

Artisanal small-scale opal mining (ASOM) insecurity in the Delanta wereda, Ethiopia: The shifting landscape of multidimensional insecurity in the face of emergent ASOM wealth

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ABSTRACT

The commencement of opal mining in Ethiopia a decade ago has attracted the involvement of poor peasants, wealthy traders and traffickers. Although the academic and official literature on artisanal small-scale opal mining (ASOM) has primarily focused on the loss of wealth owing to a lack of skill and its traditional nature, this study explores the multidimensional insecurity that the discovery and mining of opal stones in the Delanta wereda of Wollo has brought about. This study contends that the ASOM industry has brought a new and previously unknown body of wealth to a society that is not used to the circulation of huge amounts of money in its narrow geography of commerce, engendering multidimensional insecurity. To make things worse, the network of patrimony and rentierism connecting locals with powerful people at the regional and federal level has given licence to illegal wealth extraction at the cost of exacerbating local insecurity. The qualitative data for the study was collected using interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations and document analyses at Delanta mining sites, the Wegel Tena town administration and Dessie city.

KEYWORDS

Artisanal opal mining; insecurity; Wollo-Delanta opals; anomies; violence

Introduction

The concept of security in peace and security parlance is inseparably entwined with the rise of the new security paradigm: human security. Security, in general, refers to a state of being safe without experiencing uneasiness – of being in a situation without abnormal risks or threats. It can be defined as the state of being protected from sources of fear, intimidation and risk that are not a normal part of society.¹ Unlike the classical conception of safety and security, which underscores hardcore military threats, risks and vulnerabilities, human security is the shift in referents of security from the state to the people. It accounts for such factors as the absence of basic services and provisions, the prevalence of intra-state conflicts, hazardous workplace conditions, and poor or misguided economic and developmental efforts. At best due to a dispassionate disregard of complex human needs, the prevalence of poverty and disease has become a major source of human insecurity.²

Leaving aside the factors which undermine the pursuit of liberty and happiness, other causes of human insecurity include unsound developmental interventions and the discovery of new resources which cause loss of livelihood. The United Nations (UN) in its human

development report and human security publications equates human security with quality of life that entails *freedom from fear* (coercion) and *freedom from want* (poverty and marginalisation), which underscores the imperative to ensure both for greater quality of life.³

Put simply, a sound development peace nexus need not involve sacrificing the potential economic gain of any enterprise for the benefit of human safety or vice versa – and unless both economic gain and human safety are strictly observed, the inevitable costs of what might initially appear to be great opportunities can be environmental degradation, natural hazards, communal conflict, and the rise of criminal, illicit networks. When developmental efforts fail, economic engagements and emergent alternative livelihoods like mining become sources of insecurity, and hence are desecuritized in the sense that they are not viewed as sources of insecurity. In terms of perception, securitisation entails the identification, prediction and description of sources of insecurity. At the level of action, it entails the monitoring, prevention, pre-emption, and elimination of threats, risks and vulnerabilities, as well as insulation against them. Insecurity constitutes an attitude of complacency and negligence towards threats, risks and vulnerabilities; thus, in effect, multimodal sources of insecurity can emerge from the womb of developmental endeavours.⁴

One area of great insecurity the world over is the discovery of new resources like petroleum, precious stones and metals. The rise of the resource ‘curse vs blessing’ debate began in response to the outbreak of turbulent, violent conflicts that occurred in the wake of the discovery of new resources. Many among the academics of peace and security are forced to allude to the ‘resource curse’ claim when viewing the intractability of the violent conflicts in Africa that are related to resources.⁵ This is more so the case in areas where rampant poverty, lack of good governance, dilapidated infrastructure and the lack of sound alternative livelihoods and rudimentary means of production are the rule rather than the exception. The mining sector in particular is a major source of insecurity due to the rudimentary and informal nature of many of the operations within it; this problem is especially prevalent in the area of artisanal small-scale mining, and even more so in operations involving minerals such as gemstones that can easily be looted.

