

‘Do our bodies know their ways?’ Villagization, food insecurity, and ill-being in Ethiopia’s Lower Omo valley

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Abstract

This paper investigates food security and well-being in the context of development-forced displacement. In southwest Ethiopia, a large hydroelectric dam and plantation schemes have forced people to cede communal lands to the state and business speculators, and indigenous communities have been targeted for resettlement in new, consolidated villages. We carried out a food access survey in new villages and in communities not yet subjected to villagization; we complement this with ethnographic research. Survey data suggest that household food insecurity was high in both places, but lower in villagization sites than in communities not subjected to villagization. Ethnography paints a very different picture. Settlers were unable to feed themselves, and depended on food aid. The salient features of villagization were heat, indignity, and bodily discomfort. We discuss the contrast between the information generated by the different research methods, and ask how surveys might mistake the precarious state in which the settlers found themselves for the stable and continuing state implied by *food security*. We highlight the potential of survey research to mislead, and stress the importance of taking local context into account. The impacts of villagization in the Lower Omo cannot be understood apart from wider forces that are changing the way people live and the landscape around them.

Key words: resettlement, displacement, food security, poverty, well-being, ecological change, Ethiopia

Introduction

What effect do massive social changes have on people’s sense of well-being? Does it make a difference if these changes are forced upon them or freely chosen? In the first decade of the twenty-first century alone, some 200 million people were displaced by development projects, forced into leaving their homes for somewhere new (Cernea 2009:xxvi). Quantifying these phenomena is challenging, as governments and agencies tend to account for some types of movement (for example, cross-border flows of refugees) more carefully than others (for example, internal displacement). Understanding the quality of the experience of displacement is more challenging still. In this paper we investigate the experiences of people forcibly displaced in Ethiopia through both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and we consider the implications of the information they generate.

Systematic study of situations of resettlement, as opposed to the more settled communities that have constituted the traditional focus for anthropologists, may be traced to Elizabeth Colson’s work in Zambia, which began in the late 1950s. Her studies of resettlement associated with the Kariba dam were among the first to consider the social impacts of displacement for entire communities, and to theorize about the processes of rupture that

massive resettlement schemes entailed (Colson 1971). As the numbers displaced by dam and infrastructure development schemes grew over the course of the 20th century, a large literature accumulated on the phenomenon of resettlement, or development-induced displacement (McDowell 1996; de Wet 2006). By and large these studies focus on one of three problems – the economic impacts of resettlement (Cernea 1999); the function of resettlement as a tool of state power (Scott 1998); or the dynamics of resistance to resettlement (Oliver-Smith 2010). Although it constituted the focus of Colson’s classic work, less attention in recent writing on this topic has been given to the question of how these changes are experienced by people themselves.

Ethiopia, which experienced among the largest programs of resettlement and forced displacement of the twentieth century, is an apt place to consider this question. The scale of population transfers — at least 1 million people displaced between 1980 and 2010 — and their deliberate character as part of national resettlement policies, means that a substantial literature has accumulated on the experience of resettlement (reviewed in Pankhurst & Piguet 2009). The logic of many resettlement programs was that moving people from areas of higher to lower population density would help prevent famine, as it made possible more efficient use of ‘underutilized lands’. But the lands in question were invariably occupied already by people for whom the arrival of newcomers was a shock. Placed in historical perspective, these programs can be seen as part of a longer process of state-making, involving the political incorporation of the southern lowlands by peoples from the Christian highlands in the north – they represent one of the major continuities in the history of the Ethiopian state and its relationship to the peoples on its periphery (Donham and James 1986; Markakis 2011). Given the diverse landscape of the Horn of Africa, with marked contrasts between the rainfall regimes and topographies of the high and lowlands, such resettlement often involved dramatic changes in both ecological and social circumstances. These changes were not always to the advantage of the settlers, and return migration was not uncommon (A. Pankhurst 1991, 2009).

Another, quite different type of resettlement involved moving people who lived in dispersed settlements into large, government-designed villages. Such programs of village regrouping, or forcing people to move into ‘model villages’, were employed by colonial administrations, for example in Egypt and Rhodesia (Zambia) (Mitchell 1988; Kay 1967). Never did they go to plan. In Rhodesia a policy of moving rural communities into amalgamated settlements was abandoned after famine and food shortages in 1909 (Kay 1967:10-11). In Ethiopia under the Derg (the military government in power from 1974 to 1991) official policy was to villagize the entire rural population as part of a program of collectivization of agriculture. This vision was never realized, and among farming communities subjected to villagization, patterns of land tenure remained largely unchanged; but many negative effects were felt nevertheless, including social disruption, obstacles to efficient livestock management, and hazards related to increased population density, for example increased risks of diarrheal disease (H. Pankhurst 1992; Tadesse 2002).

A third type of resettlement involved both displacement and changes to land tenure and ecological circumstances brought about by development schemes. This combination of social and ecological changes has characterized resettlement programs carried out in conjunction with river basin development schemes. In Ethiopia the earliest major scheme of

this kind occurred in the Awash Valley in the northeast of the country, where, beginning in the 1950s, a series of hydroelectric dams were built to provide electricity for Addis Ababa and to facilitate the irrigation of new cotton and sugar plantations (Ayalew & Getachew 2009). Irrigation development continued with World Bank support through the 1960s, raising challenges for Afar and Oromo pastoralists who had previously used the floodplains of the Awash for dry season grazing. Kloos (1982) estimated that the irrigation schemes displaced 20,000 people, who at the same time faced heightened competition for resources with the estimated 150,000 farm laborers, mostly migrants from the highlands, who settled near the plantations. When rains failed in 1973, the result was famine, as many among the Afar and Oromo no longer had any fall-back options (Kloos 1982: 32).

