corporation will bring affliction and death on the land. The second implication is that it establishes a scale of value in which Mela hold a superior position. Here, Mela know how to propitiate the dangerous forces of the earth, and this brings them close to the divine, in contrast with the Northerners, who are deemed to fail to respect these powers. The imagining of an environment alive with threatening forces does not lead Mela to consider themselves as being overly dominated by nature. For although these forces are dangerous, they can endow humans with power when treated appropriately.

The Great Serpent and the decline of the land

Mela's references to the Great Serpent reveal in more detail their understanding of the changes occurring as leading to environmental degradation and more conflicts. The figure of the Great Serpent is not a recent import to Mela cosmology.⁷⁷ Mela believe its home is the highest summit of the Dime mountain range – the place which is closest to the sky. From there it moves, following the rivers down to the plains and dwells in the bushland, its other home. The bush, which forms a belt following the Omo River below an elevation of 500 metres, was open grassland two or three generations ago.⁷⁸ However, there were no human settlements in this part of the land, as it is waterlogged during the rainy season.⁷⁹ This bushland has always been sacred, in the original sense of being set apart. It provides a privileged place for wildlife to find shelter to give birth; bees are also abundant. The growth of the bush might have led the Mela to see this place more readily as a rightful home of the Great Serpent, for, as a divine being, it is related to the divine gift of fertility and wealth, as represented by the fecundity of wildlife and honey-producing bees. Mela describe the Great Serpent as the 'shepherd' of the wild-life: it helps wild animals to thrive and multiply.

As the bushland is now being replaced by sugarcane plantations, Mela are keen to note the signs which prove to them that these development activities are wrongly conducted:

Recently, their bulldozers ran and they were supposed to cross the Hana river, but the bees ... they stopped them from continuing. There were not even beehives. The bees came by themselves, they stung the people! They came from above. The beehives, [the Northerners] did not see. [...] They had cleared in the place of the Great Serpent.⁸⁰

The bees were not the only animals disturbed by the disappearance of the vegetation cover: buffaloes too were suddenly without shelter, running in the new sugarcane fields and being shot by the workers, and an unusually high number of birds invaded the fields of the Kwegu and Mela. A Kwegu woman explained that the birds used to be together with the Great Serpent, but the Sugar Corporation workers had chased the divine creature away, and the birds did not know where to go. On noting the changes, Mela often said: 'the Great Serpent has left the land'. Thus, in such instances, local people linked the demise of the wildlife with the disappearance of the mythical being which sustained it. This view implies a critique of the Northerners and their relation with the environment. The Northerners are viewed as not carefully engaging with the presence of the divine in the land, leading to the bad consequences noted above. Mela stress the importance of their

own ritual work to avoid such outcomes: ‘We do not live forcibly. We really work the land.’⁸¹ They claim to be attentive to the signs that could indicate that they did not treat the powerful beings appropriately. For instance, their oral tradition recalls specific areas of forest which were not open for cultivation anymore following numerous deaths in their midst; it took sacrifices and the potency of politico-religious office-holders to successfully re-open them. Likewise, when ancestors of Mela first entered their present land from the west, many people were allegedly swallowed by the Great Serpent coiled in a valley. Only after an offering of milk could people pass through. Mela think of themselves as having established good relations with the mythical beings, and their very survival is seen as testimony of this. More precisely, the rituals through which Mela forge these relations are performed by men who occupy a ritual office or whose ancestry connects them to a particular place; they reflect the Mela’s social organization. Behind Mela’s condemnations of the disregard of the powerful beings by the Sugar Corporation, there is a critique of the Northerners’ refusal to foster social relations with the Mela. The outcome extends beyond the wildlife. A new cattle disease was interpreted as a consequence of the Northerners’ misconduct, and conflicts which erupted since the beginning of the development project were for the Mela sure evidence that ‘the land does not like the Northerners’.⁸² The tale of the disappearance of the Great Serpent foretells the ultimate failure of the government’s activities.

The chaotic situation the Mela find themselves in prompts reflections on the power exerted by the government. In the course of development activities, government officials bypass the establishment of meaningful social relations with the land’s present inhabitants and ignore the ritual acknowledgement of divine entities – it is not short of acting as if it was Divinity Itself. A Mela man develops this thought:

The government comes and takes our land by force. Only Divinity can do that. The government thinks it is Divinity. But only Divinity who made us from clay can take our land and destroy us. The government is not able to do that.⁸³

In this statement, he challenges the legitimacy of state power. The government sets itself apart from local engagements with space but it cannot reach the divine. It has no place in Mela’s cosmological order and as such, Mela predict that it can only fail in its endeavours. They also approach this anticipated failure through another cosmological figure: a white giraffe whose legs never touch the ground.

