

Research Article

A History of Famine on the Southwestern Ethiopian Border: The case of Akobo (1950-1991)

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Abstract: *Famine has been a common phenomenon in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian borderland also experienced a series of famines. This paper examined the famines that occurred during the second half of the 20th century in Akobo, an area located in Gambella, south-western Ethiopia. The study was conducted through rigorous consultation of archives and the related literature. This study viewed famine from a historical perspective as an event caused by multiple factors and resulting in diverse effects. Therefore, it investigated the cause and ramifications of famine and mitigation measures taken by stakeholders in alleviating such acute problems on the*

southwestern Ethiopian border. The famines that struck Akobo were caused by both geophysical and historical processes. Hunger, migration and changes in livelihood were the major consequences. Efforts were made to mitigate the problem of famine, although shortcomings were observed.

Keywords: Akobo, Border, Drought, Famine, Flooding, Mitigation

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia has suffered from famine on a regular basis for centuries. It has been documented since 253 B.C. In addition, the major devastating famines known as *Asah*, *Fassas* and *Hglah* occurred in the 15th century.¹ Furthermore, the two notorious famines known as *Quachine* and *Kifu qen*, which ravaged major areas of the country, were reported in the 16th century and in

¹ Environmental Protection Authority, background information on drought and desertification in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa, 1998), 10.

the second half of the 19th century.² In the second half of the 20th century famines of unprecedented magnitude recurred in Ethiopia and subsequently affected a large number of people, notably in the country's north. Most of the recorded historic famines struck the northern and central highlands. Besides, eastern and north-eastern lowlands of Ethiopia suffered very badly. These areas included northern Showa, Wollo, Tigray, eastern Eritrea, Hararghe and Bale.³ In this regard, the famines in Wollo and Tigray which occurred in 1953, 1958 and 1966 are worthy of mentioning.⁴ The victims from these provinces migrated to the major towns of the country and less affected areas by famines. The northern parts of Ethiopia of which Wollo and Tigray were part and parcel and other parts of Ethiopia suffered from famines between 1972 and 1974.⁵

Famines have been caused by several phenomena. According to chronicles of the medieval period, people believed that famines were punishments from God for their sins. As a result, a range of factors that caused famine were not well understood.⁶ In contrast, historians of the modern period have attributed the causes of famine to natural factors. However, such scholars also had limitations in understanding administrative failures as a cause of famine. They rarely mentioned the role of warfare and the failure of governments to prevent famine rather than highlighting its causes.⁷ In reality, famines were caused by mismanagement and ineffective mitigation measures manifested by unaccountable and incapable centralized governments.⁸ These administrative failures were mainly common in the second half of 20th century. Limitations in introducing technological inputs and inappropriate resource management had exacerbated famines. The food items exported out of Wollo at the time of serious famines in the province were an example of the negligent nature of governmental administration that gave no regard to the people suffering from acute hunger.⁹

² *Ibid*

³ Patrick Webb, Joachim von Braun, and Yisehac Yohannes, "Famine in Ethiopia: Policy Implications of Coping Failure at National and Household level," Research Report 92. *International Food Policy Research Institute*, (Washington, D.C, 1992), 19.

⁴ The staff of USAID office of American Embassy, *Financial Disaster Report: The Ethiopian Drought/Famine Fiscal years 1985 and 1986* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1987), 2.

⁵ Derseh Endale, "The Ethiopian Famines, Entitlement and Governance," August, 1992. *World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University*, (Annankatu 42 C, 00100 Helsinki, Finland), 10-11.

⁶ Derseh Endale, "The Ethiopian Famines, Entitlement and Governance," 7.

⁷ An Africa Watch Report, *EVIL DAYS: 30 YEARS OF WAR AND FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA*, (London, New York, and Washington, 1991), 26.

⁸ Girma Amare, *Drought and Famine in Ethiopia and the Effort to Overcome It*, 3 Notre Dame J.L. Ethics & Pub. Poly 71 (1988). available at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol3/iss1/8> 71-72.

⁹ Stephen Devereux, Paul Howe and Luka Biong Deng, "Introduction: The 'New Famines'," *IDS Bulletin*, Vol 33, No 4 (2002), 36.

Famine had repercussions for social, economic and political aspects of people's lives. Mortality, epidemic, migration and depopulation were some of the common consequences. The Great Famine commonly known as *kifu qen* (Evil Day) 1888-1892, for instance, had profound effects on people's lives. The famine caused the outbreak of epidemics that brought about loss of people's control over wild animals, depopulation and migration. The famine also assisted Catholic and Protestant missionaries to get more converts.¹⁰

Nevertheless, research conducted so far on famines in Ethiopia has geographical and conceptual (approach to analyse) limitations. The literature on famine from various disciplines such as geography, history and economics has given much coverage to northern, north-eastern and central regions than the rest of Ethiopia. Thus, historical records about the south-western lowland started to evolve only after the 1970s.¹¹ Another limitation of the research conducted on famine is its excessive dependence on "food availability decline" and "food entitlement decline" approaches. The food availability decline approach was commonly exploited by scholars who produced research output prior to the 1980s. Afterwards, the entitlement approach has dominated the scholarly literature on famine.¹² Thus, scholarly publications about famines of northern Ethiopia that used entitlement as a framework were dominant. However, historical roots of famine, processes and consequences were not adequately addressed.