Gemstones are extracted in various ways that fall into two wide categories: large-scale gemstone mining (LSGM) and artisanal small-scale gemstone mining (ASGM).⁶

The latter is the practice of producing varieties of precious stones using rudimentary tools and mechanisms often under dangerous conditions, within 20 m of the surface. As opposed to LSGM, which involves standardised and specialised equipment and expertise the world over, with ASGM – other than sharing certain general features, as discussed below – there is no such one-size-fits-all definition; rather, it is context-defined. All over the world, millions of people are engaged in ASGM in order to support their dependants. The global scenario of ASGM insecurity tells sad stories of occupational and non-occupational risks ranging from physical and health through to criminal, along with social stigma and psychological detachment.⁷

In Africa, more melancholic stories of ASGM miners are abundant. These go to the level of redefining the nature and constituency of states more than in any other part of the world. The raging wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Great Lakes Region, and the tragedies of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Zambia all involve elements of ASGM insecurity, though the mega-scale international interventions have taken the lion’s share. Thus, new resources in Africa are taken by some as a harbinger of war, destruction and human suffering – in short, insecurity.⁸ This insecurity comes about as a result of the unstructured nature of the mining, its numerous connections to illicit production, exchange and trafficking, the environmental distress that is caused, and a strong affinity with huge social mobility that inevitably

leads to social degeneration and communal conflict. Hence, ASGM has a greater association with insecurity than any other type of mining.⁹

Gemstones can be found in Precambrian basement rock, located in northern, western and southern greenstone belts, as well as in Paleozoic to Mesozoic sedimentary rock and Cenozoic volcanic features and sediment.¹⁰ Recently, ASGM extraction has been demonstrating a lucrative contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP). About 1 million people are directly engaged in the ASGM throughout Ethiopia, and the number of people who are dependent (either directly or as indirect beneficiaries) on this mining sector is more than 5 million.¹¹ In terms of creating job opportunities, ASGM has proven to be a primary source of employment for the disadvantaged in the labour market (e.g. the unskilled, the low skilled, women, the disabled, etc.). The number of people entering this sector is significantly increasing, making it a source of job opportunities for a lot of people.¹² The increase in gemstone exporting from Ethiopia from less than 2 000 kg in 2005–6 to more than 18 000 kg in 2011–12 shows that it has become a lucrative source of revenue.¹³

According to Ethiopian legislation, ASGM is defined as a non-mechanised mining operation (mainly manual in nature) of gold, gemstones, tantalite, salt, platinum, clay, industrial and construction minerals and rocks, and others.¹⁴ It is an activity that is carried out at vertical depths of up to 15 m by Ethiopian individuals or groups who are not required to possess financial resources, technical competence, professional skill and experience, or an artisanal mining license. The number of ASGM miners organised into the 335 legal associations in different parts of the country make up a small part of the national total. Official reports on the status of ASGM confirm the degree of insecurity to which the majority of ASGM miners – with those not belonging to a legal associations being the worse off – are liable.¹⁵ Although there are many types of gemstone mining, this study is concerned with artisanal small-scale opal mining (ASOM).

Amhara Regional State is one of the richest hubs of gemstones, the extraction and exporting of which has been underway since 2008 via ASGM. Localities like Northern Shewa, about 225 km north-east of Addis Ababa, Gonder and Tikil Dingay are extraction sites.¹⁶ Recent sites in Wollo, in the locality of Wadla Dilanta, Wegel Tena and Tsehay Mewcha, are where the most valuable, multi-coloured (brilliant), rough opals of varying size are currently produced. The nugget-type, brilliant, rough opal of Wollo is known as the 'Desert Crystal Opal' and thought to rival the Australian opals.

ASOM in Ethiopia in general and in the Amhara region in particular is highly active in the Delanta sites of Wollo. According to a Ministry of Mines report, thousands of people organised into 20 ASOM associations are earning a living from various forms of ASOM that range from temporary and migratory to permanent. The returns from ASGM in general and ASOM in particular are estimated to have replaced the annual returns from total gold production and its share of the GDP since 2009.¹⁷

The Dawent Delanta wereda,¹⁸ commonly referred to as simply Delanta, is one of the eight weredas of the North Wollo Administrative Zone, which is organised into fifteen rural and three urban kebeles located north of Dessie. In 2008, brand new opals unique to Mezzo and Somali characterised by a kaleidoscopic colour play were discovered in Wegel Tena in the environs of Tsehay Mewcha Kebele; production was commenced by 200 ASOM miners using the most rudimentary methods and working under hazardous conditions.¹⁹ Currently, thousands of ASOM miners organised into 20 ASOM cooperatives are engaged in risky production, and they contributed 60% of the national production of opals and other gemstones in 2011 and 2012.²⁰