In this paper we investigate an instance of displacement and river basin development under the current regime in Ethiopia – the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government, in power since 1991. Our evidence comes from household survey and ethnographic research in the Lower Omo valley, where irrigation schemes and expanding plantation agriculture are transforming the landscape.¹ The combination of methods we employ reflects our backgrounds as anthropologists trained respectively in a more quantitative and a more qualitative or ethnographic style of research. The collaboration on which the article is based has been instructive because, in this case at least, the different research methods produce very different views of reality. Household surveys suggest that in 2013 food insecurity was less severe in villagization sites than in communities not yet subject to villagization. Ethnographic data, on the other hand, paint a picture of heightened precarity and suffering in the villagization sites, and show how villagization was experimented with by both parties – government administrators trying out new configurations of irrigated agriculture, plantation development, and social engineering; and indigenous people experimenting with life in the new villages at the same time as they continued to pursue livelihoods elsewhere.

The story we tell is illustrative of how research methods and designs carry with them a set of assumptions about how society is organized, and about the problems they purport to address. The household survey provided a simple answer to the question of how food access differed between the new villages and a comparison community, but this information is misleading because it does not account for crucial aspects of context. Ethnography not only provides a different answer to the question – what impact does villagization have on food security? – but forces us to reconsider the terms of the question: Can people be considered ‘food secure’ when they are dependent on food aid for their survival? Can their lives be said to have been improved, when well-being in their own terms has plummeted? And if people are not committed to living in planned settlements, and maintain home bases elsewhere in addition to the resettlement sites, can ‘villagization’ be said to be happening at all?

Villagization and plantation development in the Lower Omo: the planners’ view

In 2012, the South Omo Zone Agriculture Bureau circulated a “Villagization Plan” which described how, in the course of a year, the majority of inhabitants of the zone – some forty-five thousand people – would be moved into new villages (FDRE 2012). According to official documents, moving these people, referred to collectively as pastoralists, into new

villages and introducing them to new farming methods would improve their lives. In the Plan the benefits of villagization are described as follows: (1) growing new crops, such as sugarcane, on irrigated fields would improve food security; (2) providing people with schooling and medical services would improve their health; (3) settling in planned villages would reduce conflicts that result from “mobility in search of water and pasture” (FDRE 2012:5).

As laid out in the Plan, the campaign would begin with community meetings at which the benefits of villagization were explained, whereupon people would be directed to plots on which to build new houses. At the same time as the sugar-cane plantations, processing factories, and new towns and villages were being built on land that was owned by the local communities, people would be issued with formal titles to both residential land and to farmland: “In the case of land that relies on rain [for cultivation] 2 hectares would be apportioned to each settler pastoralist, whereas those settling on irrigable land would be apportioned 0.5 hectares each” (ibid., p.8). They would also be provided with food aid “for about eight months, until the crop they plant in the first year reach for harvest [sic] and they could feed themselves” (p.18).

The expansion of artificial irrigation in the Lower Omo Valley was made possible by the construction of the Gibe III dam upstream, which began in 2008. In conjunction with the dam, a system of canals was built to distribute water to the Omo-Kuraz Sugar Plantation, within which selected plots of land were set aside for use by ‘settler pastoralists’. The Omo-Kuraz Plantation is part of the Kuraz Sugar Development Project, a state-owned enterprise projected to cover 175,000 hectares (Sugar Corporation 2015). At full capacity, it was predicted, Kuraz would generate fully a quarter of the country’s sugar and ethanol production, more than any other plantation in the country (Sugar Corporation 2014). In line with this vision, the Villagization Plan describes the overarching goal of the villagization project as to “change the economic and social condition of the pastoralists and make them out-growers for the sugar factory” (FDRE 2012:4).

Investigating the Bodi experience of villagization

It is important to note that although the people who were targeted by the South Omo villagization program are frequently described as “pastoralists” by government officials (e.g., Meles 2011; Walta 2012), their diets are based mainly on farming of sorghum and maize, with dairy products providing an important supplementary component.ⁱⁱ In the more southerly parts of the lower Omo valley, there is ample floodplain on which to cultivate; further north, people rely on a triad of livelihood strategies: herding, flood-retreat farming, and rain-fed agriculture (Turton 1985). This misconception about the livelihoods of the target population – the idea that, being pastoralists, they are unacquainted with agriculture – is widespread, and has significant repercussions for the ways ‘development’ is imagined by planners.

Our study focused on the Me’en living on the eastern side of the Omo River, a segment of the larger Me’en ethno-linguistic group known to the Ethiopian authorities and outsiders as the Bodi, who on account of their location close to the Kuraz Sugar Development Project were the first people in the Lower Omo to be targeted for villagization. Numerically among the smaller ethno-linguistic groups of the region, the Bodi were estimated in the most

recent census to number approximately 8,000 people (CSA 2008). According to the Villagization Plan, between 2012 and 2013, 1,430 households were to be resettled in three 'new villages' in Bodi territory. (Assuming an average household size of 5, this would represent more than 7,000 people.) Infrastructure for the villagization sites was first installed in 2012 – schools, clinics, veterinary centres, and mill houses.