Therefore, the study of famine on the Ethiopian borderland of Akobo has two fundamental aims. Firstly, it aimed to reconstruct famine experiences in the area under investigation as an event. Studies that focused on famine were not yet done in the study area. In addition, the economic history of the south-western Ethiopian borderland is not a well-studied theme. Secondly, the present study views famine as a historical process rather than a mere short-term geophysical and entitlement failure. However, the study doesn't overlook the major aggravating factors for the occurrence of famine. Thus, this study encompasses famine events, causes, consequences and mitigation efforts in Akobo from 1950 to 1991.

2. Background of the Study Area

Akobo is found on the south-western borderland of Ethiopia. It was one of the districts in Gambella province during the imperial period and the early years of the Derg. Later in the

¹⁰ Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892: A New Assessment: Part Two," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied sciences*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (1966) 274-294.

¹¹ Kurimoto Eisei, "Natives and Outsiders: A historical experience of Anywak of western Ethiopia," *Journal of Asian and African studies*, No. 43, (1992), 2.

¹² Derseh, "The Ethiopian Famines, Entitlement and Governance,"

1980s, Akobo was promoted to *Awraja* (sub-province) when Gambella became an administrative region. After the fall of the military government in 1991, Akobo went back to its district status and was later divided into Akobo and Wantow districts.¹³ Therefore, this study covers Akobo as a district and an *Awraja* prior to the fall of the military government in 1991, i. e. present-day Akobo and Wantow districts.



Figure 1: Map of Akobo¹⁴

Akobo was one of the most resourceful parts of the Gambella administrative region. It has abundant resources of water, fertile soil and pasture. Rivers and large wetlands are available in the district. The main river channels found in and around Akobo are Baro, Gila and Akobo, which originate from the Ethiopian plateau, and the Pibor originates from South Sudan.¹⁵ People of the area have been utilizing these rivers for fishing, irrigation, drinking and transportation. These rivers bring fertile soil from the Ethiopian highlands where they originate from and make the Akobo district productive in agriculture.¹⁶

¹³ Medhane Tadesse, "Gambella: the impact of local conflict on regional conflict," *Institute of Security studies*, Pretoria, 4-11.

¹⁴ "The ancient history of Nuer and their advantage on EPRDF constitution," *presented to the symposium on 10th Ethiopian nations nationalities, and peoples day*, December 2015, 24.

¹⁵ Tahani Moustafa Sileet et al., "The Development of the Baro-Akobo-Sobat sub basin and its Impact on Downstream Nile Basin Countries," *Nile Water Science & Engineering Journal*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, (2013), 38.

¹⁶ NALA, a letter from *Yager Gezat minster* (Ministry of Interior) to Illubabur Province, 2 May 1969 EC, about the people of Illubabur province.

Akobo is one of the lowland areas in Ethiopia. There have been variations in temperature in different seasons. The maximum temperature recorded in the area is from October to April which can rise up to 45⁰c. However, in the remaining months (the Ethiopian rainy season) the temperature decreases to 32⁰c. This fluctuation of temperature has been observed due to the availability of rainfall. The rainy season in Akobo enables the society to cultivate crops.¹⁷

Akobo has been inhabited by Nuer and Anywak ethnic groups of the Ethiopian Nilo Saharan language super family. However, the former ethnic group populates a significant portion of the area. Anywaks are economically dependent on mixed farming. On the other hand, the Nuers are largely dependent on pastoralism, although they also practice small farming along the shores of their rivers. During the rainy season, Akobo often becomes flooded and the people therefore are forced to resettle on the plateau where flood could not reach until the river banks recede.¹⁸

3. Conceptual Framework

Two competing approaches have been applied in the study of famine. These are Food Availability Decline (FAD) and Food Entitlement Decline (FED). FAD is an approach to understand and study famine focusing on total food availability.¹⁹ FAD gives much attention to circumstances that negatively influence food availability.²⁰ It has taken into account two dimensions as causes of famine. First, FAD gives emphasise to natural calamities such as drought and flood that have adverse effects on food production. Second, population pressure as it was proposed by Malthus could adversely influence food availability in certain regions. According to Malthusian theory introduced in the late 18th century, the faster rate of population growth would affect food availability. Besides, it proposed that population increment should coincide with food production capacity.²¹ FAD, in this case focuses only on natural and demographic factors; however, political and economic causes that affect food availability have

¹⁷ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No.ከፀ11/74/ክ2. A letter from Nigussie Asfha (Provincial Affairs Coordination Commander) to *erdata mastebaberiya ena maquaquamiya komishin* (Relief and Rehabilitation Commission), 5 July 1980 EC.

¹⁸ Abraham Sewonet, "Breaking the Cycle of Conflict in Gambella region," *UN-Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia*, (2002), 2.