Not until very recently has the government paid sufficient attention to the lucrative nature of ASOM in Wollo. The Artisanal Mining Transaction Coordination and Cooperation Desk (AMTCCD) of the Ministry of Mining and Energy (MoME) in collaboration with the regional bureaus have trained, organised, and supplied equipment to thousands of ASOM miners in 20 associations.²¹ Consequently, according to eBay price tags, the international market price of Wollo gemstones in general and opals in particular have seen a great increase, rivalling the classical first-class gemstones from Australia and Mexico.²²

According to wereda mining office reports and notes from an expedition team of scientists, multidimensional risks, looming threats and unmitigated vulnerabilities manifesting as communal conflict and state–society disarticulation over access to, control over and ownership of mining sites have resulted in the tragic deaths of a number of miners.²³ Moreover, the influx of miners has resulted in an increase in illicit settlements and vendor business and trade, along with the problems associated with them.²⁴ Other than the extraction and transaction dimensions, no effort to securitise ASOM operations has been made and no study of which the author is aware has explored the multiple security risks involved therein to date.

As is commonplace in Africa, the booming market and growing size of the population engaged in ASOM in Delanta is not accompanied by a critical assessment of the overall ills in general and the security threats to the miners and the greater community created by the discovery of this new wealth. Hence, this knowledge gap warrants an in-depth assessment of the insecurities of ASOM in the area with the aim of working towards improving ASOM miner overall security.

Methodology of the study

This study is based on an exploratory qualitative research design which uses semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) guidelines, structured environmental and site observations and thematic documents analyses. It is believed that this study is the first of its type to be carried out on this subject and indeed the first to examine ASOM insecurity even at the national level, as so far it does not appear to have benefited from secondary literature. This study seeks to rectify this through pioneering the collection and analysis of archival records from police criminal data, the Department of Administration and Security Affairs, the MoME, Environmental Protection, ASOM cooperatives, and Land Administration and Rural Development of the Wereda. Archival sources provided the baseline for the strategy employed for the rest of the data collection strategy in the study. Accordingly, 35 people were interviewed, ranging from ASOM miners to workers in the above-mentioned administrative organisations and residents of the town of Wegel Tena, as well as opal traffickers and illegal collectors. Four FGDs were carried out – two at high-insecurity sites, one at a medium-insecurity site and one at a low-insecurity site – to gather ample data about the ASOM miners' experiences of the risks associated with their trade. Field observations were also made at these sites and data was collected using observation checklists.

The data has been thematically grouped and interpreted using the multiple conceptual constructs of insecurity developed by the UN's human security framework; therefore, both the insecurity and security engendered by ASOM is explored in terms of its social, economic, political, environmental, spiritual and physical dimensions. Sources of insecurity emerging from the breakdown of social norms – known in sociological terms as *anomies* – such as violent crime, arms trafficking, prostitution and HIV pandemics, skyrocketing inflation and social marginalisation, environmental degradation and dwindling productivity are

meticulously examined in the context of the emerging ASOM wealth. Therefore, this study delves into the hitherto unexplored subject of insecurity arising from ASOM in the hope that lessons can be learned both for this area and others with similar problems.

Dimensions of ASOM insecurity in the Delanta wereda

This section addresses the pre- and post-ASOM scenarios by describing the nature and level of (in)security that the denizens of the Delanta wereda area are used to facing and have faced in recent times. The discussion is mainly based on the testimonies of residents of the wereda and government officials who give comparative narratives to the voice of the people. Thus, the first two sections are devoted to a comparative overview of the conditions before and after the advent of the ASOM, and then the two following sections provide a detailed account of the types of insecurity associated with it.