It was not until planning was well underway that the government arranged public meetings to announce the villagization plan, and little effort was made to accommodate local ideas about the layout of the sites or the kinds of livelihood that would be possible there. As Yidneckachew (2015), who studied the public consultation process, observed: “the process was a nominal participation of pastoralists [sic].... Discussions at the public forums were top-down.... [The] facilitators determined and controlled the agenda, the alternative solutions, and the process of the consultation” (pp.296, 300). The forums were orchestrated so as to permit the airing of “personal concerns about the project,” but did not afford the opportunity for any major challenge of the premises of the scheme. Rather than being open to all comers, participants in the forum were “called” up by the organizers based on their “proximity to the project command area” (p.296). According to a member of the Regional Steering Committee interviewed by Yidneckachew, “participants were not to represent any [particular] group or the pastoralists’ concern” (p.296).

Settlers began to arrive in May of 2012 and official data suggest that by September of that year a few dozen households were living in each of the villages. The principal ‘benefit’ they received was an allocation of 30kg of grain per household per month as food aid. Land for irrigated farming was unavailable for approximately the first six months, but by early 2013, agricultural extension agents (known locally as Development Agents) had begun directing the settlers to grow maize using an irrigation system provided by the Sugar Corporation. The promise of the planners was that by using fertilizer and artificial irrigation, two or three harvests would be possible each year, with additional income available from selling cane to the Sugar Corporation for processing in the new factories.ⁱⁱⁱ In practice, delays in the installation of infrastructure – both irrigation systems and sugar factories – meant that these harvests were elusive, and in many other ways the experience of villagization failed to meet official expectations. Although people were at first given plots of 0.5 ha to cultivate maize for subsistence on irrigated plots, later the size of their plots was reduced to 0.25 ha. Once the processing factory was completed, the planners suggested, people would be entitled to 0.75 ha of land for sugar-cane cultivation, in addition to the 0.25 ha they were already cultivating. But as of this writing, the sugar factory is still not operational (Kamski 2016).

While development initiatives that involve population transfer are conventionally referred to as “development induced displacement,” the absence of any meaningful consultation prior to the implementation of the villagization scheme in the Lower Omo means that it is more accurately described as development *forced* displacement. As Cernea has noted, “‘induced’ is not an appropriate term for a process that is determined by fiat, decided and planned out in advance” (cited by Oliver-Smith 2010:2). To get a sense of how the scheme and its impacts were experienced by the Bodi, we designed a study that would (1) compare food access in villagization sites and in communities that had not yet been subject to resettlement, and (2) investigate the impacts of ongoing changes on well-being as locally understood. We take food access to mean the ability to acquire sufficient food at a given time

(Maxwell & Smith 1992). This is one component of food security, which refers to a state in which there is a low risk of food shortage due to poverty, “crop failure, natural or other disasters” (United Nations 1975:14). Food security may itself be considered as a component of the larger domain of well-being, by which we mean the experience of pleasure, or partaking in what is good in life, often associated with participation in meaningful daily routines (Weisner 2009); its opposite, ill-being, refers to suffering, isolation, and disruption (Narayan et al. 2000). We carried out our research both in villagization sites near Hana town (the administrative centre of Salamago *woreda*^{iv}) and in a comparison community in the division of Bodi territory called Gura. Below we describe our research methods and recount some of the challenges we faced in the process of carrying out the research.

Survey methods. To assess food access quantitatively we used an adapted version of the Household Food Insecurity Access questionnaire (Swindale and Bilinsky 2006) which asks about households’ experience of hunger and worry over food in the month before the survey. The questionnaire, developed by the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) project of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), comprises nine questions, including, “In the past 30 days, did you / worry that your household would not have enough food?/ eat fewer meals because of a shortage of food? / go to sleep hungry?” If respondents answered ‘Yes’ to any of these questions, follow-up questions were asked, concerning the frequency within the past month with which these occurred (rarely, sometimes, or often). The resulting data are conventionally treated either as a continuous measure of food insecurity or used to categorize households as ‘food secure’ (no ‘Yes’ responses) or as ‘mildly, moderately, or severely food insecure.’ ‘Moderate’ food insecurity implies, for example, often having to consume foods you really don’t want to eat, or ever having to skip meals. ‘Severe’ food insecurity implies such things as skipping meals frequently, having no food in the house, or going all day and night without eating (Coates et al. 2007). Our survey also included questions about household demographics, water access, and assets.^v

Carrying out a household survey in the Lower Omo involves various challenges that are often either absent or ignored in conventional accounts of survey research. First, Bodi is a largely non-literate society, yet to carry out a survey, we needed the services of enumerators who were both literate and fluent in the local language, Me’en. In attempt to identify suitable enumerators, one of us (EGJS) put out word of the project in Hana town, and then, with the help of our collaborators, administered a short literacy test, in the shape of an application form, to the men who had come forward. (All of the candidates who presented themselves to us were men.) We subsequently provided the six men who had proven themselves most literate in Amharic with a week’s training on the procedures of survey research in general and the project questionnaire in particular. The questionnaire was written and answers were recorded in Amharic, with translation into Me’en being carried out spontaneously by the enumerators. In principle it would have been better to print the questions and record answers in Me’en, but since the language is rarely written, it would have made the interview process much more difficult for the enumerators, and increased the likelihood of errors.^{vi}

A second challenge is that survey research conventionally requires a sampling frame from which to select households for inclusion, yet civil registration systems barely function in the region, and official data on the population of the villagization sites proved unreliable.

Government reports from early 2013 suggested that more than 800 households had registered to resettle, but when we visited the villages in August 2013, there were altogether only about a hundred houses that were occupied in the three new villages.^{vii} We therefore attempted in our survey complete coverage of those households in the new villages in which there were children under five years old. (We focused on households with children under five because we were also interested in assessing children's growth – another measure of nutritional sufficiency.) Of the approximately 100 households present in the villagization sites, 59 included children under five, and all of these consented to participate in our survey.