¹⁹ S.R. Osmani, *The entitlement approach to Famine: An assessment*, Balliol College, Oxford World Institute for Development Economic Research of the United Nations University, WP 107 (oxford, 1993), 47.

²⁰ Degefa Tolossa, "Famine and its Causes in the Perspective of the Modern Geographical Thoughts," *EJOSSAH* Vol. IV, No. 2, (2006), 8.

²¹ Alexander Attilio Vadala, "Understanding Famine in Ethiopia: Poverty, Politics and Human Rights," *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. by Svein Ege, Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra and Shiferaw Bekele, Trondheim (2009), 1072.

been given less attention. In recent decades, there is a shift in the theories of famine from natural factors and Malthusian perspectives to economic, social and political causes.²²

Studies of famine after 1980s were analysed mainly using the entitlement approach and undermine food availability. According to the entitlement theory introduced by Amartya Sen, famine can be caused by the inability to have access to food. Amartya Sen states that access to food sources is determined by endowment, production opportunity and exchange capacity. It gives priority for the shortage of financial constraints to have food and policy failures as causes of famine rather than absence of food items.²³ The major departure of Amartya Sen's entitlement theory is its approach to the causes of famine without significant reduction of food availability.²⁴

Sen argued that in the 21st century famine occurred in many parts of the world while the resources and food production could feed every individual. This was because of inequalities of access to resources, power imbalance and biased opportunities.²⁵ Entitlement focuses on the inability to access food, while it is available and accessible with affordable price. For instance, food items were available in Ethiopia, while people in the north were suffering from famine in 1972-74. Moreover, the price of food was not expensive. However, the economic ability of the people to buy food items available in the market or getting access to food items from other regions was low.²⁶

The entitlement approach is being criticized for its overemphasis on economic and market based factors of food insecurity. Entitlement again downplays inherent effects of drought, flood and war. It also undermines political, historical and social roots of famine.²⁷ It gives greater emphasis to individual entitlements and economic exchange relationships as immediate causes of famine. As a result, it failed to address broader structural causes of famine. Moreover, it denies causes of famine from social and political perspectives or processes.²⁸ Indeed, the

²² Mamadou Baro and Tara F. Deubel, "Persistent Hunger: Perspectives on Vulnerability, Famine, and Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.*, 35:521–38, (2006), 10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123224, 522-3.

²³ Vadala, "Understanding Famine in Ethiopia: Poverty, Politics and Human Rights," 1073.

²⁴ Khandakar Quadrat-I Elahi, Amartya Sen, FAD and the 1974 Famine in Bangladesh: A closer Look," *Bangladesh J. Agric. Econ.*, XXXVIII, 1&2, 17-33, (2016-2017), 30.

²⁵ Degefa Tolossa, "Famine and its Causes in the Perspective of the Modern Geographical Thoughts," 1.

²⁶ Getnet Alemu, "Conceptualising Famine in Ethiopia," *International Conference on African Development Archives*, Paper 80, (2003), 1.

²⁷ Baro and Deubel, "Persistent Hunger: Perspectives on Vulnerability, Famine, and Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa," 524.

²⁸ Jlateh Vincent Jappah and Danielle Taana Smith, "State Sponsored Famine: Conceptualizing Politically Induced Famine as a Crime against Humanity," *Journal of International and Global Studies*, 4.1(2012) 19.

entitlement approach has an advantage of understanding famine better than food availability decline in plurality of causes and asymmetry of impact.²⁹

However, “perspectives of famine have shifted from famine as an abruptly occurring event to famine as a process occurring over a period of time, characterized by both natural and manmade events including drought, inefficiency, mismanagement, and political attributes.”³⁰ Nonetheless, the primary focus and debate of food availability decline and food entitlement decline is the features that induce famine rather than the processes and effects. However, the root causes such as structural difficulties, institutional failures, and subsistence economy, have much more effect on inducing famine in Ethiopia than immediate geophysical and entitlement failures.³¹ Moreover, “famine as a process can be differentiated by three periods. The first period is dearth, which refers to the social and economic origins of famine. The second period is famishment, which refers to the process of being starved. The final period is morbidity, or the incidence of sickness within a region”³²resulting from acute food shortage.

Thus, in studying famine in Akobo, Ethiopia, a historical process is better than the previous two perspectives. First, studying famine from a historical perspective enables one to understand food shortfall caused by the long-term adverse effects of the social, economic, and political process than short-term entitlement loss for food.³³ Second, to analyse famine as an event, processes and its multiple features; historical perspective is suitable. Third, it enables one to reconstruct earlier major famines, the trend across periods and its consequences. The consequences may be on people, the economy and environment.³⁴

4. Famine in Akobo

The people of Akobo were hit hard by famine of great magnitude in 1961/62, 1982, 1988 and 1990. The famines had immediate and fundamental effects on the people.³⁵ Multiple factors played an important role in exposing the people there to chronic food shortage in the area.

²⁹ Purusottam Nayak, “Understanding entitlement Approach to Famine,” *Journal of Assam University*, 1 (2014), 4.

³⁰ Jappah and Smith, “State Sponsored Famine: Conceptualizing Politically Induced Famine as a Crime against Humanity,” 19.

