

# ETHIOPIAN ETHNIC FEDERALISM: A “GOD-SENT” OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL ETHNIC GROUPS?

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**Abstract:** Results of the implementation of Ethiopian ethnic federalism are remarkably anomalous even after this political order has been in place for more than two decades. Among others, the anomaly is evident within the range of ethnic groups existing at the local level. In particular minorities that share a federal state within majorities have not obtained equitable positive change from the federal system. Investigation of the impact on their social, economic, and political life shows that indeed they are inadequately accommodated to the extent they are promised at the level of constitutional promulgation. For some, the era of federalism has become even the era of old and/or new predicaments. As an illustration, this article assesses the case of a minority group known as Kumpal in the lowland of Northwest Ethiopia. Among the all-rounded problems of the Kumpal, the paper only takes into account the case of the unchecked influx of the highland population into their land and some of the predicaments ensuing from them.

**Keywords:** *Ethiopia, ethnic federalism, results of ethnic federalism, minorities, Kumpal*

## 1. Introduction

At first, it seems to me interesting to begin this article with marking the time when the constitution was written. In the engineering of the current political system of Ethiopia (ethnic federalism in place *de facto*<sup>1</sup> since 1991), “the nations, nationalities and peoples”<sup>2</sup> of the

1 Even though the current federal system of Ethiopia was legally promulgated in 1995, it was there practically since 1991.

2 The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, hereafter called the FDRE Constitution or Constitution, under article 39 (5) uses the names “nations, nationalities, and people” to designate to ethnic groups of all kind in number and

country, on the 8th day of December 1994, ratified the FDRE Constitution through their delegated representatives. This Constitution was later promulgated by Proclamation no 1/1995. Since 2006, the date of the ratification it is annually celebrated under the banner of the “Nations Nationalities and People’s Day”. The 9th annual celebration was undertaken this year, during the time of writing the final draft of this article.

The celebration was accompanied by several events spearheaded by the state machinery, such as state institutions and their media. Places where the celebrations were held were also government offices ranging from the top ministerial level to the local branches. In the education sector, for example, celebrations were made at different levels from the kindergarten to Universities<sup>3</sup>. Similar celebrations were also conducted by civic associations with affiliation to the ruling party (i.e., Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF) such as women and youth leagues. The celebration of this year was often reiterated to be unique because it coincided with the 20th anniversary of the ratification of the Constitution; it was the year which marked the end of Growth and the Transformation Plan I (GTP-I)<sup>4</sup>; and it was the year for the once-in-five-years general election<sup>5</sup>.

Ceremonial speeches<sup>6</sup> on this occasion recognized the celebration of “the nations, nationalities, and the people’s” day was also a celebration of the success of the federal system itself. Moreover, in events which extended this celebration (and in fact almost every other time even without any occasion), it was an everyday observable fact to hear the state media and political officers reiterating the federal system to

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political status. In this article, I just use “ethnic group”, which can be a generic term for all.

- 3 Addis Ababa University celebrated this event on December 4, 2014, and I attended this celebration.
- 4 The GTP I is a national five-year plan (2010-2015) of the Ethiopian Government to improve the country’s socio-economic development by achieving a projected Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth between 11-15%. The plan includes details of estimated cost required over the five years and specific targets to be hit in all sectors of the economy. The GTP document can be accessed from <http://www.mofed.gov.et>.
- 5 In the Ethiopian electoral system, the term of election is once in five years. Since 1995, it has been held every five years, and the fifth term election is held in May 2015.
- 6 Speeches by the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam Desalegn and the Speaker of the House of Federation can be found at [http://www.hofethiopia.gov.et/web/guest/home/-/asset\\_publisher/4Jyo/content/](http://www.hofethiopia.gov.et/web/guest/home/-/asset_publisher/4Jyo/content/). Accessed 29/12/2014.

have emancipated ethnic groups from previous oppression, to have brought them immense change in development and good governance, and to have ended conflict and to have come up with a new democratic union of all ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It does not seem to be an exaggeration to say that the federal system is always portrayed as a god-sent opportunity for *all* “nations, nationalities, and peoples” of the country. In a documentary film broadcasted by state television in December 2014 (and has often been repeated at other times), I heard the date of ratification of the constitution described as the date of the “rebirth” of Ethiopian ethnic groups.

As will be summarized below from the academic literature assessing results of ethnic federalism, it is not contestable to say that there are indeed positive changes ensuing from the implementation of the ethnic federal system in Ethiopia. But, occasions of special celebration also provoke one to ask a question about such generalized claims by government about the mere success of the system. Important questions are: to what extent has the system been useful and to whom? Has the ethnic federal system equally and positively addressed all ethnic groups? These are critical questions that this paper addresses, but before this and as promised above, it is important to summarize relevant literature in the field of Ethiopian federalism.

Indeed, Ethiopian Federalism has attracted a lot of academic attention since its inception with the coming to power of the current regime in 1991. It is even difficult to list academic conferences being held on this<sup>7</sup>, and there are academic institutes devoted to studying it and to training students at graduate levels<sup>8</sup>. And there are also a lot of published and unpublished sources.

Literature on the subject can be summarized based on arguments, among other things, on strengths and weaknesses of this system. Researchers (e.g. Turton 2006:2; Fasil 1997; Alemseged 2004) who articulate on its strengths present the ethnic federal system as “magic”, to use the term by Assefa (2012:435), which is capable of solving the

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7 For example, the biennial International Conference of Ethiopian Studies has had panels directly or indirectly devoted to federalism since 1991; The Fifth International Conference on Federalism was even held in Ethiopia in December 2010.

8 Addis Ababa University Institute of Federal Studies undertakes research and trains students in MA and PhD in Federalism; and The Ethiopian Civil Service University has the Institute of Federalism and Legal Studies.

country's all-rounded political, social and economic problems. For example, they argue the Ethiopian federalism can be a mechanism to end protracted and brutal interethnic conflicts which existed before its commencement. They also acknowledge it as being successful in averting the risk of the dismemberment of ethnic groups from Ethiopia which would otherwise have been or will cause the disintegration of the state like that of Soviet Union or Yugoslavia (Turton 2006).