In Gura, the community that had not yet been subjected to villagization, we aimed to survey an equivalent number of households to those we had covered in the existing resettlement sites. The social and physical organization of space among the Bodi is important for understanding the logic of sampling here. Bodi traditionally divide space into two types of settlement, each associated with a particular kind of food production: (1) cattle camps (*ori*, singular *tuy*) in the grasslands and (2) cultivation sites (*kerta*, singular *ker*) in the bush or by the river, where they practice either slash-and-burn agriculture or riverbank cultivation on land inundated by the annual rise of the Omo (Fukui 2001: 4). These settlements differ in their layout and demographic composition. When farming, one or a few women build temporary houses in small clusters, in immediate proximity to their fields. Women live in these settlements, known as *olman*, during most of the cultivation season, guarding their fields against pests. Men are more often found in the cattle camps (*ori*), where forage and water for cattle are available. Each cattle camp comprises a cluster of family compounds arranged in a U-shape around one or more shade trees under which men habitually gather to socialize. (Young children move freely across these gendered spaces; as they grow, they conform more to gender expectations.) Although such camps are sometimes located close to each other, overall they are widely scattered over the grassland. In August 2013, the people of Gura were residing principally in cattle camps, and the sample in Gura was drawn from three such camps, which were judged by locals to be representative of Gura generally. Of the approximately 50 households present in these cattle camps, 39 included children under five, and all of these consented to participate in the survey.

During administration of the survey in both Gura and the new villages near Hana town, our team was accompanied at all times by a member of the Salamago *woreda* administration, who assisted in explaining the aims and procedures of our research to informants. We took pains to explain to respondents the independence of our research from the activities of the government; however, the fact that we were accompanied by a government employee, and the formal nature of the survey procedure, may have identified us in the minds of respondents as complicit in the villagization program, and may have made some people reluctant to report experience of hunger, lest it be taken as criticism of the program.

Ethnographic methods. In addition to the household survey, this paper also draws on four months of ethnographic research carried out by the one of us (LB) who is fluent in Me'en during three stays between 2012 and 2015 – the years before and immediately after the villagization campaign in Hana. This ethnographic research is based on spontaneous and opportunistic conversations as well as semi-structured interviews and observations. The

primary focus of the ethnographic work was the communities of Gura, but comparative work was carried out in the villagization sites and in Hana town.

One difficulty of carrying out ethnographic research in the new villages was the obvious fear among people not closely acquainted with the ethnographer to voice negative comments, in case they be reported to the authorities. Thanks to LB’s long-term presence, however, we were able to discern people who had long been recruited by the local government as ‘representatives of the Bodi’ and who had thus learned not to criticize government policies. Another way we got around this fear was to rely on friends who themselves introduced us to trusted relatives living in the new villages.

Comparing ethnographic and survey data on food security

During the period of our research, Hana town was undergoing a transformation from a mere police post into an increasingly bustling town, and camps for full-time plantation workers, who numbered in the thousands, were springing up alongside the plantation. Both through informal labor migration and through planned resettlement, Salamago *woreda* as a whole was becoming increasingly ethnically diverse. Resettlement from Konso, a highland area of southern Ethiopia, had begun in the mid-2000s; ^{viii} and from 2012 increasing numbers of spontaneous migrants were also arriving from other parts of Ethiopia’s Southern region in search of work on the new plantations. These newly-arrived people were especially visible in Hana town: in the mornings they lined the main street to await transportation by lorry to the plantation sites; in the evenings they filled the restaurants and bars – businesses that themselves had been established only within the previous year. In the space of a decade, not only the Bodi but also the neighboring Mursi and other indigenous people of Salamago *woreda* had become minorities in their own lands.

Our survey provides a snapshot of food access conditions in the villagization sites and in Gura in August 2013 (Table 1). The food insecurity scale ranges from 0 to 27, with higher numbers representing more experiences of food insecurity (hunger, skipped meals, reduced dietary diversity, and worry over food) within the past month.

Table 1: Food access in villagization sites near the Kuraz sugar plantation and in the cattle camps of Gura, in August 2013

	Mean food insecurity score*	Standard deviation	Sample size (households)
Villagization sites (receiving food aid)	7.8	5.1	52
Gura cattle camps (not receiving food aid)	11.6	5.0	39

* Mean values are significantly different between the two sites (p <.05)

Our hypothesis was that food security would be lower in villagization sites: that is to say that compared to Bodi communities not subject to villagization, households in the villagization sites would experience greater food insecurity. This prediction was based on our reading of the literature on the social impacts of resettlement, which demonstrates that relocation has more often deepened poverty than ameliorated it (Cernea 2000; Scudder 2012).^{ix}

The household survey data do not support this hypothesis. Food insecurity was high in both of the study areas – 85 percent of households in the villagization sites and 97 percent of households in the Gura cattle camps reported experiences in the preceding month that reflect moderate or severe food insecurity according to conventional criteria (Coates et al. 2007) – but responses to the survey suggest that people in Gura experienced a higher degree of food insecurity than those in the villagization sites.

From these data one might conclude that villagization was succeeding in bolstering food security for the Bodi. In interpreting these results, it is important to remember that at the time of the research, the government was distributing food aid only to people in the new villages. Ethnographic data also allow us to check the validity of the food security indicator against other aspects of context. How did the communities differ in terms of food access, beyond food aid? How did the people feel about their situation?