³¹ Don Crummey, “Explaining Famines in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Kefu Qän, 1888-1892,” Legal Statement, *Department of History University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*, (2002), 5.

³² Jappah and Smith, “State Sponsored Famine: Conceptualizing Politically Induced Famine as a Crime against Humanity,” 19

³³ Getnet, “Conceptualising Famine in Ethiopia,” 12.

³⁴ Degefa, “Famine and its Causes in the Perspective of the Modern Geographical Thoughts,” 15.

³⁵ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. ፳፬2/2800/112. *Yegambella akababiyawi astedader shengo* (Gambella regional administrative *Shengo*) to Council of ministers, 8 June 1982 EC, about the famine of Akobo.

Akobo suffered from scourge of famine in 1961/62 that resulted from flooding. In this period overflow of water from the river inundated and destroyed growing crops along the shores of the river in Akobo district. Many people in the district faced severe food shortages, although the number of people under such circumstance was hardly known. However, a register at the time indicates that 258 were suffering from hunger immediately as the famine was reported. Gradually, the famine engulfed the whole district.

The problem was so serious that the people there started to eat wild fruit and leaves of trees. However, these naturally grown fruit and leaves of trees were soon exhausted.³⁶ District administrators requested provincial and sub-provincial administrators for aid to distribute and rehabilitate the victims. Initially, the central government replied that governmental relief was allowed for unconditional natural disaster. So, people had started to use the available animals and fish. Later on, the government was able to deliver relief for the victims, though it was difficult to reach all the people in every *kebele*.³⁷

Famine also occurred in Akobo in 1982. In this year, delay and shortage of rain resulted in ineffective seasonal cultivation. The normal cultivation season of May and June was left denuded. Even the flowering crops planted in April became fruitless. The people who had hope during the season became hopeless. The crops harvested along the river shores in December 1981 couldn't sustain for months. Serious lack of food had occurred in the area except fish resources and animal products.³⁸

Furthermore, Akobo was scourged by acute famine in 1988 and 1990. These two deadly famines were caused by multiple factors such as drought and flood. The people had consumed all their harvested crops and started to eat wild plants. However, the wild fruit was also consumed and the people were forced to migrate to refugee camps.³⁹ In the famine of 1988 and 1990, civil servants sent to the area as government functionaries and security forces were also starved. In the famine of 1990 alone between 15,000 and 20,000 people in Akobo had been affected. Nearly all the victims had migrated to neighbouring sub-provinces in the

³⁶ NALA, Folder No, 254, Ref No. 8148/5/11. A letter from Admasu Shiferaw to *yager gizat minster* (ministry of interior), 23 March 1954 EC.

³⁷ NALA, Folder No, 254, Ref No. 11273/38. A letter from Asefa Gebre Mariam (Administration V/minister) to Fitawurari Wolde Semayat Tessema, 20 May 1954 EC.

³⁸ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. ከ፳፻11/74/ከ2. A letter from Nigussie Asfha (Provincial Affairs Coordination Commander) to *erdata mastebaberiya ena maquaquamiya komishin* (Relief and Rehabilitation Commission), 5 July 1980 EC.

³⁹ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. ከ፳፻11/73/ከ2. Letter from Nigusie Asfha to *erdata mastebaberiya ena maquaquamiya komishin* (RRC, Addis Ababa), 9 June 1980 EC, about the Akobo famine.

administrative region. Indeed, some mitigation measures by the regional RRC were undertaken.⁴⁰

5. Causes of Famine in Akobo

5.1. Droughts

Drought has recurred in Akobo for many years. In addition, Akobo was the victim of both indirect and direct droughts. Direct drought resulted from shortage, delay and absence of rainfall in a given geographical area. Direct drought often occurred and caused famine in the area during the Ethiopian summer months from May to August. However, indirect drought was the effect of another drought in the Ethiopian southwestern highlands. As it previously mentioned in this paper, the rivers that flow over the land of Akobo mainly originate from the Ethiopian highlands. So, droughts in the upper course of rivers such as Baro, Akobo, and Gila resulted in reduction of the amount of water that reaches Akobo. As a result, cultivation along the shore of rivers is limited or totally absent in the months from October to December.⁴¹

The extent and disastrous effects of droughts were noticeable in the 1982 and 1990 famines. In 1982, only very little amount of rain came in some *kebelles* of Akobo district in June. However, in the next month, it rained only on July 15, and stopped since that date. Consequently, crops growing along the shores had shrivelled in some *kebeles*. The maize planted in the district in 1982 withered due to the absence of rain. Other *kebeles* of the district were not lucky to cultivate crop due to the absence of rain.⁴² The first season (June-August) of crop cultivation in 1982 was unproductive and resulted in acute shortage of food in the area.⁴³

Similarly, after the early days of June 1990, there was acute shortage of rain in Akobo. It caused shrivelling of planted crops. The people who harvested crops in December 1989 consumed it for over seven months that left them destitute, and they were subsequently exposed to severe

⁴⁰ NALA, a letter from *yakababi gudayoch mastebabriya* (regional affairs coordinator) to Guad Hailu Yimenu (EPDR V/c prime minister), 19 June 1982 EC, about Akobo Famine.