On the other hand, researchers (e.g. Alemante 2003:88, Maimire 2006) on the negative side criticize the ethnic based federalism as a "curse", also to use another term by Assefa (2012:435), that rather encourages the country's disintegration. They also argue the federal experiment has been rather provocative and causes new bloody conflicts between ethnic groups over different interrelated factors such as over new linguistic-territorial claims, competition over political power, border claims, and deprivation of rights and opportunities for minorities living in regional states that are "owned" by certain ethnic groups (e.g. Vaughan 2006; Dereje 2006; Dereje 2011, Desalegn forthcoming). The critiques also add the theory of decentralization and practice on the ground that it is incompatible (e.g. Negalign 2010; Tsegaye 2006). For example, centralization of power through a single party rule contradicts the principle of decentralization (e.g. Assefa 2006).

I believe the nature of such arguments varies depending on the time they were made and the person making them. Writers at the early stage of the federal experiment seem to have been more frustrated by the newly introduced system and they anticipated its dangers more than advantages. On the other hand, those who write after decades of federal implementation have the chance to learn from the test of time and thus are more cautious to exaggerate problems. And the personal political belief of the writers can also have a background impact on the type of argument one makes. No matter how debatable it may be, Assefa (2012) presents a more conciliatory and emerging belief that what matters for the success or failure of a federal arrangement is not its framework *per se*, but how it is implemented (e.g. whether there is a genuine inter-state democratic relationship, whether minorities are all appropriately accommodated, etc). The subject is indeed a bone of contention which remains today, in either or both ways in academia and politics.

Even though a lot of literature at the macro level exists, there is inadequate attention devoted to assessing results of the implementation of the federal system at the local level. This article assesses the case of a minority group known as Kumpal. While there are some positive changes, ethnic federalism, despite it being in place for more than two decades, still fails to address the many problems of the Kumpal. One may even argue it has aggravated old problems and/or created new ones. Through an interdisciplinary approach (federalism as a political concept) and its local process (as a concept of studying a society), the article investigates how the Kumpal were displaced, impoverished and even their existence as a viable ethnic group was threatened.

Also, even though much literature exists for other “national regional states” (as the Ethiopian federations are formally called), the case of the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) (see below) where Amhara as the predominant majorities and the Kumpal as minorities live have been explored less. The social and political system in ANRS is generally less explored. In particular the Kumpal have never received any significant academic attention in any field of study, except Cowley (1971) to mention one on linguistic aspect as well as (Amsalu 2014) and Takele (2014) on anthropological aspects.

The article is the result of my research engagement among this group since 2011. Since this time, I have conducted several interviews and focused group discussions to collect data for a broader project from which this article is extracted. Moreover, different recent interviews (in December 2014 and January 2015) were conducted with local people, as well as with political and state officials at different levels for the completion of this article with data which were not readily available from the previous fieldwork. All personal sources of data are kept anonymous due to the purported sensitivity of the information and at the request of the informants.

## **2. The Kumpal**

In the existing federal structure of Ethiopia, ethnic groups are delineated based on their ethno-linguistic similarity they share in a given area. The administrative system runs from the first and highest level to the last and lowest: national regional state, zone, *woreda*, and *ke-*

*bele*. Physical and political occupancy of an administrative level by an ethnic group varies depending on its dominance over other coexisting minorities. Hence, ethnic groups existing in a particular administrative level range from those who *own* an administrative entity to those, in practice, without any claim over any politico-administrative unit.

To illustrate this with ANRS, at the highest level is what is formally called Amhara National Regional State. Within this, there are eleven zones<sup>9</sup>, each zone subdivided into several *woreda*, and each *woreda* subdivided into several *kebele*. In this region, the Amhara are the ones who have it as the “mother state” (Turton 2006:18)<sup>10</sup> and who have their state designated after their name. There are other ethnic groups exceptional to the Amhara occupancy, namely Awi, Wag-Himra, and Oromo. Each of the three ethnic groups in turn occupies self-administrative zones (Article 45 and Article 73 of the Constitution of ANRS), today called Awi Nationality Administrative Zone (ANAZ), Wag-Himra Nationality Administrative Zone, and Oromo Nationality Administrative Zone respectively. Theoretically, each ethnic group is entitled to enjoy autonomy over a designated zonal administration and primacy of rights and privileges over other ethnic groups living in an autonomous administration.

The Kumpal live, from the highest to lowest administrative unit, in the ANRS, ANAZ, and Jawi Woreda. In the political administration before ethnic federalism, they were scattered in different geographical administrative units not representing ethnic identification. When ANAZ was established later in 1995, they were partly pooled into this new zonal administration with the Awi ethnic group, together belonging to a proto Agaw family. Even later in 2006, Jawi Woreda was formed which split from another *woreda*, to overcome the inconvenience of a vast administrative unit and in the meantime in an intention to accommodate the peculiar identity of the Kumpal from their Awi counterparts (Amsalu 2014).

Geographically, the Kumpal live in hot lowlands situated in the northwest of Ethiopia, in particular to the area west of Lake Tana and towards the Ethio-Sudanese border. The altitude of their settlement

9 Detailed profiles of this national regional state can be found at [http://www.amhar-abofed.gov.et/about\\_ANRS.html](http://www.amhar-abofed.gov.et/about_ANRS.html) (accessed 29/12/2014).