Bodi views of food security and well-being under villagization

As this was the first attempt at smallholder irrigated cultivation within the Kuraz Sugar Development Project, pressure on Development Agents was high to make it into a showcase for the success of the whole project. Once irrigated plots were made available in early 2013, Development Agents monitored people's fields closely, and held the Bodi accountable for any failure to bring the maize to maturity. This monitoring and nagging was resented by the Bodi, because crucial aspects of the farming – the size and location of plots, the type of seed, and the time of planting – were beyond their control. Settlers perceived themselves as occupying a lowly position in a command hierarchy, which grated with Bodi ideals of autonomy. As one settler told us:

In the fields we cultivate ourselves with our sickle [the rain-fed fields], the fire eats everything and the weeds don't grow fast. And if they grow, it's only a little. People weed only for two or three days; if necessary we might weed for five days. We hold a working party with beer so we can finish it up quickly, and then we go back to our cattle and our children – we act like adults (*gal ke zugo*) and live in peace, at home. But here, if the maize dries up, the Highlanders keep nagging you [as if you're a child]: 'Why hasn't this person weeded his field? Why hasn't that person brought water into his field?' (Man from one of the new villages, June 2014)

The supply of water from the new irrigation system was also determined by the Sugar Corporation. Some settlers found themselves in a position of advantage – those whose fields were closest to the canal received the water first when the canal gate was open, and could then block it so that the water entered their fields only. But crop yields from the irrigated fields were generally disappointing. Even when planting occurred during the rainy season *and* water was available from the canal – and the crops therefore received both rainwater and

artificial irrigation – the resulting harvest was not enough to feed the settlers, let alone to produce a surplus for sale.

In addition to simple availability of food, a sense of well-being for the Bodi also includes the opportunity to consume – and share – food and drink in familiar ways. The physical arrangement of the new villages constituted a key challenge here. The villagization sites, once they were established, bore little resemblance either to the clusters of houses found in cultivation sites (*olman*) or to the cattle camps (*ori*) that we described earlier. Although the new villages were supposed to gather several hundred households into more nucleated settlements, within these sites each household was positioned quite distant from the next – each on its own 0.5 hectare grid square – and in the allocation of plots to settlers, the local administration gave people little choice over either the location of their houses or whom they had as neighbors. These features of the new villages implied a very different set of routines and relationships than the ones the Bodi were used to. When asked whether he shared his morning coffee with neighbors, a resident of a new village answered:

Where can we share our coffee? There is no one you can call and say: ‘Come on, let’s drink coffee!’ The way God made us is this: you are my neighbor, we get along well, so we build our compounds close to each other. ^x God made us this way. But now the government comes and wants to turn us into Highlanders. Do our bodies know their ways? They don’t. Now that we’re here, we cultivate the maize as they show us, and the maize ripens and we eat it, but our bodies feel bad (*rεε ga k’esi*). (Man from one of the new villages, June 2014)

Bodily discomfort and social alienation emerged as key idioms for describing the disruption associated with villagization and plantation work. When one of us (LB) visited an irrigated field where women were weeding, and asked them how they felt about the new conditions, at first some young women answered shyly that the government was arranging things well. But then an older woman spoke up: “Here, we are forced to live like *serategna* [Amharic: day-laborers]!” In their own fields, she went on to say, they had shade to rest in, and could make coffee; they enjoyed the comfort of their homes, and they mixed farm work with breaks drinking or socializing. But in the irrigated fields set aside for the settlers, which were approximately a half hour’s walk away from new villages, all the shade trees had been cut down. In order to get a little shelter from the sun, they had to spread clothes over the immature maize plants, and then crowd into what shade it afforded to drink the beer of the working-party. From being a place to live *and* work, the fields had become mainly a place of (hard) work.

(Image around here)

The heat, the sense of powerlessness, the meagre harvests, and the harrassment of the Development Agents made life hard for people in the villagization sites. Food aid provided by the government was the principal attraction. The following excerpt from an interview with a man from a cattle camp a few kilometers from Hana town represents the motivations of many of the first people who registered as residents of the new villages.

When the Highlanders [i.e., government agents] told us to move [into the new village], I went to build my house. My wives, they were hungry. I had no cattle to sell. So I said: “Let’s build a house and take some food [rations] from there.” And we built one.

[LB:] *Did you just plant a few poles?*

I just planted a few poles [to mark the site] and I came back. Then I went to cultivate in the bush [to carry out rain-fed cultivation]. When my maize ripened, I left [the resettlement site]. (Man from a cattle camp near Hana town, 2012)

This strategy of building a makeshift house at the villagization site in order to obtain rations seems to have been tried by many other families. Rather than representing a vote of confidence in the development plan, the principal reason for participating in the villagization campaign was to obtain food aid. Many of those who opted to settle before the irrigated fields were made available were struggling to support themselves through ordinary livelihood activities – some, like the man quoted above, had few cattle, and could not therefore afford to sell any to buy grain; others had few able-bodied children, or elderly husbands. Yet others were relatively well-off, but wanted to take advantage of the food being distributed in the villagization sites. During the fieldwork for our household survey, for example, one of the enumerators whose relatives had taken up a plot in the settlement used our project automobile to transport bags of grain from the villagization site to town for resale – a practice that was officially prohibited, but to which the authorities turned a blind eye. As in the case of villagization in central Ethiopia studied by Helen Pankhurst, the initiative appears to have attracted a variety of people for a variety of reasons – some of them among the poorest and most desperate, and others who were more prosperous but saw an opportunity to profit from the situation (Pankhurst 1992:59).