⁴¹ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. 1705/ከለጭ4/04. A letter from Worku Alemneh (agricultural expert in Gambella awraja branch office of Ministry of Agriculture) to Illubabur provincial branch of office of ministry of Agriculture, 12 July 1974 EC.

⁴² NALA, A letter from Gambella awraja to *geberna minister teteri tsehfet bet* (delegate office of the ministry of Agriculture) in Illubabur, 23 July 1974 EC.

⁴³ NALA, Folder No, Illubabur 257, File No, 17. 1. 9.22.01, Ref No. ጭ2/5536/42/4. A letter from Abera Gebre Egziabher (Illubabur province administrative service officer) to *erdata mastebabriya ena maquaquamiya komishin* (Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Addis Ababa), 5 August 1974 EC.

food shortages. The shortage of rain was not only damaging the farmlands of the society but also destroyed state-owned agriculture in the district.⁴⁴

5.2. Floods

River floods mostly occurred around the lowland areas due to heavy rainfall or reduction capacity of rivers. The western part of Gambella region particularly the districts of Akobo and Jikow have an elevation of 500- 300 meters above sea level. The land in the area is characterized by flat plain. River floods frequently inundated low-lying areas falling along Baro, Gilo and Akobo Rivers in the Gambella Regional State.⁴⁵

Akobo has had experiences of flooding and related consequences. Riverine flood dominated its past disastrous overflow of water. Floods have occurred due to overflow of rivers such as Gilaw, Pibor, Akobo and other small streams. Indeed, flash floods were also observed in the area sometimes. Recurring seasonal floods forced the society to manage settlements accordingly. The Nuer and Anywak people in the area have changed their settlements seasonally as a response to the floods there. During rainy seasons, Akobo can be flooded and the people move away from rivers with their cattle until the river banks recede.⁴⁶

Although it was a common phenomenon for the people of Akobo, the 1961 flood was unprecedented. River Pibor that was located between Ethiopian and the Sudanese border overflowed the surrounding lowland. It was caused by heavy and continuous rainfall in October and November. The plain land of Akobo was inundated by the floods. The water that covered farmlands remained high for more than a month.⁴⁷ It destroyed settlements and farmlands. In fact, there were no registered deaths at that time. However, the flooding caused significant devastation to the people of Akobo. Crops planted in farmlands between Aferwa and the mouth of Gilawo River were destroyed by heavy rainfall and overflow of the river. In addition, at the village of Tiergol (administrative town of Akobo district), four houses in a military camp were

⁴⁴ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. 1705/ከለጥጥ4/04. A letter from Worku Alemneh (agricultural expert in Gambella awraja branch office of Ministry of Agriculture) to Illubabur provincial branch of office of ministry of Agriculture, 12 July 1974 EC.

⁴⁵ Samson Wakuma Abaya, "Floods and Health in Gambella region, Ethiopia: An Assessment of the strength and weakness of the coping mechanism," (M.Sc., Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies, 2008), 9-10.

⁴⁶ Gatwech tut riek, "Resource and political conflicts in Gambella Peoples National Regional State: The case of Itang Woreda," (MA. Thesis, Addis Ababa University, 2016), 27.

⁴⁷ NALA, Folder No, 254, Ref No. 1032/2907/32. A letter from Bilata Bizuwork Sahile Selassie to Fitawurari Wolde Semayat Tesema (Illubabur), 24 December 1954 EC, about flood in Gambella.

taken away by the floods.⁴⁸ Another memo written from Gambella *Awraja* administrators indicated the number of houses destroyed and inundated by the floods. Accordingly, four houses of soldiers were destroyed and additional eight houses were taken away.⁴⁹

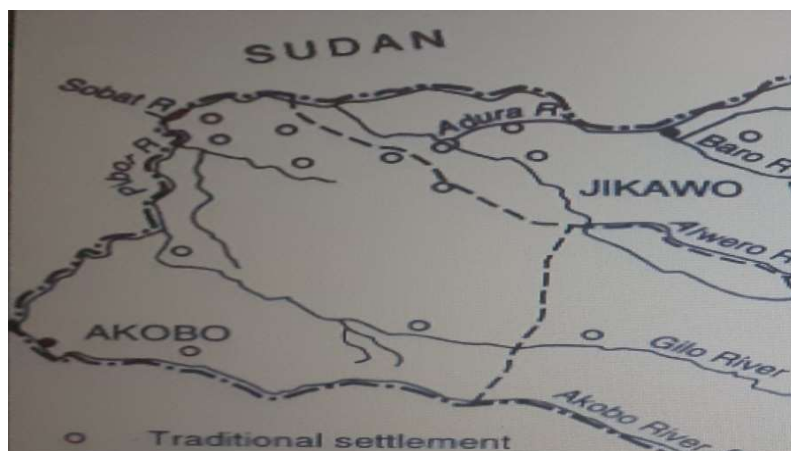


Figure 2: Rivers and streams in Akobo flow to Sobat⁵⁰

The people of Akobo used to cultivate two or three times a year. The main cropping seasons last from May to August and from October to December. However, the flood that occurred in 1961 destroyed the crops planted in October. As a result, the people lost crops that were waiting to be collected in December. The people in the area remained without cultivation for more than nine months. Small amount of crop production coupled with longer dry season complicated the problem induced by flooding. The people were then affected by famine.⁵¹