Delanta before the opal discovery

The Delanta highlander people are traditionally known for their typical highlander mentality of surviving within narrow margins of production, consumption and exchange. Owing to the harsh climatic conditions and ragged terrain, they are known to be once-a-year producers. Their tenacity to survive within the limits of once-a-year produce has often been complemented by long seasonal migrations to the lowland areas of Worebabo, Raya, Yeju and Awusa of Afar to work as labourers. According to many of the informants, the combination of seasonal migration, subsistence production and excess production in poultry, equine and honey used to complement and sustain life in Delanta's rural areas.²⁵ The only problem for the rural population to sustain life, however, was money. Cash was a miracle to peasants, who often suffer from asymmetrical value exchange for their products. Sadly, during this period, the urbanites – especially the civil servants and government officials – used to enjoy a life of affluence through benefiting from the superior purchasing power of money in relation to the supplies of the rural population.²⁶ These urban dwellers also support the account that it was, in fact, a period of bounty for them – some even said that people used to live on half of the monthly salary of elementary school teachers (by then a maximum of Birr 1200) for a whole month.²⁷

Social relations are based on the reciprocity of respect, honour and compassion for one's fellow human, which are defined by tradition and Ethiopian Tewahido Orthodox Church (ETOC) teachings. Historically, the ETOC – besides its strategic position at the land bridge joining Ambasel, Yeju, Lasta and Gonder – and the Amhara traditions used to be reflected in the typical conservatism, reservation and scepticism of strangers, especially foreigners. As the sanctuary of many religious relics and heritages, this tradition has preserved the social balance. Though very scarce and highly demanded, money was not the major concern and defining parameter in society; the customs of highland Amhara Christian society formed the dominant organising ideal.²⁸

Paradoxical as it might seem, this society is also famous for its practice of criminalising innocent people using false and fabricated testimony, which is known among the locals in the Amharic language as *adafine* or *yadafine miskir* (which literally means 'perjury'). According to the elders of the town of Wegel Tena, they believed that the area was cursed by an innocent victim of *adafine* who was executed by hanging in the marketplace, so the people of that area were tormented by the lie of their *adafine* which resulted in the death of an innocent.²⁹ Sorcery and witchcraft were matters of secrecy and often had ostracising consequences. The spell-

makers with ETOC learning were many and infamous. Witchcraft was disavowed but secretly practised and was often used in attempts to attain success in trading, court litigation or marriage, but was never openly discussed. Sex is another restricted matter which was kept hidden in the shadows – and even more so for commercial sex. Hotels are a recent addition to Wegel Tena; up to the mid-1990s, commercial sex workers did not operate in this area as they did in cities like Dessie and Woldiya. Hotels were considered unethical places where urban dwellers squandered their riches. Even so, the age factor was an important demarcation for those who were allowed to enter hotels; it used to be impossible for young children and teenagers to gain entrance to hotels because of sociocultural constructs as well as the scarcity of money.³⁰

The society in Delanta before the commencement of the ASOM was patriarchal, conservative, sceptical and tenacious, in many ways isolated from the modernity of urban centres and surviving at the fringes of the national economy. According to agricultural and rural development experts, two decades ago 75% of the people in this region were constantly suffering a shortage of food and half were supported by safety-net programmes. But paradoxically for those who had the cash, the supply market for agricultural produce was abundant.³¹ From this one can say that the society was marginally integrated into the cash economic system, even during the turn of the 21st century.

Violent crimes and major economic crimes were not common in the area due to cultural and contextual factors, including the lack of access to arms. However, one major issue of conflict and continuous litigation has always been the issue of land. Most cases coming to the wereda court involved conflicts about access to and control over land. Apart from the high value associated with land in the highlander Amhara culture, the fact of its extreme scarcity is what makes it such a contentious issue.³²

During and after the opal discoveries in Delanta

Opals have long been available in Delanta, Wadila and Guba Lafto as pebbles to which no value whatsoever was attached. This changed when the global capitalist economy stretched its reach through a young diaspora woman of Delanta from Australia who began its collection. Coming from the world's number one producer of quality opals, the woman amassed the stone with an insignificant price. But for the people who had been marginal to the cash economy, the new income from opals was a blessing, however sold at low price. No more than two years after 2005, opal became a common commodity in the market but still sold at the price of cereals. Collectors of opals regret not amassing and hoarding them during the period when they were worth so little, before the government was aware of their growing value. Until the government media gave wide coverage to the worth of opal mining during 2008, its value was not known. Shortly after 2008 opal became the magic stone, attracting people from far and near places.³³ Before discussing the security dimension of these changes, this section aims to provide a brief post-ASOM summary of life in Delanta, as it is important to understand how the different actors in Delanta's society were left feeling as a result of the sudden transformation of yesterday's pebble into today's precious stone.