The Hovering Giraffe or the restoration of the original order

Although Mela interpret the disorder as evidence of the government’s inability to ‘work the land’, another discourse presents the chaotic situation as being deliberately provoked by the Hovering Giraffe. For instance, upon hearing the prediction of an imminent large-scale conflict, a Mela man exclaimed: ‘The Hovering Giraffe will not fail us!’, that is, the mythical being would turn the land upside down, drive the Northerners away but leave the land to the Mela. In his exclamation, he expressed the belief that the Hovering Giraffe will restore the original order.⁸⁴ Such a spontaneous reference was new to me, although the man assured me that Mela had always prayed to the giraffe-like creature in this manner. Discourses drawing on their relation with mythical beings of the land,

however, are likely to surface now that the government's activities threaten Mela's long-built relation with the land.

The Hovering Giraffe is the *genius loci* of the grassland. One elder explained to me that an ancestor of the Miniguach clan, a clan which is associated with the grassland, was once transformed into the Hovering Giraffe.⁸⁵ However, men from this clan to whom I reported this interpretation did not seem to know it, although they acknowledged that their clan is particularly associated with a place whose name is derived from the word for giraffe. It appeared to me that most Mela see the divine being as transcending any intra-Mela social category. Upon the naming ceremony of a new generation-set, its members slaughter a giraffe-coloured ox, in order to recognize the presence of the Hovering Giraffe and to gain its acceptance. Mela can then say: 'We are its children.' They seem to have broadened the association with the mythical figure anchored in the grassland, from the autochthonous clan to the entire Mela society. The current recasting of their society as a fundamentally autochthonous one, which is expressed in the prayers to the Hovering Giraffe, comes as no surprise. In comparison with the recent state presence, Mela are all equally from the land.⁸⁶ The distinction between migrant clans and autochthonous clans, which structures Mela society, becomes irrelevant when facing a powerful newcomer.

I argue that the focus on autochthony in this context is not simply a claim on the part of the Mela to be the legitimate inhabitants of the land, but that it is mostly an affirmation of power over the state of the land – its well-being or its withering – which eventually trumps the government's power. For autochthonous people are considered to have certain powers in connection with the place they are from. In Mela, the watering of cattle at a stream or river that has not been used for a while does not take place before the slaughtering of a stock animal by a member of the clan which came into existence in that very place. It ensures the well-being of all; the potency released by people of the autochthonous clan benefits the society at large. The power of the autochthones, as acknowledged by Mela, stems from their shared essence with the place. Fayers-Kerr explains how the Mursi consciously act to become consubstantial with their environment, notably through the smearing of clay on their bodies, and that pioneers – those who have first survived in a place – best exemplify this consubstantiality with a place and its substances.⁸⁷ Likewise, in Mela, a person whose clan is associated with a watercourse drinks its water following a long absence only after smearing its mud on her forehead, lest she becomes sick, thereby renewing and maintaining her common nature with the place. The offerings and prayers to the Hovering Giraffe may be understood similarly as an effort at becoming united with the land, and at benefiting from the power that this relation entails.

A short example sheds further light on the inseparable link between the land, the mythical creatures and the autochthones, and the claim of this relation to assert one's power over others, this time within Mela society. A Mela elder, member of a clan believed to originate from the grassland, recounted an argument that B., his father's father, had with another Mela who contested his prestigious ancestry. He explained that his grandfather threatened to curse the man with the milk of the autochthonous clans' cattle, and, carried away by the story of his ancestor, the Mela elder finally exclaimed:

This grassland, it does not disappear [fall apart]! It goes with the custodians. It goes with the Great Serpent, it goes with the Hovering Giraffe and the Feathered Serpent.⁸⁸ I, child of B., I do not disappear!⁸⁹

He reveals that the autochthonous clans have the power to curse and that, together with the mythical creatures, they are inseparable from the land. But more than the other creatures, the Hovering Giraffe stands for the potentiality to curse the land at the expense of outsiders. A Mela man explained the meaning of their prayers to it as follow:

When we say ‘This is the land of the Hovering Giraffe, later will it help us?’ When we say like this, it helps us. We pray to it only. [...] ‘I give disease to these people, and may they die’, this is a power that it alone possesses. ‘I give war to these people’, this is a power that the Hovering Giraffe alone possesses. And: ‘May my land be at peace, and may we stay, I and the Mela only, may they work the land with my cow’, the Hovering Giraffe alone can say this.⁹⁰

The current focus on the Hovering Giraffe may have been driven by the succession of the generation-set naming ceremonies in each of the three Mela local groups, during which a giraffe-coloured cow is slaughtered.⁹¹ Already an important event in itself for identity formation, the ceremonies were the occasion for the Mela to strengthen their autochthonous power in the face of dispossession and to hope for a renewal thanks to the Hovering Giraffe’s ability to avenge.