5.3. Ineffective administration

In the second half of the 20th century, famines in areas under effective administration were supposed to be preventable; technological improvements and administrative developments contributed a lot to reducing mortality and morbidity. However, in most of sub-Saharan countries, famine was exacerbated by corrupt and reckless administrators. This is true in Ethiopia in general and in Akobo in particular. Absence of immediate responses, limited

⁴⁸ NALA, Folder No, 254, Ref No. 4951/1/2. A letter from Fitawurari Wolde Semayat Tesema (V/regent of Illubabour province) to Lieutenant General Abiy Abebe, *yager gizat minster* (minister of ministry of interior), 10 December 1954 EC, about flooding in Gambella.

⁴⁹ NALA, Folder No, 254, Ref No. 1032/2907/32. A letter from Bilata Bizuwork Sahile Selassie to Fitawurari Wolde Semayat Tesema (Illubabur), 24 December 1954 EC, about flood in Gambella.

⁵⁰ Bahiru Zewudie, "Relations Between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontiers 1898-1935," (PhD, Diss, University of London, 1976), 10.

⁵¹ NALA, Folder No, 254, Ref No. 4951/1/2. A letter from Fitawurari Wolde Semayat Tesema (V/regent of Illubabour province) to Lieutenant General Abiy Abebe, *yager gizat minster* (minister of ministry of interior), 10 December 1954 EC, about flooding in Gambella.

technological provision and inputs, and lack of infrastructural development were the main aggravating factors.⁵² Similarly, the serious famines that hit Akobo repeatedly in 1961/62, 1982, 1988 and 1990 were related to administration recklessness.

Administrative problems that induced famine in Akobo included limited development efforts and ineffective immediate relief provision. Geographical inaccessibility and political problems of the area had contributed a lot to the shortfall of social, economic and political progress. Moreover, the south-western Ethiopian borderland was incorporated later than the rest of the regions of the country. It was also considered as environmentally difficult for state functionaries.⁵³ As a result, infrastructure, agricultural inputs and modern institutions did not expand. There were no significant governmental efforts to change the way of life of the society.

Infrastructure for transportation and communication was absent in the area. The road to the district of Akobo was not constructed. It was difficult to access Akobo with reliable roads. Several networked rivers and streams needed bridges to make transportation accessible. However, there was no a single bridge over the streams and rivers of Akobo. Mainly an absence of a bridge on River Gilawo posed a major hurdle to access the district. It was only accessible through Jikaw and then to Sudan by crossing the international boundary. As a result, travel to Akobo needed the permission of Sudanese officials. The only direct means of transportation to Akobo from Gambella was boats over the rivers of Baro and Gilaw. However, the boats could only sail when the water levels were high enough.⁵⁴

The Baro River had been a suitable means of transportation. In the Ethiopian summer season, food items for civil servants, soldiers and other sections of society in Akobo were transported via Baro using boats. The opportunity to transport materials using horses or mules to Akobo was unavailable due to climate of the area.⁵⁵ Besides, there were problems not only in transportation infrastructure but also in reporting that had a lot to do with the absence of communication infrastructure. It took at least two months to exchange memos between Gambella *Awraja* town and Akobo district.⁵⁶

⁵² An Africa Watch Report, *Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine In ETHIOPIA*.

⁵³ Bahiru Zewdie, "Relations," 10.

⁵⁴ Freddie Carver, "Rethinking Aid in Borderland Spaces The case of Akobo," *Rift Valley Institute* (2020), 8.

⁵⁵ NALA, Letter from Ministry of Interior to Illubabur Province, 2 May 1969.

⁵⁶ NALA Folder No, 254, Ref No. 1632/2957/32. Zewudie Dubale (Gambella awraja Secretary) to Illubabur provincial Administration (Gore), March 1954 EC, About the flooding of Pibor river.

The other significant administrative problem was ineffective mitigation efforts to alleviate famine. Governmental inefficiency to respond to the plights of famine victims also complicated famine relief operations in Akobo. For instance, in the famine of 1990, more than 15,000 people migrated from Akobo in search of food to other sub-provinces. Local officials requested at the beginning to get aid and transport them to the region through helicopters. However, the requested helicopter for relief transportation from the central government was delayed. The famine became serious and the people migrated to Jikow and Baro. Besides, significant number of victims entered refugee camps at Itang.⁵⁷ Similar situations also occurred earlier during the 1988 famine. During that time, the food supplies were delayed that resulted in death and migration of famine victims of Akobo.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the agency that took the responsibility to watch over such disasters had its own limitations. The Risk Rehabilitation Committee from the Emergency Aid Commission had faced difficulty to address the famine that struck the people of Akobo. The Emergency Aid Commission was requested by local officials to provide relief. However, it responded that Akobo was not among the areas under such plans. It was also out of supply areas due to late decisions made by the government.⁵⁹ With these circumstances, famine in Akoko has become devastating that had various effects on the people of the area.