The ethnographic findings that we have reported above reflect the immediate experiences of Bodi in the face of villagization. Other crucial features of the situation relate less to villagization and more to the political and ecological changes that accompanied it: the fact that it was carried out at the same time as (1) a massive influx of labor migrants, which added to the almost decade-long presence of people deliberately resettled from Konso and (2) the ecological reengineering of the landscape to make it fit for plantation agriculture. In these respects what is happening in the Lower Omo closely resembles the forced displacement associated with plantation development in the Awash Valley (Kloos 1982), and the combination of plantation development and villagization that has been carried out more recently in Ethiopia’s western province of Gambella (Fana 2016a, b). In all three cases, a variety of forces undermined the livelihoods and food security of indigenous people *at the same time* as some of them were attempting to make a living in resettlement sites. In the penultimate section of this article we place our ethnographic findings in relationship to the work of other scholars of forced displacement and well-being, and we briefly consider the kinds of resistance the Bodi mounted to the changes forced upon them. Finally, we reflect on the limitations of social surveys for shedding light on these problems.

Do our bodies know their ways?

We have highlighted in this paper certain misconceptions on which villagization in the Lower Omo has been based – (1) that the population to be resettled were pastoralists unacquainted with agriculture, when in fact they were already reliant on farming for the majority of their diets; (2) that the target population would enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to ‘settle’ as soon as they were made aware of it, whereas in practice they viewed it skeptically; (3) that the resettlement sites would be more nucleated than places like Gura, whereas in important respects they were more spread out; and (4) that food security and well-being would inevitably be improved by these changes. We have shown that villagization was actually experienced by the Bodi settlers as undermining food security and diminishing well-being. It was experienced as heat, as disruption to routines, as a loss of control over livelihoods, as being treated like children rather than adults, and as abstracting work from ordinary sociality (cf. Carrier 2001). The question asked by one of our informants, “Do our bodies know their ways?” is emblematic of the profound disruption that many Bodi felt in the context of the upheaval that was forced upon them.

Unpacking the words our informant used helps point out some implications that are not otherwise clear. A literal translation of the phrase would be ‘Does the body/self know? It doesn’t.’ *Rεε*, which we have translated here as ‘body’, can also be understood as ‘self,’ a double meaning that challenges the mind / body dichotomy in Western philosophy.^{xi} Students of the Mursi, culturally one of the Bodi’s closest neighbours, have analyzed the Mursi word for ‘body’ and its relationship to local notions of selfhood. Eczet explains that the Mursi word *ree* denotes a general state of being, rather than the physical body as such – hence the phrases ‘the body is good’ or ‘the body is bad’ refer to personal well-being or ill-being (Eczet 2013:86ff).^{xii} Furthermore, the ‘body’ or ‘self’ is intensified or strengthened through positive social interactions, when it is perceived by others (*ibid.*; see also Lienhardt 1985:155). Mursi and Bodi acknowledge that persons are made up of social relations; social interactions are therefore actively sought out (Fayers-Kerr 2013:90).

The opportunity to drink coffee with one’s friends in the morning – something that people missed in the new villages – may seem a banale thing, occurring as it does against the backdrop of land alienation and the upending of a political and ecological order that for the Bodi has deep cosmological significance (Buffavand 2016). But this practice is indicative of a set of meaningful routines that allow people to experience what is good in life, including connection with others. There’s a naturalness about these routines (“God made us this way”); when people are forced to abandon them, they suffer (“our bodies feel bad”) (cf. Weisner 2009). In urban settings in Ethiopia, price spikes following the global financial crisis of 2008 impacted on well-being in part because they made it hard for the poor to afford coffee, and precluded the social gatherings associated with coffee drinking (Hadley et al. 2012).^{xiii} Freeman describes social gatherings for coffee drinking among the Gamo of the Ethiopian south-west highlands as a “technique of happiness” which allows people to “subsume [themselves] in the social fabric” (2015:162, 171). The villagization scheme’s effective prohibition of such “techniques of happiness” can be seen as part of a continuum of violence being done to the Bodi and others in the name of development.^{xiv} Focusing only on the most obvious manifestations of this violence, such as the bulldozing of one’s backyard, can serve

as a barrier to empathy for those of us who have little in our life experience to compare with this. Focusing on the denial of small freedoms, on the other hand, can help make larger injustices more comprehensible.

“To be resettled,” Oliver-Smith has written, “is one of the most acute expressions of powerlessness because it constitutes a loss of control over one’s physical space. The only thing left is ... the body” (2010:14). The hunger and insecurity that our informants spoke of underline the fact that the body in question is vulnerable. If the set of routines and practices we rely on to make a living and to give life meaning – in short, our culture – is thought of as a second skin, then this is a body that has been stripped of that skin.

Local resistance, and its limits

The sense of indignity and loss of control that we witnessed in the Lower Omo are of a piece with what researchers of forced displacement have documented in many other places (Oliver-Smith 2010). Another commonality is the ubiquity of resistance. One of the resources on which the Bodi have drawn in order to preserve a sense of dignity is their long experience of resistance to the projects of powerful outsiders (something they share with many other peoples of the Ethiopian periphery; cf. James 1979; González-Ruibal 2014). In the case of the resettlement campaign, this resistance took the form both of overt conflict and covert subversion. Open conflict occurred principally between the Bodi and immigrants from Konso, and mostly took the form of tit-for-tat killings. These conflicts had begun almost immediately upon the arrival of Konso settlers in the government resettlement drive in 2004. The government had intervened in these cases by attempting to broker peace meetings. But with the region becoming newly critical to national development plans, the government installed a larger federal military presence in the woreda from 2012 onwards. A denouement occurred in early 2014, when, after a new round of fighting had broken out between the Bodi and settlers from Konso, the Ethiopian military intervened on the side of Konso settlers, firing on Bodi who approached Konso settlements; according to Ethiopian Satellite Television the soldiers injured 17 women, children, and youth (ESAT 2014). In the midst of this conflict, school teachers and other government workers left the new villages, as did most of the settlers who had been living there.