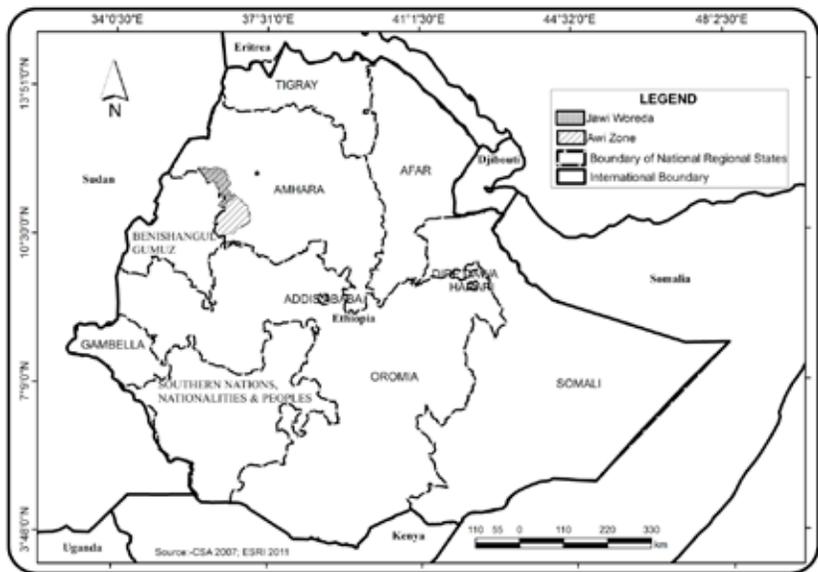
10 Amhara are one of the six ethnic groups in the country who have the “mother state” (others are Oromia, Tigray, Afar, Somali, and Hareri).

area ranges between 1,025 and 1,225 meters above sea level (Jawi Woreda Communications Office 2012) with an average temperature of 26°C (Tesfaye 2007). Before they are confronted with livelihood crisis due to a number of state and neighboring peoples intervention (discussed in this paper below), traditionally they relied on hunting and gathering with a small amount of complementary hoe farming. They are a minority group in both senses of the word (i.e., numerical and political) living scattered in lowland rural villages. The political administration they live today called Jawi Woreda (also see above) covers an area of 5,150 km<sup>2</sup> (515,000 hectares) (Jawi Woreda Communications Office 2012), but, as will be discussed below, most of the population is non-Kumpal and some Kumpal are also found in other, by far Amhara dominant, contiguous administrative areas.

According to the population and housing census results reported by the Central Statistics Agency of Ethiopia (2007: 9), the entire population of the Jawi Woreda is 79,090. However, the Kumpal are not independently represented in the census; rather they are, purportedly in their own choice,<sup>11</sup> counted into either Awi or Amhara ethnic groups depending on who dominates their contiguous/mixed settlement. Thus, it is difficult to know the number of Kumpal living in Jawi Woreda. From their very scattered settlements, I would estimate a sheer maximum number of 10,000 (12.6%). According to data from the Jawi Administration Office (2013) the total population projection of the *woreda* in 2012/2013 was 89,000, and it seems that by this time the relative number of Kumpal would be even smaller than estimated because of the dispersion from their villages to more marginal neighboring areas due to massive highlander intervention. All in all including those living in the surrounding administrative units, the total population of this minority group would not be more than 15,000 (Amsalu 2014).

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11 As contents of this article would somehow show in the subsequent sections, the Kumpal are deeply marginalized by their neighboring ethnic groups. Historically, they were also trounced in marginalization by their highland rulers in addition to their neighbors, mainly the Amhara. Hence, they have developed an identity of “self-denial” and this seems to be a reason why they would like to be regarded as Awi or Amhara.



*Map showing national regional states of Ethiopian federalism and Jawi Woreda of the Kumpal settlement in ANRS*

### **3. Some positive results since the implementation of ethnic federalism**

When a Kumpal informant was asked about positive changes ensuing from governance under ethnic federalism, he would mainly talk about infrastructure and social services. First, since the implementation of federalism, it has been made possible to access the Kumpal land through gravel roads from two different directions. Previously the area was isolated from highland areas of this region (Northwest Ethiopia), and it was a safe haven for insurgents fighting the government but at whose hands the Kumpal also suffered a lot. Since 1991, the area became safe and it was linked with other parts of the region with the newly provided road transport service.

The second domain of change is referred to education. There is indeed an expansion of schools in the place where almost none existed before

federalism. According to data obtained in 2013 from the Jawi Woreda Education Office, as of September 2013, all in all there were forty-six schools, including one high school (grades nine and ten) and one college preparatory school (grades eleven and twelve). In addition to the physical expansion of schools, there is also no formal discrimination of the Kumpal on equal access to the school. Informants remember that particularly during the time of the Imperial Regime of Haileselassie I (1930-1974), students of the Kumpal origin were considered unworthy to school even when there was one to go in neighboring areas (Amsalu 2014). Besides, there is also an implementation of mother tongue education today. Data from the education office also shows that as of April 2013, there were a total of 614 mother-tongue teachers in the entire *woreda*. Unfortunately, from this number of teachers, only five were the native Kumpal (one female and four males) while the rest are from their Awi neighbors speaking a different dialect (though they belong to the same proto-ethnic group). Having five Kumpal teachers is the highest record ever in the history of this ethnic group.

The Kumpal area was also ridden by disease, and had no clinic. In previous times, informants remember it was commonplace to accept people particularly children dying every day in every village because of malaria and other epidemics when they become beyond the control of indigenous medical treatment or are too fatal to take time to treat them with indigenous medicine. The same was true for animal diseases. But today, they begin to appreciate the importance of clinics around them. One day while I was conducting an interview with him, my informant received a call from villagers. It was a call requesting help from him to take a pregnant woman to a delivery ward in Pawi Hospital in a neighboring area. He stopped the interview and rushed to the woman who was placed in an ambulance given by the *woreda* health center in accordance with “an ambulance for a *woreda*” program of the government<sup>12</sup>. When he came back from the hospital the next day, I continued the conversation with him about the situation of women delivery today. He expressed the difference before and after

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12 One ambulance for each *woräda* is a program by the Ethiopian government to make accessible one ambulance in every Woreda so that delivering mothers can be transferred to the nearest health centre or hospitals for delivery. It is part of a Millennium Development Goal to reduce maternal mortality. For more details, see *Road Map for Accelerating the Attainment of the Millennium Development Goals Related to Maternal and Newborn Health in Ethiopia* (2012).

this regime enforcing ethnic federalism was like the distance between the sky and the earth.