According to the view of the head of Selam Minichil ASOM cooperative, it was like an unbelievable myth – a dream come true, as though God was answering the prayers of the tormented, famine-stricken people of Delanta. He said that just a year before they had been hungry and weak, desperately waiting for government support to help them to make ends meet – but then they realised that these stones under their feet were actually as precious as gold and they seized the opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty.³⁴ Another informant from Tsehay

Mewucha reflected on how the confusion and disorder that resulted from the huge amount of money falling into the hands of very impoverished peasants was akin to the chaos that arises when starving people who have been surviving on scraps are presented with a sumptuous feast.³⁵

More than 20 000 people organised into 29 ASOM operations entered the mining sites in and around the town of Wegel Tena. As per federal and regional ASGM legislation, the ASOM was restricted to cooperatives using only rudimentary tools without adding any value to the opal.³⁶ The only legal requirement was getting a letter of support from the local kebele administration which indicated that the claimants had found the opals and had no employment, which then had to be submitted to the cooperative's office. Next, the cooperative's office would send the application to the mining and water office to get approval. The latter would then examine the area and upon confirming the presence of the mineral require the examination and approval of the Rural Development and Land Affairs Bureau to ensure feasibility. After this, an environmental impact assessment (EIA) needed to be carried out, which was outsourced to private contractors who would award EIA certification to the ASOM claimants. However, the private contractors do not carry out the proper assessment and certification process. They issue certificates to collect a fee. At the end of the process, the claimants would present the EIA and other paraphernalia to the cooperative office, which would then issue a licence for mining.³⁷

Eligibility for membership followed the above procedure of identifying residence in the locality of the ASOM site and being an unemployed adult. This meant that minors, urban residents and the employed were ineligible to stake a claim. However, according to the heads of the wereda's ASOM cooperatives, based on the direction given to them by the regional mining bureau, orphans, the elderly and the frail were allowed to be included so that they could benefit from the wealth of the ASOM, along with women and girls, although they were not involved as actual miners. Such members were, according to the leaders of the ASOM cooperatives, assigned to transport provisions and mining fill, as well as keeping watch on the mining holes (called *gudes*).³⁸

When the ASOM commences, regulations require that every opal obtained is presented to the mining office for certification so they can be evaluated for the purpose of tax and royalties, and this information is reported to the finance office. Each week, the certified minerals are submitted to collectors who are supposed to be licensed to sell the minerals to the National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE), which centrally carries out the exporting.³⁹ Accordingly, 20 000 legally-approved miners were organised into 20 ASOM cooperatives generating an unprecedented amount of wealth. According to the Delanta wereda finance office, the average sales of opals for the period 2012–14 exceeded Birr 34 million.⁴⁰

During the first two years, the ASOM operations continued to grow as people illegally joined them, coming from both urban and rural areas, and even from the nearby weredas of Dawint and Gubalafto. The rush of wealth caused both euphoria and a massive mobilisation of miners, robbers, traffickers, collectors and dealers. The huge influx of opal-generated cash caused the inhabitants of the wereda and the town of Wegel Tena to suddenly find themselves in the middle of a vibrant cash economy, and they did not know what to do with their newfound wealth, other than feeding their new insatiable obsession of earning even more money. The money was acquired by the peasants, youth and women who had been so impoverished before; even teenagers ended up owning hundreds of thousands of birr, creating new wealth for those in proximity to the resource-rich areas while urban poverty continued to worsen and the frustration of civil servants grew.⁴¹

Wegel Tena became a destination for domestic and foreign opal hunters and smugglers. It did not take long before the involvement of local and regional government officials became a reality. Decision-makers in positions of authority prioritised their personal and group interests in relation to the ASOM operations. Huge spending on urbanite commodities revived trade and commerce, while services amassed massive returns. Amidst the good news of the peasants' success in gaining a new and incredibly lucrative livelihood, the new ASOM cash economy – which had neither social nor cultural roots – brought an alien way of life to the society.⁴² Despite the fact that no immigrant miners have had a significant role in the post-ASOM scenario, the local people have readily become vehicles of new customs and a new way of life that has had immense and immediate long-term negative security repercussions.

The exploration of new mineral wealth has historically always been accompanied by disorder and anarchy at various levels; however, if it constitutes a radical departure from the established norms and customs of a society then it can result in social dysfunction and become a source of grave multidimensional insecurity. Therefore, the next sections are devoted to the presentation of the multidimensional insecurity caused to the region by the advent of ASOM.