Resistance to the government’s designs was more commonly of a covert kind: (1) refusing to show up to meetings, or to endorse the plans presented at them; (2) partial compliance, in the form of building new houses, laying claim to irrigated land, and receiving (and sometimes re-selling) food aid, and (3) adopting a bet-spreading strategy by trying out life in the new villages, while keeping one foot planted in their former homes. It also manifested in the porous nature of the resettlement sites, and the ways in which people moved back and forth between the new villages and cattle camps and rainfed cultivation areas – treating the villagization sites not as their only homes, but as another node in their network.

These resistance tactics work, however, only as long as other livelihood options remain open. As Scott has noted in his work on the “hill people” of Southeast Asia, grabbing of land and other resources by outsiders has diminished the power of techniques of resistance that for centuries helped people on the periphery maintain a degree of autonomy.

Resettlement – the “transplantation” of “presumptively loyal and land-hungry valley populations” to the hills – has been a key strategy in the outsiders’ playbook (Scott 2009:xii). Another and complementary strategy has been to redesign the landscape, using engineering technologies that effectively turn the “hills” into “valleys” – or, in the Ethiopian case, technologies that make the lowlands useful for highlanders.

In some ways our research may have captured a moment when things were at their best for the Bodi in terms of engagement with the government’s designs: able to access food aid, but also to live without it. By 2016 these opportunities had narrowed. Filling of the reservoir behind the Gibe III dam, and the impoundment of flows from the upper basin, led to the end of the seasonal flood in the Lower Omo. The dam, and the diversion of water along newly built canals, enabled the establishment of the Kuraz Sugar Development Project and private cotton estates, but effectively ruled out river-bank cultivation – a livelihood strategy that is crucial for an estimated 90,000 people living along the banks of the Omo (Turton 2010:4). The option of opening up new fields by the riverside on which to grow sorghum, or clearing bush on which to grow maize, has been largely foreclosed to the Bodi and their neighbors, through processes that the planners did not undertake to explain.

In 2016, Bodi families who for several years had been growing maize on plots set aside for settlers continued to do so, but they recognized that this alone could meet their needs, and many had fallen back on cultivation in rainfed areas, which due to the end of river-bank cultivation had become newly crucial to their survival. Should the rains fail – not an unlikely scenario in this semi-arid region – famine would ensue, just as it did in the Awash in the 1970s (Kloos 1982). Moreover, since the Omo flood is vital not only for the livelihood systems of most of the people of southwest Ethiopia, but also for Lake Turkana and its fisheries, the dam and plantation schemes plausibly threaten the food security of *all* indigenous peoples of the lower Turkana basin, on both sides of the Ethiopia-Kenya border (Anonymous 2013; Avery 2013).^{xv}

Bearing witness to development forced displacement

In drawing attention to the potential of household survey research to hide, rather than expose, the essential features of this predicament, we are sounding a conclusion rather different from the conventional “More research is needed...” The potential of research to represent faithfully the experience of those who are paying the costs of development cannot be taken for granted. In focusing only on the villagization piece of what is in fact a much wider set of interventions, our food access survey risked giving a misleading picture. As we have shown, the survey results are best interpreted as showing that in both the villagization sites and the community of Gura, a majority of people were struggling to obtain enough food at the time of our research. Having carried out this survey, and having invested considerable effort in conforming as closely as possible to the conventions of quantitative social science research, we can make this claim with particular force. The weakness of the survey – and of social surveys in general – is that, in pursuit of data that are widely comparable, it excludes important aspects of local context. As the designers of USAID’s household food insecurity questionnaires noted, “To develop a tool that is culturally invariant, some cultural specificity

must be lost” (Deitchler et al. 2010: v). Or, as a cultural anthropologist might put it: the further your instruments travel, the less useful they are (Shweder et al. 2007).

In the time that has elapsed since we carried out the research for this paper, multiple delegations from donor country agencies such as USAID and DFID have paid “fact-finding” visits to the Lower Omo, only for their findings to be misrepresented, or buried (Hurd 2013; Turton 2014). The testimony of the Bodi that we have placed at the center of this article is a very small contribution towards redressing the debt owed by foreigners to some of the people who confided in them. It may be that the delegates from these agencies failed to report what they heard because it did not make sense to them: it did not square either with the official reality of infrastructural development and improved service provision (the Ethiopian government’s narrative) or with the views of those critics who have focused on specific abuses, such as assaults and rapes committed by soldiers (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2012). The systematic forced displacement that the Bodi and Mursi have experienced has in fact occurred alongside the infrastructural development of which the government and the Sugar Corporation boast; and it raises more difficult political questions than does any isolated case of abuse. Household surveys, the standard means of generating evidence about human problems in the social sciences, are not well suited for investigating processes such as these. Unless surveys are designed with the explicit intention of determining whether forced displacement is occurring, or they are accompanied by in-depth explorative research, they risk overlooking the problem, and merely reaffirming the preconceptions of the surveyors.

Whether villagization is improving food security and well-being, it turns out, is not a very good question. It assumes certain things that, in the course of our research, we have come to recognize as problematic. Foremost among them is the assumption that villagization is a potentially positive alternative to a livelihood system that remains viable, but may be less conducive to food security and well-being. In fact, the hydro-engineering schemes that make irrigated agriculture possible for settlers simultaneously undermine the possibility of making a living in the ‘traditional’ way. From being expert stewards of their landscape, the Bodi and other peoples of the Omo-Turkana basin are being forced into the position of ignorant and vulnerable laborers, out of touch with the world around them (cf. Hobart 1993). But a survey that compares villagization sites and other communities that have not been villagized without taking the broader context into account will miss this.