The other change is the use of telecommunications, particularly mobile phones. Kumpal people, particularly in urban areas, possess mobile phones today. In the past, exchange of information was entirely made through communication in person, to announce the death of a person, for example, vigorously walking for long hours through a lowland-forest. But today, people call from their home about anything. An informant referred to my case in this regard. He said if it was in earlier times, it was not easily possible for me to contact elders and collect data. It would take several days or even months to travel to a village or send a messenger to an elder to contact me as a researcher based at a town. But today, it is possible to make a call and go to the elder or make him come within a few days or a week. According to informants, this is said to be a remarkable change this regime has brought.

Overhauling identity, which had previously been a source of utter shame and discrimination, is now being made through discourse of equality of ethnic groups. Moreover, *fifi*<sup>13</sup> single song was published in January 2013, the first time in the history of the people to have been recorded and get media exposure. This move has also been described by the people as a “rebirth” to them who were in the bush and under discrimination. An informant’s remark is so telling to me: “even we see snakes on television, but we were not seen ever. Were we inferior to those snakes?”

However, this account does not give the prevailing reality of the Kumpal. Most of the purported changes are not targeted to these people as primary beneficiaries. They are byproducts of state intervention for the purpose of executing resettlement policy (Yohannis 2011) (also see below) and building large-scale development projects (Amsalu 2014)<sup>14</sup>. A visitor to Kumpal villages can notice by far more overwhelming predicaments than there are positive changes described above.

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13 *Fifi* is an annual commemorative musical ritual of the Kumpal, which is celebrated for three months every year from early June to early October. Its musical instruments as well as style and sequence of performance by participants in the ritual narrates the story which is believed to have happened sometime in the past and in relation to oppressive local despots.

14 For example, from ten giant sugar projects to be constructed under the GTP I, three of them are being constructed in the Kumpal land.

#### 4. Highland population movement to the Kumpal lowland: at a glance

Planned highland to lowland population distribution in the form of state-sponsored resettlement has been common in Ethiopia over the last three consecutive regimes i.e. the regime of Emperor Haileselassie I (1930-1974), the Derg Regime (1974-1991), and the current government of EPRDF in power since 1991. In response to food scarcity or as a strategy for food self-sufficiency, all these regimes officially used the resettlement of people to the lowlands of Ethiopia where land is presumed to be in “excess”. However, it is only the current government that undertook intervention in the Kumpal area through two schemes of resettlement, i.e. emergency and planned.

In 2000, a deadly conflict broke out between Amhara and Oromo in a place called Gidda KIRAMU, in Oromia National Regional State<sup>15</sup>. The conflict resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Amhara who are accused of invading the Oromo land through continuous migration since the Imperial Regime of Haileselassie I (1930-1974). The displaced people were transported to Jawi Woreda, to Kumpal land, because of the mere fact of the Kumpal and the Amhara belonging to the same national regional state (i.e., ANRS). Without consultation with the host community, the state suddenly resettled (as an emergency) at least 12,000 people (4200 household) which are culturally and linguistically different from the hosts (Tesfaye 2007).

The second scheme was planned. As indicated in the above, one of the strategies for attaining food security is population distribution from more crowded, environmentally depleted highlands to scarcely populated lowlands with “vacant” lands (The Food Security Strategy 2002). Accordingly, the Jawi Woreda, which is found in lowland and inhabited by the Kumpal, was chosen as a target resettlement site for people from the highland areas. Between 2004 and 2008, at least another 6001 households (16, 119 people) were settled to Jawi (Amsalu 2014).

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15 Oromia National Regional State (ONRS) is one of the nine national regional states forming the Ethiopian federation. In addition to the nine states, the Ethiopian federation also constitutes two city administrations. The Oromo are the “owners” of ONRS and another group designated the regional state after their name.

But by far a large number of people came and are coming through self-initiated migration. Since the Imperial Regime of Haileselassie I (1930-1974) gradual migration of highlanders onto the Kumpal lowland has been common (Amsalu 2014). However, resettlement opened a new era for inundating and constant migration. Once the state sponsored settlers were established, once the area was made possible to access through road transportation, and once the security in the area became reliable, and after the area became the destination of large scale development projects, self-initiated migrants started to drift to the “new land” (Amsalu 2014). As indicated before, from 89,000 people in Jawi Woreda today, only about 10,000 are estimated to be the natives (Amsalu 2014). The rest are old and new migrants. Moreover, since a number of migrants came after the census in 2007, they are not documented and hence not part of the above figure.

The following table shows the case of a *kebele* known as Bambluk. It shows how a previously Kumpal village has been swiftly replaced by new comers from highland areas.

**Table 1: Bambluk Kebele population by settlement status (as of 2013)**

<b>Population by settlement status</b>	<b>Figure</b>
Legal (state sponsored settlers)	508
“Illegal” (self-initiated migrants)	1630
Natives (Kumpal)	0
Total population of the Kebele	2138

**Table 2: Bambluk Kebele population by ethnic group (as of 2013)**

<b>Population by ethnic group</b>	<b>%</b>
Amhara	65
Agaw Seqota/Himta	20
Tigray	15
Kumpal	0
Total	100

Source (for both tables): Fieldwork (2013)

## 5. Consequences of population movement

The state-sponsored resettlement and the self-initiated migration has displaced the Kumpal from their settlements and disrupted their livelihood without giving them a genuine alternative. Land is increasingly sliding into the hands of the highland migrants. Administrative and political leadership is increasingly dominated by people other than those representing this indigenous group. There is conflict from which the Kumpal are the losers. In general, due to unbalanced population movement, the Kumpal are marginalized in every aspect (Amsalu 2014).

It is not possible to cover in this article all the problems of the Kumpal ensuing from unbalanced population movement. Here, I want to discuss one dimension of the problem of land alienation and the ensuing livelihood crisis. And it has to be remembered that I discuss them as cases where the ethnic federalism for this group is still not on the agenda even after two decades of its implementation.

### 5.1. Alienation from rural land holding

One of the natural consequences of population movement from one place to another is the occupation of land. Whether through state sponsored resettlement or self-initiated migration, migrants from one rural area to another maximize the occupation of land, either for crop production, animal rearing or construction of villages and towns. And there are different strategies for this. Mechanisms by which the land from the Kumpal slips into the hands of new settlers are both official (legal) and unofficial (private/ “illegal”). State sponsored settlers obtain plots of land *officially* allocated by the state, i.e., in most cases 1.5 hectares per household (Takele 2014: 47). But this is not enough in reality. Hence, both the legal resettlers and the self-initiated (“illegal”) migrants are engaged in the private activities of securing land from the host community through, for example, cheating, forming phony social bonds and forceful displacement.