Conclusion

With the end of flood-recession agriculture due to the controlled flood by the new dam, the transformation of the bushland in sugarcane plantations, the control of the Sugar Corporation and the local government of the allocation and size of cultivable plots, the use of the irrigation system and access to seeds and fertilizers, with the injunction to settle in villages, the power of the political centre has clearly tightened on the Mela. But Mela have not yet accepted this situation. They have found ways to hold on to the belief that their fate is not yet sealed and that they still have a part to play as ‘people of the land’. Behind the short references to mythical creatures or more elaborated statements on the development project, lies a firm critique of the state’s engagement with the environment and of the power it wields over the Mela. These discourses are testimony of the Mela’s resilience when confronted with transformations that seriously threaten their autonomy and identity.

However, these discourses largely remain as hidden transcripts, unheard by the power holders. Scott sees the hidden transcripts as the necessary precursor for open resistance, but it is difficult to assert this for the Mela case. Open resistance appears not to be a viable response, and the development projects continue unabated. The hidden transcripts are a means through which the Mela maintain a sense of worth and agency, and a sense of being Mela. They react in a way similar to the Boran of Marsabit County who, as Hassan writes, turn to a narrative of a return to their homeland in Ethiopia when facing rapid infrastructural development that would complete the integration of their region into the Kenyan state:⁹² in the advance of the nation-building project, societies that have been historically marginalized resort to forms of identity that contradict it. In the Mela case, the reframing of Mela identity as indissoluble from the land that sustains Mela’s lives contrasts with the discourses of state officials, which empty the land of any social meaning by applying a dichotomy between nature and culture, in line with a long Ethiopian history of large-scale development projects designed by the centre. It remains to be seen how long the Mela will be able to sustain this distinct identity in the face of such huge challenges.

Finally, the Mela's cosmological references in a time of disenchantment offer a penetrating perspective on large-scale development projects, as they are conducted in Ethiopia. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Scott demonstrates that state-led, high-modernist development schemes can only fail in their attempt to implement by force a new social order. Mela are arguing just the same, in a highly symbolic way: that the neglect of their knowledge and the rejection of their meaningful participation in the development project can only have disastrous consequences, which are already unfolding.

Notes

1. For an analytical overview, see Oliver-Smith, *Defying Displacement*.
2. The Mela, as they call themselves, are known under the name 'Bodi' by the government and outsiders. They appear under both names in the anthropological literature. The term 'Bodi' actually refers to two local groups of speakers of the Me'en language, which are established east of the Omo River: the Chirim in the north and the Mela in the south. My research took place essentially among the Mela.
3. See for instance Brosius, "Between Politics and Poetics," 283, who argues that resistance in such contexts goes together with 'efforts at engagement' with outsiders.
4. Scott, *The Arts of Resistance*.
5. *Ibid.*, 191.
6. Hollander and Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance."
7. Scott, *The Arts of Resistance*, 201.
8. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 4–6.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Markakis, *The Last Two Frontiers*.
11. Abbink, "Paradoxes of Power."
12. Girke, "The Uncertainty of Power."
13. *Ibid.*, 189.
14. Kamski, personal communication.
15. Clapham, "The Politics of Emulation."
16. *Ibid.*, 142.
17. *Ibid.*, 147.
18. The only exception was the Ethio-Korean farm in Omorate. This scheme failed and was abandoned in 1991.
19. Kamski, "Agricultural Investments in Ethiopia," 11.
20. UNESCO, *Mission Report*, 20.
21. *Ibid.*, 8.
22. At the time of writing, no Mela had yet become an out-grower.
23. In the cattle camps, men and women are spatially separated and thus women cannot participate in men's conversations. Being first a foreigner, I could cross this gender line.
24. Abbink, "Dam Controversies;" Girke, "Homeland, Boundary, Resource;" Turton, "Wilderness, Wasteland or Home?"
25. Turton, "Wilderness, Wasteland or Home?" 167.
26. Thomas, "The Politics of Vision," 22 in Turton, "Wilderness, Wasteland or Home?" 167.
27. Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 94.
28. Girke, "Homeland, Boundary, Resource."
29. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 178–99.
30. Turton, "The Meaning of Place," 276.
31. Turton, "Wilderness, Wasteland or Home?" 170.
32. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 183.
33. The Mursi are the southern neighbours of the Mela.
34. Turton, "Wilderness, Wasteland or Home?" 170–1.