5.4. Socio-economic practices

Social and economic traditions made the people easily prone to famine. Seasonal settlements, backward agricultural practices, extravagant practices, and limited market traditions were historical causes of famine in Akobo. The people, mainly Nuers, had been shifting settlements seasonally. Nuers settled in the area between Pibor and Akobo rivers. In the Ethiopian winter season they move to the Gilaw River in search of pasture. On the other hand, the Nuers of Bourbey seasonally cross the international boundary to Sudan Jungmir due to flooding.⁶⁰ Seasonal shift of settlement prohibited them from expanding farming practices, and in turn has become a hurdle to cultivate an excess amount of crops.

⁵⁷ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. ሠ።2/2800/112. *Yegambella akababiyawi astedader shengo* (Gambella regional administrative *Shengo*) to Council of ministers, 8 June 1982 EC, about the famine of Akobo.

⁵⁸ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. ከ።11/74/ኣ2. A letter from Nigussie Asfha (Provincial Affairs Coordination Commander) to *erdata mastebaberiya ena maqaquamiya komishin* (Relief and Rehabilitation Commission), 5 July 1980 EC.

⁵⁹ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. ከ።11/73/ኣ2. Letter from Nigusie Asfha to *erdata mastebaberiya ena maqaquamiya komishin* (RRC, Addis Ababa), 9 June 1980 EC, about the Akobo famine.

⁶⁰ NALA, No. ሠ።2/633/ኣ103/2. A letter from Abera Gebre Egziabher to Ministry of Interior, 7 October 1976 EC.

The economic bases of the people were cattle herding, fishery and farming. Farming had tertiary level in its significance. Fishery had more importance than farming. Famine occurred in Akobo, although the soil was fertile and appropriate for farming, with much of it covered rich in alluvial soil brought by flood and provides better cultivation ground for farmers along river banks. The people used to employ traditional farming instruments. They used a single hatchet not longer than two inches. They used to plough and hack only using hatchets. Besides, using oxen for farming was strictly prohibited by the culture of the people. Thus, the farming grounds to be covered by crops were small. This indicates that the reliable sources of food were not in abundance.⁶¹

In addition, extravagant practices among the people of Akobo had affected saving which in turn made them susceptible to famine. They had a tradition of preparing traditional alcohol from the crop that can be collected seasonally in small amounts. Moreover, an exchange practice in an open market was not known by the people. Thus, the opportunity to have access to food items from other areas through trade was limited. The only means of getting food items at times of difficulty was governmental aid. Later on, the influx of refugees due to the Sudanese civil war came with some market exchange trend that paved ways for the local people to engage in marketing. They used to exchange animal products with food items. However, this effort couldn't secure their food access and rescue them from the recurring famines.⁶²

6. Consequences

The famines in Akobo had a variety of social, economic and political repercussions. The major discernible effects of famine were hunger and migration. The problem of food shortage led people in the area to depend on locally available resources. However, exhausted local resources, inefficiency of governmental bureaucracy, and absence of markets in the area forced the people to migrate to neighbouring areas in search of food. For instance, in the 1990 famine, victims migrated to Gambella town which was the seat of the regional administration. Around 15, 760 people flocked to Gambella in different directions within less than two weeks.⁶³ The

⁶¹ NALA, letter from Ministry of Interior to Illubabur Province, 2 May 1969.

⁶² NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. 002/633/h103/2. A letter from Abera Gebre Egziabher to Ministry of Interior, 7 October 1976 EC.

⁶³ NALA, A letter from *yakababi gedayoch mastebabriya* (regional affairs coordinator) to Guad Hailu Yimenu (EPDR V/c prime minister), 19 June 1982 EC, about Akobo Famine.

problem did not only affect the local community but also civil servants (from Ethiopian highlands) of the *awraja* who migrated to neighbouring *awrajas* and administrative regions.⁶⁴

The famines also remained a major cause for security problems in the area. The coincidence of famine in Akobo and the Sudanese Civil exacerbated the problems. Because Akobo is geographically very close to Sudan, Sudanese civil war affected the lives of the people in Akobo. Thus, political and security issues on the borderland needed serious attention. It was recommended that militias be given priority to receive aid to increase their effectiveness in protecting the border. Nevertheless, the effort to prioritise security members was not effective. As a result, some local militias crossed the international boundary in search of food, and were killed on their way by the rebels in Sudan.⁶⁵

Moreover, famine had become one of the fundamental causes that altered the ways of life of the society. Earlier, the community in Akobo was predominantly pastoralist and had seasonal settlements. However, several factors including famine had forced them to look for alternative ways of life. They were forced to diversify their economic activities since the second half of the 20th century due to recurring famine in the region. They engaged in practicing mixed agriculture and fishing that paved a way for the beginning of permanent settlements.⁶⁶

7. Mitigation Measures

Mitigation responses are important parts of reducing disaster caused by famine. Thus, efforts were made by both the local community and governmental agencies to overcome problems caused by famine. Local responses were mainly made by the victims. These measures included consuming animal products and eating wild fruit and leaves.⁶⁷ Besides, they expanded irrigation farming along the river shores. However, these mitigation efforts were not sufficient to cope with the problems caused by famine.