Here, I want to focus on settlers’ land acquisition mechanisms through the private process (other than transfer by the state through lawful mechanisms). And I begin this with land acquisition through mechanisms that seem to be bare deception. In order to get a glance of this

situation, it seems important to give an example of what I was told to be a true story of a Kumpal deceived in a local rent contract with a settler in 2010. In one instance, a Kumpal agreed to rent some land to a settler. The two parties explicitly agreed for a total of 5000 Birr (as the Ethiopian currency is called) for a rent period of five years. In order to celebrate the agreement, they came together for socialization in a post-contract drink, locally known as *yifintir*. After the renter invited the Kumpal man to intoxication, he presented the latter a written contract to sign on. However, in this contract, the previously agreed sum of 5000 Birr was vitiated for 500. The Kumpal person signed on the vitiated contract out of an excitement from the drink, and he knew the ploy only after some days when he was to receive the rental fee. Similar stories of deception are numerous, such as being misled by the duration of agreed rent, confusing and claiming for a different (better) plot of land from that agreed, etc. In the view of settlers, the local people are “naive” who can be tricked even for preference of new Birr notes to old ones as though the former has a greater value.

Many plots of land were also, as informants from the Kumpal argue, deceivably left in the hands of settlers during the official land registration in 2004 and 2005. In addition to a few plots of land they maintain for hoe and through shifting cultivation, many Kumpal households use their land for rent to settlers and for a long rent period. Before land registration took place in the area in 2004 and 2005 (before this time it was unknown), many Kumpal had thus rented their land to settlers. During the registration, the latter registered the rented land as though it was their own. As they were able to manipulate officials (like bribing), the settlers took undue advantage to officially convert the land into their holding (instead of rent). Even though officials today claim they have returned to the Kumpal land unduly taken by settlers, the losers argue what was returned was only insignificant compared to what remains in the hands of the deluders. There is no documentation of the size of land that is said to be improperly confiscated through the above mechanism by the settlers.

Settlers land dispossession of the natives is also made through creating social bonds which are not genuine. The social bonds are locally known as *gabicha*, *kiristna-abat*, and *tut-metabat*. *Gabicha* is a marriage bond. The relationship between the Kumpal and the highlanders was historically deeply pejorative. It is also basically the same today.

In their dietary habits the Kumpal are discriminated for their being “heathenish”, for their origin they are labeled as people “who came from wood”, for their language they are scorned as the ones speaking “birds’ language”, and the like. The Kumpal are also discriminated from intermarriage with the highlanders. Let me mention a case of how a settler responded to me for a question whether his wife was a Kumpal (Amsalu 2014). The persons’ response was filled with surprise, and he said: “How can I marry her! My wife is a human”. At worst, the difference between the Kumpal and settlers is like the difference between being human and not, though the level of intensity is lesser today than it used to be before ethnic federalism. Despite the discrimination, today settlers increasingly marry Kumpal women to take a share of their land holdings.

*Kiristina* is a bond relationship created through godparenthood. In this relationship, a man or a woman settler may approach a Kumpal family to form solidarity as a godparent for a boy or girl of the latter. A godparent, in highland Christian tradition, is an institution which is established through someone (godfather or godmother) taking part in a baptismal ceremony of a child and making an oath for a proper personal and religious upbringing of the child. However, today the institution does not necessarily have religious overtones. Throughout life, families on both sides (godparent and godchild) maintain bond relationship articulated through mutual socio-economic support other than or in addition to the personal upbringing of a child. From the highlander’s point of view, in particular, it is an economic institution more than it is religious.

*Tut-metabat* literally means to “feed a breast”. It is a kind of adoption; it is the social process of taking responsibility of someone for the economic support of a person who is not biologically related. A person of any age may approach another person, often a well to do family, for a proposal of “breastfeeding” (for himself/herself or for his/her child). If an adopter agrees to take such responsibility, he or she is supposed to treat or support the adoptee metaphorically as though it was his or her own child. The adoptee is not necessarily supposed to live with his adopter, nor is this institution personal. The adoptee may live with his parents or may even have his own household and the relationship at the family level.

The purpose of bringing this description of bond relations is not to leave the reader to wonder as to how the phenomenon should be presented in the context of land alienation from the Kumpal. To begin with the marriage bond, it is a mechanism whereby a Kumpal man, by virtue of marriage, shares a plot or plots of land from the possession of a Kumpal woman he entered into a (pseudo) marriage with. Unfortunately, the marriage is not designed to endure from the settler's side and when he breaks it, he secures plots of land from the division of property with his "wife". Worse, as far as necessary, a highlander can make several of such "marriages" and every time he breaks them, he retains some plots of land from property division with his "wives". As to the other bonds, all of them have elaborated ritual ceremonies of bond formation and subsequent strong bond relationships. But like in the marriage relation, the relationship between a settler and the Kumpal bond remains exploitative. As a ritual event of forming such bonds is accompanied by gift exchange, the Kumpal give the others a plot or plots of land while it may be just cloths or presenting festive foods and drinks from the latter. The gifts exchanged to each other need not be necessarily equivalent, but according to the Kumpal perception whoever shall give what he/she has, is welcome. What matters for them seems to be not the price of the gifts but the symbolic value of the exchange. Besides, the Kumpal are want to form such relationships, many think, because it is also a pride for them to learn Amharic<sup>16</sup> by forming a bond with the settlers. The relationship is considered as an integration of the long marginalized Kumpal by Amhara settlers. And, the relationship from the Kumpal side is unconditional. In case a settler and a Kumpal enter into conflict, another Kumpal having a bond relation with the former will fight for the cause of his bonded-settler against his own countryman. In general, the bond relationships have more moral value for the Kumpal while they have economic value for the settlers. As a result, like what is said for the marriage bond, settlers may repeat one or more of these institutions with several other Kumpal families so that the more relationships they create the more plots of land they acquire. These institutions are the means by which possession of land increasingly slides from the possession of the Kumpal into the settlers hands.