35. Girke, "Homeland, Boundary, Resource," 20.
36. Hollander and Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," 550.
37. The Kwegu might not agree with the Mela man's statement. Regarding the sharing of cultivation sites at the Omo, a Kwegu man said that they are careful not to give a plot to a Mela two years in a row, otherwise the Mela might claim it later as his own.
38. Mela say they owe their being safe from crocodile attacks to Kwegu ritual abilities.
39. Girke, "The Uncertainty of Power."
40. Taylor, "An Altered State?," 142.
41. Turton, "The Downstream Impact," 2.
42. The Sugar Corporation has built bridges and passages across the irrigation canal and dig ponds for cattle (Kamski, "Agricultural Investments in Ethiopia," 12). Some Mela, however, complained to me about lost cattle which drank water in the canal and fell in it.
43. Unpublished census for a UNICEF campaign, Salamago *woreda*, 2009.
44. The sugarcane plantations would create one job per hectare (MoFED, "Growth and Transformation Plan," 59).
45. The Derg launched a villagization plan in 1985 to resettle the entire rural population of Ethiopia. At the end of the programme in 1989, most of the 14 million peasants who had been resettled dismantled their new houses to go back to their original homes (Taddesse Berisso, "Modernist Dreams").
46. Scott, *Seeing like a State*, 247–52.
47. Tewolde and Fana report that the most successful village had 'less than one-third of the planned household units living in it' (Tewolde and Fana, "Sugar Development in Salamago," 126).
48. The local government puts the Mela officials at the forefront of the mobilization for villagization, due to their intermediate position.
49. Clay, Steingraber, and Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine*, 23 in Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 251.
50. Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 92.
51. "Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance," 9.
52. Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 93.
53. Scott, *Seeing like a State*. Conversely, people do not attempt to make their practices legible for state objectives (Girke, "Homeland, Boundary, Resource," 14), or may even keep their practices intractable to avoid extraction by the state (Scott, *Not Being Governed*).
54. Turton, "Wilderness, Wasteland or Home?" 167.
55. Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 94.
56. www.mofa.gov.et.
57. Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 94.
58. Hammond, "Strategies of Invisibilization."
59. Fana Gebresenbet, "Development, Dispossession and Resistance."
60. The graves of ancestors who occupied the politico-ritual office (*komorut*) of the northern sub-group of Mela are mostly found in the eastern part of the land, south and east of the Hana River. This river crosses the plain in a north-east to south-west direction and is a line of great significance in the ritual construction of space. The *komorut* in office preferably lives east of the Hana River, and ceremonies during which the whole community congregates should take place at this ritual anchor of their land.
61. Tewolde Woldemariam and Fana Gebresenbet, "Sugar Development in Salamago," 131. Emphasis in the original.
62. Massey, *For Space*.
63. Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 94.
64. Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places," 151.
65. The Great Serpent seems to be related to the worldly widespread figure of the rainbow-serpent.
66. Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 68.
67. *Ibid.*, 61.
68. Harvey, *Justice, Nature*, 121f.

69. Ibid., 131.
70. Ingold, "Globes and Spheres," 216.
71. Ibid.
72. A similar idea is expressed among the Dinka (Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 304) and the Mursi (Fayers-Kerr, "Beyond the Social Skin," 5 and 184).
73. Mela man, Hana, 2012.
74. Ibid.
75. In the Me'en language, the word for Divinity, *Tumo*, also means sky and rain.
76. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 156.
77. Fukui, who did the main part of his fieldwork in Mela in the early 1970s, mentions the 'supernatural creature' which looks like a python (and whose name he spells *orome*) (Fukui, "Animal Coat-Colour Diversity," 379).
78. Turton, "A Cool Place," 269.
79. Ibid., 270.
80. Mela man to a Chirim man, Jinka, 2012.
81. Mela man, Hana, 2012.
82. Mela man, Gura, 2014.
83. Mela man, Hana, 2011.
84. This conviction recalls millenarian movements.
85. Fukui, on his part, reports that the mythical giraffe is the non-human ancestor of an eponymous clan, whose members were expelled by the ancestors of present-day Mela when they came from the west – the creature remained (Fukui, "Religious and Kinship Ideology," 791). The Mela whom I have asked about this Kirinkabul clan which was wiped out ignore even its existence.
86. In Mela's attempt at envisioning themselves as more autochthonous, the Kwegu, although prior inhabitants, are clearly absent from the picture. The realm of their autochthonous powers is confined to the Omo River and its banks.
87. Fayers-Kerr, "Beyond the Social Skin."
88. The Feathered Serpent is another mythical being.
89. Mela elder, Gura, 2011.
90. Mela man, Gura, 2013.
91. The first group named its new generation-set in 2012, the second in 2013 and the last in 2016. Men from all groups claim that they have always sacrificed a giraffe-coloured cow for their naming ceremony, which in the last century or so have happened on average every 40 years.
92. Kochore, "The Road to Kenya."

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