Multidimensional insecurity

The conceptual frame of the term 'insecurity' is herein used to refer to any form of threat, risk or vulnerability that could potentially prevent people from continuing with their normal life and working on the realisation of their capabilities. Factors which contribute to the decline of a state of freedom from fear and want, and which threaten to cause physical, social, economic, political, mental, emotional and/or psychological harm to members of society are explored in the following subsections, beginning with one major showcase of the insecurity represented by the *safety net and model metaphor* introduced after the emergence of the ASOM wealth.

The safety net and model metaphor

The safety net and model metaphor came about as a result of the national development plan that aims to advance people who are only surviving with the help of the safety net food programme to a status of self-sufficiency and subsistence, producing the peasantry name of model. Food self-sufficiency achieving peasants graduate from the safety net and become models. The usage of the words was limited to the official discourse on local food self-sufficiency. Before the emergence of ASOM, the majority of people in the wereda were included in the safety net program. By default, the civil servants and local government leaders along with the urbanite traders had the status of being the models, as such. After the emergence of ASOM, the relative status of former safety net users engaged in ASOM improved because of the new wealth, compared to the static condition of the rest of society not included in the ASOMs business (including civil servants and local government leaders along with the urbanite traders). Consequently, the metaphor of safety net and model now, used by ASOMs, came to refer to the reversal of roles between the latter and people working on ASOM. This time it carried an element of stigma and stereotype which it had not had before. 'Model' no longer refers to those peasants who managed to escape poverty and become self-sufficient through hard work. The ASOM miners, collectors and traffickers became models, not those not participating in the safety net system. The metaphor had a damaging impact on the psychological and emotional well-being of the majority of the

people who were still surviving only through the safety net programme and those neither in the safety net nor in ASOM. The usage is opposed by both government and the non-ASOM community; government because the metaphor subscribes to a dangerous tendency of a short cut and fast track wealth generation which goes against the official program of poverty eradication by improving agricultural productivity and other entrepreneur engagements; the non-ASOM community because it stigmatizes them. The old usage used to refer to level of income and means of survival. But the new usage introduced a new stigma and stereotype towards non-ASOMs which hinders social cohesion and solidarity. It redefined the quality of relationship in society which can be considered as loss of social asset. In security parlance, it constitutes insecurity. A similar trend has been observed by Gezae Desta among Artisanal Small Scale Gold Miners (ASGM) in Tigray region where the non-ASGMs are called one gram to refer to their relatively poor economic status.⁴³ The use of the metaphor used to carry no social stigma and stereotype which hinder social cohesion and solidarity. While in most cases artisan miners are the subject of stigma and stereotype, in the present case it is the non-miner part of the community which became the subject of stigma and stereotype represented by the safety net and model metaphor.⁴⁴

With the emergence of the ASOM wealth, a major role reversal occurred, causing the poor peasants who made up the safety net of the past to become the models, while those who did not gain access to this wealth and who were formerly the models were left behind, effectively rendering them as the new 'safety net' group. Fuelled by their newfound wealth and with the memory of their debilitating poverty still fresh in their minds, those who had gained great wealth from the ASOM operations embarked on a huge spending spree and indulged themselves in a way that caused an economic shift which rendered the urban dwellers and civil servants asymmetrically weak and incapable of surviving on their limited income. Complaints against the inflation rise⁴⁵ caused by the spending of the new ASOM money was considered by the newly wealthy as malicious jealousy about the economic emancipation of people who for so long had been tormented by poverty. In effect, a binary divide of the safety net vs. model metaphor occurred, which caused an even greater societal rift than the one that had previously existed between the poor and the self-sufficient. This development is a source of social insecurity characterised by the gain of one section of society at the expense of the others.