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16 Amharic is the language of the settlers. It is also the dominant language throughout Ethiopia.

The following table compares land size disposed by the Kumpal to the settlers through the above institutions. The table is compiled from the cases of seventy randomly selected Kumpal household head informants. The informants were over thirty, an age intentionally cut to exclude the increasingly landless Kumpal generation from below.

**Table 3: Size of land bequeathed to the settlers through the above social institutions (in the case of seventy randomly selected household heads)**

Period	Total land holding (hectares)	Average land disposed through all bond relationships		Bond for which land is most frequently disposed (hectares)	
		Size (in hectares)	%	Institution	Size of land in hectare
Before 2000	240	34	14	<i>Kirstina</i>	12
2001- 2010	170	26	15	<i>Titu-metabat</i>	9
2011-2014	101	17	17	<i>Gabicha</i>	6
Total	511	77	15	Total	27

Source: Fieldwork (2012 & 2013)

The above institutions have a long established tradition in the religion and culture of migrants than they have in the Kumpal. Currently the Kumpal are titular Christians compared with the highland migrants. They have strong traditional belief systems which form the background of what they apparently practice today, i.e., orthodox Christianity. Christianization of them does not seem to be complete yet. The Christian and cultural traditions of the above institutions are spreading to these people from cultural/religious beliefs and social practices of the migrants. The mixing of cultures into the Kumpal has increased with increasing highland to lowland migration of people and particularly in a need by highlanders to form interethnic relations to secure land. This practice is not unique to the Kumpal. For example, Amsalu (2010) has described similar trends with regard to the interethnic relationship

between the highland Awi and the lowland Gumuz who are contiguous groups in northwest Ethiopia.

Another mechanism of land acquisition by the settlers is forceful eviction of the indigenous inhabitants. As indicated below in more detail, the Kumpal practice farming through shifting cultivation. After they cultivate for some years, they leave plots of land until they regenerate for the next cycle of farming. At this time, settlers consider those lands as vacant and forcefully occupy them. The settlers clear forest from such lands and cultivate crops without the permission of indigenous holders. In this case, the Kumpal come into conflict with the new occupants. In the conflict, the former are often the losers, for they are at a numerical, cultural and material (weaponry) disadvantage. For example, unlike settlers, culturally they are not “wise” to manipulate officials when they go to formal proceedings. Amsalu (2014) presents causes and cases of conflict between the Kumpal and the settlers.

## 5.2. Alienation from urban land holding

Alienation from land is rampant not in the context of rural land alone. There is also a parallel phenomenon in the sphere of urban land holding. Development of urban centers is still insignificant but promising in the Kumpal area (Jawi Woreda). There are budding town centers as a result of the massive migration of highlanders and intervention through large scale development projects. I will present here the case of Fendeka town, the capital of Jawi Woreda.

Land distribution (which is called *mirit* in Amharic) in today’s Fendeka town was held three times, first in 1997, second 2001, and third in 2008. The 1997 land distribution was held even before Fendeka had got the status of *woreda* capital. It was held while the town was a center of a *kebele* administration at the time. Informants who were members of the *mirit* committee say they distributed over 600 plots of land for residential housing. The size of a *mirit* varied but not less than 200 square meters. At that time, only about 100 Kumpal were allocated land while the rest were given to migrants from the highland.

Following emergency settlement of conflict induced migrants (discussed in section 4), there was also a need to distribute new plots of land for new comers into the town. An informant who participated

in the 1997 *mirit* remembers they also distributed an additional 400 housing plots of land in 2001, this time only for conflict induced highland settlers.

In July 2007, Fendeka grew into a municipal town and, land distribution made after this time became the jurisdiction of the municipality. In 2008, urban land distribution took place for the third time, assisted by experts drawn from zonal administration (i.e., ANAZ). A committee distributed 955 plots of land for residential housing (1 *mirit* was equal to 200 meters square). According to officials in the municipality today, the distribution was transparent; representatives of the community were selected and the allotment of plots was publicly made by lots. However, an informant who participated as a committee member in the previous two land distributions says, "After the municipal administration was established, I couldn't continue to work with them. I resigned because they do much corruption and corruption is against the teachings of my religion".

It was not possible to know from the municipality the number of Kumpal beneficiaries in the 2008 *mirit*. According to officials, the distribution was said to be transparent, as mentioned above. The Kumpal as original land holders were also considered for allocation; and when their plots of land were taken, they were given twofold *mirits*, one for their residential plot in the town area like anybody else and another as compensation for the confiscation of their farmland. From the authorities point of view there was no alienation of them from the *mirit*. If any, the problem was rather with them. When something new comes, the Kumpal do not participate in it but fear it and go away. For the 2008 *mirit*, some came too late to claim compensation or replacement of a plot of land. There are still some people who complain today that they were not considered during the land distribution seven years ago. Yet, the municipal officers are ready to give them it once they get permission to do so from zonal authorities.

The version of the story told by the Kumpal informants is different however. According to them, during the land distribution, there was a lot of corruption. Many highlanders got up to five *mirits* for different names: one *mirit* for own name, others for the name of other persons such as brothers and sisters. As municipal officials were themselves highlanders, they call their relatives from the highland and distrib-

uted land to them. Some people who have holdings in the highland neighboring towns (namely Chagni and Dangila) were called by their relatives in the municipal office and they were allocated additional plots of land. The municipal authorities have confirmed there were nine people who took the land illegally and the land was returned to the government holding.