By using ethnographic methods – by listening to the people on the front lines of this unfolding crisis, who oriented us towards the relationships between the villagization scheme and broader changes underway in the region – we managed to avoid falling into the trap we had set ourselves in the survey. Spending extended periods of time in the Lower Omo, and getting a feel for the dynamics of a culture that has quite successfully weathered past ecological and political changes through a combination of herding, flood-retreat farming, and rain-fed agriculture, also helped us to see the limitations of the “food insecurity scale” we employed. Food access at a given point in time (which, in spite of the scale’s name, is what the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale really measures) should not be taken as synonymous with the broader construct of food security, which implies risks to food access over the longer term. On the face of it, there are few situations in which people are less food secure, in a real sense, than when they are dependent on rations from a government or an aid agency.

On the basis of the principle, “You broke it, you fix it,” the moral responsibility for repairing the damage done to the livelihoods of the people of the Lower Omo now rests with the Ethiopian government, its backers and collaborators – including Salini (the firm that designed the Gibe III dam), the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, and the lease-holders who are growing cotton for export on land appropriated, without compensation, from local communities. This will require something more than staking out irrigated plots of 0.25 or 0.5 hectares per household, and a promise that one day they may become outgrowers for the plantation. If analyses of the relative economic productivity of pastoralism and sugar production in the Awash serve as a guide (Behnke & Kerven 2013), it would require the Sugar Corporation to hand over all profits from the plantation to the people from whom it has taken the land and water.

As we write, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn is inaugurating the Gibe III dam (Salini 2016). Downstream, the Bodi and their neighbours are hungrier and more desperate than they were before this €1.5 billion project began. In the years it would take for further research of the sort we would advocate to be carried out and published, another dam might be built on the Omo, and thousands more people dispossessed and impoverished. Gibe IV is already under construction. For this reason we invite our colleagues not only to carry out further research, but also to make existing knowledge more widely available, and to assist in communicating what they know beyond academic circles.^{xvi} One need only look to the extensive literature on development forced displacement to see the parallels with the experience of the Afar and Oromo in the Awash, and with dozens of other cases where planned development has forced people into dependency. Such initiatives make possible increased security and well-being for some only at the cost of increased insecurity and suffering for others (Roy 1999). It is hard to escape the conclusion that in cases like these, famine is not the result of technical failures, but is the logical end result of projects based on socially unjust premises.

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Notes

ⁱ Interviews and ethnographic research for this study were carried out between 2012 and 2016; the household survey was carried out in August-September 2013.

ⁱⁱ Turton noted already in the 1970s for the neighboring Mursi people that cultivation ‘clearly provides half of their daily subsistence’ (1979: 123). Although Mursi and Bodi in the early 21st century have more cattle on average than they had four decades ago, grain still constitutes the main part of their diet.

ⁱⁱⁱ The seed used was a variety of hybrid maize (BH-140) developed by agricultural researchers in central Ethiopia (FDRE 2012; see Benti Tolessa et al. 1996, Abdisa et al. 2001).

^{iv} *Woreda* is an intermediate level in the official system of regional governance (*kebele*, *woreda*, zone, regional state, nation-state)

^v Ethical review for the study was carried out by the Health Bureau of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region and by the Institutional Review Board of Emory University.

^{vi} Missionaries working among highland Me’en have worked together with locals to translate sections of the New Testament and some school texts into Me’en, but the language is far from being

established as a language of literacy, and among lowland Bodi (where our research was carried out) schools teach literacy in Amharic only.

^{vii} Tewolde and Fana, who carried out research in the same year as we did, concurred that take up of villagization site plots was below government targets. In 2013, they wrote, the largest of the villages had “less than one-third of the planned household units living in it” (Tewolde & Fana 2014:126).

^{viii} In 2004, according to official figures, some three thousand households were relocated to Salamago *woreda* from Konso (Ayke 2005).

^{ix} Cernea (2000: 20) describes some of the ways in which forced displacement can undermine food security: through receipt of inferior quality land, loss of access to common property resources (such as grazing, wild foods, and water sources), or outright landlessness.

^x The Me'en word translated as 'God' is *Tumo*. This does not correspond precisely to the English 'God'; 'Divinity' may be more appropriate (cf. Lienhardt 1961). God is used here for the sake of intelligibility.

^{xi} This is also the case in the Dinka language, which 'compels its speakers to integrate the moral and physical attributes of persons together within the physical matrix of the human body' (Lienhardt, 1985: 150).

^{xii} The work of Leenhardt is now a classic example of the relativity of the concept of 'body'. The missionary-cum-anthropologist was told by one of his Canaque students that the missionaries did not teach them the notion of the spirit, which they already knew, but that of the body (Leenhardt 1979: 164 in Graeber 2011: 243).

^{xiii} On the importance of coffee drinking in Ethiopia more generally, and its social implications, see Pankhurst (1997), Sagawa (2006), Seeman (2015), and LaTosky (*forthcoming*).

^{xiv} The idea of a continuum of violence is elaborated by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004).

^{xv} Ecologists have predicted the end of the Omo flood brought about by the Gibe III dam will lead to a reduction of more than two-thirds in the fisheries yield of the lake (Gownaris et al. 2016).

^{xvi} At least three forums exist for this kind of exchange: Mursi Online (www.mursi.org), the Lands of the Future initiative (Abbink et al. 2014), and the Omo-Turkana Research Network (www.oturn.msu.edu).