⁶⁴ NALA, Folder No, 257, RefNo. ሰፊ2/2800/112. *Yegambella akababiyawi astedader shengo* (Gambella regional administrative *Shengo*) to Council of ministers, 8 June 1982 EC, about the famine of Akobo.

⁶⁵ NALA, Folder No, 257, RefNo. ሰፊ11/74/ከ2. A letter from Nigusie Asfha (Provincial Affairs Coordination Commander) to *erdata mastebaberiya ena maquaquamiya komishin* (Relief and Rehabilitation Commission), 5 July 1980 EC.

⁶⁶ Ojot Miru Ojulu, "Large scale land acquisition and minorities indigenous peoples right under ethnic federalism in Ethiopia: A case study of Gambella regional state," (PhD. Diss, University of Bradford, 2013), 112.

⁶⁷ NALA, Folder No, 257, RefNo. ሰፊ11/73/ከ2. Letter from Nigusie Asfha to *erdata mastebaberiya ena maquaquamiya komishin* (RRC, Addis Ababa), 9 June 1980 EC, about the Akobo famine.

The government introduced various mitigation efforts. A lot of mitigation measures were taken by governmental organizations at various levels during the 1990 famine. At that time, officials of the administrative region had requested various support from the central government and expressed possible repercussions as a result of famine. Mitigation measures were recommended to provide for the people at their residence. They requested the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission to provide food, shelter and health services for the people of Akobo. However, it was difficult to host a large number of victims in Gambella due to the lack of food, shelter and health facilities. There was also fear about the possible social crisis in Gambella after the arrival of migrants. The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission was also expected to transport famine relief to the *awraja* and store them there. The summer season and flooding of Baro River disrupted road transport to Akobo. Thus, the administrative region asked for boats.⁶⁸

In response to the calls, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission of the administrative region provided temporary aid. Efforts were exerted to call and command personnel for aid distribution centres through the Ethiopian Farmers Association and the Committee for Natural Disaster Prevention. The administrative region's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission distributed 7000 quintals of cereal to Akobo. In addition, the commission transported and stored 4000 quintals to the *awraja*.⁶⁹ More than 5000 victims of the Akobo famine were offered relief from the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission in Baro *Awraja*, Itang town. Moreover, the requested helicopter arrived in Gambella and transported 47 quintals of maize to Akobo and Itang from June 08 to 11, 1990.⁷⁰

About 3567 people of Akobo who settled at refugee camps were identified and registered, although the estimated number was around 5000. Abol, a village in Baro *Awraja*, was selected for encampment of registered victims. The *Awrajas* of Akobo, and Gog and Jor were selected to provide equipment and manpower to make the encampment successful. Non-governmental

⁶⁸ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. α 2/2800/112. *Yegambella akababiyawi astedader shengo* (Gambella regional administrative *Shengo*) to Council of ministers, 8 June 1982 EC, about the famine of Akobo.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. α 2/2767/612. A letter from Gambella Regional Administrative Office Central Committee to National Committee for Coordination and Rehabilitation of Natural Disaster, 5 June 1982, about the famine of Akobo.

organizations and religious institutions requested for assistance. All government offices were commanded to make regional calls.⁷¹

8. Conclusion

Various historical accounts confirmed that Ethiopia has suffered from frequent famines resulting in socio-economic and political repercussions. The Ethiopian borderland experienced series of famines. Akobo, an area located in Gambella, southwestern Ethiopia, had been affected seriously by recurring famines. The famines were caused by several natural factors such as drought and flood. However, the economic tradition of the people, ineffective administration, and poor infrastructural development were fundamental causes of famine. These structural impediments forced the people to be easily affected by aggravating factors. The frequent famines in Akobo since the second half of the 20th century caused immediate and long-term impact. Famine caused chronic food insecurity and mass migration. It also changed the way of life of the people. The people were predominantly pastoralists before the recurrent famines. However, as a result of the famines the people started to practice mixed farming and establish permanent settlements.

Attempts were made to overcome those problems by the local and central governments. Local responses were mainly made by the victims themselves. The local people went to the extent of eating wild fruit, leaves and roots of trees to ensure their survival. The people also used migration as a mechanism to escape from chronic food insecurity, and they expanded irrigation farms along river shores. However, these mitigation efforts were not sufficient to cope with famine. Hand in hand with local responses, the government introduced various mitigation measures. The responses of the people and the government were supplemented by NGOs and religious institutions. In spite of a wide range of efforts by the local people, governmental organizations and NGOs, mitigation efforts remained insignificant.

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⁷¹ NALA, Folder No, 257, Ref No. 2/2800/112. *Yegambella akababiyawi astedader shengo* (Gambella regional administrative *Shengo*) to Council of ministers, 8 June 1982 EC, about the famine of Akobo.

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