Most of the local people, as informants say, who were born and raised in the town, didn't get land during the 2008 *mirit*. Many informants mention the list of such victims. An informant mentions a case of an old woman. She had had twelve hectares of farm land before the 2008 land redistribution, but the municipality took all of it. She got for replacement neither farmland nor urban. Now she lives in a rental house. As indicated above, the urban land distribution was made in farm lands surrounding Fendeka town. And many have lost their land without replacement to farm lands or allocation of them lands to the town. Due to the lack of access to information, many Kumpal did not even know what was going on around them. Yet, Kumpal informants themselves have also acknowledged that until today even when they have information about what is going on, they might not go to the office to claim their right because there is fear of authorities which is the legacy of historical oppression (see below). But worse is that authorities do not give them due treatment as the indigenous group living in an autonomous self-administration. They say they do not even listen to them even when they go to claim their rights.

Whatever the case may be, what is clear today is that the Kumpal are marginalized from urban land holdings. In one way or another (for example through official land distribution, through institutions discussed above in the case of rural land, through "sale" and rent or through forceful expulsion), sooner or later, they are increasingly getting out of scene of land holding in towns.

**Table 4: Comparison of urban land holdings by the Kumpal and others (the case of Fendeka town)**

Total population		Land holding (in hectares)		
Year	Population	Kumpal Agaw	Others	Total
2007	6071	320	2100	2420
2012/2013	6832	51	2600	2651

Sources: Population and Housing Census: Results for Amhara Region (2007:16) (see reference); Jawi Woreda Administration Office (2013) (see reference); Fieldwork (2013)

When one looks at pattern of land holding in Fendeka town for the Kumpal who have one, one can clearly understand a trend. I have observed most of the houses or lands of these people, and they are found on the outskirts of the town. Worse, as the town expands, the land holding of these people is extinguished for highland settlers, who will still force the former to retreat to new urban outskirts or lose their land all together.

According to an interview (in 2013) with officials in the municipality, after the *miri*t in 2008, land distribution was officially banned by the zonal administration in 2009. Since then, it was only organizations/associations that are entitled to receive land. In 2009 authorities gave seventy-four plots of land of different size for two cooperative associations one with thirty-two members and another with forty-two. In 2012, another 12,544 meter square plot of land was allocated to a sesame market place at national level. Until today, there are expropriations of Kumpal land going on, recent examples being for road construction and large scale development intervention (discussed in section 4). But there are parallel complaints by the Kumpal going on because compensation is not properly given (Amsalu 2014).

### 5.3. Livelihood crisis

The settlers have incompatible livelihood practices with that of the Kumpal and their ecology. The Kumpal livelihood mainly rests upon hunting and gathering, as well as shifting cultivation. They use slash-and-burn and practice hoe farming. When a plot of land they are using

is exhausted after cultivation usually after four to five consecutive years and thus usually it turns to red, they set fire to another plot of land to prepare it for the next plot of farming. Again, when this land under cultivation is in turn exhausted, they abandon it for another place until the forest grows again and the soil regains its fertility. It may take up to five years to come back to the land they abandoned first. This mode of shifting cultivation serves to keep an ecological balance. It is well suited to the soil characteristics of the area; harmonized with sustainable use of forest resources; and generally is an adaptive choice to balance the relationship between man and the environment.

The Kumpal also rely on hunting and gathering as their mechanism of subsistence. They rely on wild honey as a source of food, ritual, and cash. As a food, they consume honey alone or with other food and drink items. As a ritual material, they pour it to spirits in the bush during a ritual of *tsahasivi*<sup>17</sup>, among others. As a source of cash, they sell it to highland traders and generate income. In addition to honey, they also collect different wild plant food sources which highlanders are not accustomed to. Hunting is also an important livelihood activity, as well as culturally a symbol of social reputation.

However, the livelihood adaptation mechanisms are different for the settlers. They rely on crop production through intensive farming. They clear their surroundings for plots of intensive cultivation. The Kumpal increasingly complain that adult settlers habitually carry axes on their shoulders. Then they cut down trees now and then, here and there to wider and wider areas gradually minimizing forest coverage, which the Kumpal rely on for their livelihood.

This is further exacerbated by the incompatible moral attitude of the settlers with that of the Kumpal and the environment. The ecological imagination of the Kumpal promotes environmental stewardship. Rituals are conducted in the bush, and certain species of trees, for example, *bamba* (*Ficus sycomorus*) are never cut for any purpose including for firewood. They are believed to be trees where spirits dwell and cutting the trees is considered tampering with the spirits. In villages of settlers on the other hand, not many trees are left, including young trees cut, let alone to see them get old and dry.

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17 *Tsahasivi* is a kind of ancestral spirit that is believed to cause harm to people unless it is ritually implored and properly worshipped.

The consequence of environmental intervention by the settlers is hence intervention into disruption of the nature-dependent livelihood of the Kumpal, not to mention that dimension of identity dislocation in their belief system. On the other hand, the settlers are by far better off through intensive crop production, but at the expense of the environment and the Kumpal. The following table shows the level of livelihood wellbeing between the Kumpal and one of the settler groups known as Zallan, a settler community more wont towards livestock rearing in addition to crop production.

**Table 5: A comparison between better off Zallan settlers and that of Kumpal (for 2013 harvest year)**

Source of wealth	Better-off Zallan	Better-off Kumpal
Livestock (in number)	150	10
Land size (in hectare)	8.7	11
grain (in quintals)	100	7

Sources: Takele (2014); Fieldwork (2012)

In addition to interethnic conflict (see Amsalu 2014), the poverty of the Kumpal today is causing quarrels among household members. In the past, informants say, they didn't have the problem of food in all seasons. During the harvest season, they had crops and for the rainy season, they would go to bush and collect wild plant food sources and hunt animals for meat. But today there is an increasing dispute at the household level too, such as between a husband and his wife. When the latter insists the former to win for bread, the response from the husband is inadequate.

When I was trekking to a village with my assistant during the fieldwork, the latter said, it was easy to identify from afar which village I wanted to go to. According to him, Kumpal villages are thatched huts, and only few or no steel roofs. On the other hand, the settlers have increasingly managed from their intensive agriculture produces to sell cash crops such as sesame and generate money to build corrugated iron roofs. Thus, the settlers' villages shine from afar from their roofs while the Kumpal villages are hidden surrounded in and by trees. The standard of living between the two groups is thus striking beyond the household. The settlers have houses in urban areas both in their place of resettlement and in their original place where they still maintain

contact; and some of them also have managed to buy commercial cars within two or three years. A Kumpal informant has aptly explained the difference between the two groups: that the “migrants are creeping over us like an ivy plant creeps over a fig tree. While the settlers are “going up”, the natives are “going down”.

## **6. Unfulfilled promises of ethnic federalism**

In the Ethiopian federal system, promises for rights and protections to minorities, among other things, regarding their land and livelihood is entrenched at different levels ranging from principles at the level of FDRE Constitution to more specific programs of action, such as in the food security strategy of 2000. The above data show however, there are inconsistencies in the implementation of the promised rights and protections. The inconsistency becomes stark when it comes to the Kumpal who are supposed to enjoy the priority of rights and privileges within the premises of an autonomous self-administrative zone, i.e., ANAZ.

Let me begin with constitutional promises. The FDRE Constitution and that of the constitution of AMNRS stipulate rights and protections for ethnic groups in relation to their land and livelihood. Article 40 (3) of the FDRE Constitution provides ownership rights of land to ethnic groups (in addition to the state) and prohibits its sale, both stipulations laid down presumably to protect rural peasants from the risk of landlessness. Sub-article 4 of the same article also gives ethnic groups the right to protection from improper dispossession of their land. Moreover, the FDRE Constitution under 89 (4) pledges the government to provide special assistance in every aspect to disadvantaged ethnic groups.

Yet, the ethnographic data in the foregoing sections show that the constitutional provisions are not met for the Kumpal. The people are constantly evicted from land; their livelihood mechanisms are disrupted; they never receive special support either. Worse, even if the constitutions (Article 40 (4) & (5) of the FDRE Constitution and the same provisions of the Constitution of ANRS) explicitly mention peasantry and pastoral ways of life, the shifting cultivation and hunting and gathering mode of livelihood the Kumpal and many other

peripheral groups relied on until recently is never recognized as a livelihood mechanism in Ethiopia.

Favourable stipulations to host people made in the resettlement policy of the present day are also merely on paper. The resettlement policy of the current government denounces that of its predecessor i.e. the Derg regime (1974-1991) because of at least three problems. First, the resettlement was not made based on the consent of the people. Settlers were not consulted and convinced to the scheme of moving them to new places. Second, the policy was guided by political motives of maintaining peace and security in border regions. By settling people from other places, the government intended to set up buffer zones to fight insurgencies. Third, it was carried out hastily and was not integrated with regional development efforts (The Food Security Strategy 2000). Thus, the resettlement policy of today's federal regime, under the Food Security Strategy (2000), claims to undertake resettlement practice in a way that overcomes problems in the previous regimes.

Besides, the policy states, in order to make it compatible with the existing federal structure, the resettlement should be made intraregional, and hence within the same cultural and ethnic group. The resettlers should be integrated into hosts so that the newcomers should not dominate existing communities. Moreover, the resettlement should be made on the basis of voluntary displacement and upon the consent of the recipient community. However, the experience of resettlement among the Kumpal is a paradox in spite of these claims. Among others, the idea of intraregional relocation is practically untenable when resettlement was made across different ethnic groups even if in the same regional state. The Kumpal and the resettlers are different in every respect yet the latter were resettled over the unique cultural and environmental landscape of the former. Moreover, the idea of the integration of the migrants into the hosts is simply a reverie. As shown already, the number of settlers and the indigenous Kumpal is highly incompatible, the former being predominant majorities.

The problem for the Kumpal is further exacerbated by the fact that this group exists at a historical disadvantage. The problems existing today, from the Kumpal point of view, are not merely the result of improper execution of federalism. Rather ultimately they are results of the curse of history.

To make a long story short, in the past regimes, the Kumpal say, taxation was so unjustified that they were even asked to pay tax on their young girls. One day, the community made an oath to go for exodus against this exploitation. Unfortunately, soldiers were chasing them after the news and, as the exodus was during the rainy season, River Abay, some also say River Ayma, was also full ahead. Sandwiched between the two, some people absconded behind, breaking the oath they made all to go in one heart. Those absconded behind were cursed by the loyal group. Regrettably, the Kumpal today believe they are descendants of the cursed group, and since the curse is capable of transmitting into generations, they are cursed. This ancestral curse gives reason for virtually every problem today. The population movement, the livelihood crisis, dispossession of land and a lot other problems not mentioned here are ultimately the result of the curse. The past for the Kumpal is not where they left it.

So if the federal system were effectively implanted, it would also change this condition of the Kumpal. To mention again for example, article 89 (4) of the FDRE Constitution imposes a proactive obligation on the government to change the condition of ethnic groups at disadvantage. However, it has been difficult for the Kumpal even to survive despite “god-sent” ethnic federalism. This discussion suggests, in the Kumpal case, undertaking resettlement up to the standard of what it says in its policy, halting self-initiated migration disrupting the host environment, land and livelihood, and proactively assisting the people to come out of the resilient victimhood from history is what should have been done through the effective implementation of federalism. But as the discussion shows above, the government seems to be more part of the problem than it is part of the solution.

## **7. Conclusion**

There is a good concentration of literature in the field of Ethiopian federalism, but few scholars have gone before me to publish how minorities, in particular, are indeed influenced negatively or positively by the federal operation in the last two decades. Particularly the assessment of negative or positive changes in the everyday life of the local minorities is not adequately made within the framework of

ethnic federalism. Within this broad interest, the paper focused on the case of the Kumpal.

The paper gives a clear message for government to reconsider the discourse on federalism as a god-sent opportunity for *all* ethnic groups. Some grotesque results of it for not a few ethnic groups such as the Kumpal should be recognized. The government's stance is just a representation as though all old problems are dissipated and as though there are no new problems created today. Indeed, to analyze the realm of minorities seems to be to enter into the unresolved dilemmas and complexities of applying federalism to Ethiopia.

A new readiness is required from the state at different levels to change the Kumpal problem and other minorities with the same condition. The purpose here is not to suggest an alternative policy to ethnic federalism, but to suggest a more accommodative and a more useful implementation of it particularly among minorities. The question is about unfulfilled promises rather than unfulfillable.

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