In the words of one wereda administrator:

When we go to entertainment places and the market, they call us the 'safety net'. Not to mention the ordinary people suffering from the high level of ASOM-induced inflation, they do not even spare government officials from this derogatory label, which is damaging emotionally and psychologically. This, in turn, is causing social polarisation and antipathy that has greatly contributed to the deterioration of law and order and peace and security in the wereda.⁴⁶

According to the ASOM leaders, this complaint about the metaphor is considered sour grapes about the God-given opportunity for the poor to finally do more than just exist on meagre handouts.⁴⁷ While the new 'safety nets' feel unfairly disadvantaged by the manners of the ASOM wealthy, the new models have responded by openly using the metaphor to refer not only to the people who have not benefited from the ASOM wealth but also to the government officials who oppose their new way of life.⁴⁸ The implication of the metaphor goes beyond what it directly stands for; rather it also represents the overall insecurity caused by the lack of proper management of the opportunity provided by the ASOM wealth. This is evident

from the findings documented on other the dimensions of insecurity which flourish in the deteriorating social solidarity and symbiosis represented by the safety net vs model metaphor.

Crime and victimisation

The alarming rate of crime and victimisation is one feature of emergent ASOM sites.⁴⁹ In other countries this is due to the flood of immigrants and temporary labourers that pour into the area and the illegal networks of miners and traffickers that arise as a result. In the case of Delanta, although there has not been any significant influx of immigrant labour, the rate of crime and victimisation associated with ASOM has grown four times within a period of two years from the commencement of the mining operation.⁵⁰ According to police records, violent crimes like homicide, mugging, robbery and assault have increased sixfold compared to the period prior to the emergence of ASOM.⁵¹ Reports of violent crimes at the mining sites and during travel from the sites to the town and back are now commonplace. In the week that I spent at the ASOM sites, there was automatic gunfire during both the daytime and the evening, and hand grenades were thrown at the mining holes. Within a period of just three months more than 300 such incidents had occurred around the *gudes*. The situation was so serious that whilst we were out in the field, my colleagues and I required armed escorts to protect us from falling victim to the violence related to the ASOM operations.

During my two-month stay at Wegel Tena, I observed the occurrence of traditional mediation efforts being carried out at my hotel. I was also made aware by some informants of the occurrence of rape and other sexual violence directed against underage girls and boys.⁵² This was exacerbated because of the uncontrolled arms trafficking and rampant corruption that have put the law enforcement and judicial organs in the pocket of the ASOM cooperative leaders and the traffickers.⁵³ In effect, the wereda in general and Wegel Tena in particular have become the most insecure areas in the region – even more so than the city of Dessie, which previously had the highest rate of violent crime in the region.⁵⁴ One incident attests to this better than the preceding crime records. In 2014, Delanta was selected to host the annual sports festival of the South Wollo Zone; according to an official security assessment report, ASOM-related threats were rated highest.⁵⁵

The findings of the FGD conducted at the security development and peace command post (SDPCP) confirm this; the participants of the FGD carried out at Tsehay Mewcha emphasised the ever-growing tide of violent crime in the wereda and the insurmountable situation that the law enforcement and security organs face.⁵⁶ The fear caused by the high rate of crime has limited the mobility and productivity of the people of the wereda, especially those living in Wegel Tena, which serves to underscore the way in which the ASOM operations have led to a high level of crime-related insecurity.⁵⁷

The social segregation and polarisation caused by the safety net vs model metaphor is further compounded by the prevalence of ASOM-related crime, further intensifying the social antipathy within the wereda's population and exacerbating the insecurity situation.

Illicit land acquisition and the housing construction boom

According to Ethiopia's land policy, and as part of the orientation of ensuring food self-sufficiency, rural agricultural land is meant to be solely utilised for subsistence agriculture, with the exception of the displacement of land holders for the sake of implementing major development projects such as infrastructural expansion. More than any other location in the region and the country, the policy carries cogency in the environmentally-marginalised area of Delanta highlands. Sadly, one of the negative consequences of the ASOM is the uncontrollable

rise in land sales and theft, and the conversion of agricultural land in and around the towns and rural kebeles of the wereda into new settlements. Although the possibility of converting agricultural land for other purposes is almost impossible, the newly rich – not knowing what to do with their large amounts of rapidly-gained capital – invest in corrugated-iron-covered ‘modern’ houses on agricultural land taken over by bribing both the lawful landholders and government officials.⁵⁸ One striking case in point is the formation of a new town in Tsehay Mewcha that had been a deserted farm area just one year earlier.⁵⁹ Tsehay Mewcha used to be a typical rural market place and village including its environs where ASOM sites are located. Now, it has become a town having a municipality status. But the transition was illicit land holding and housing construction.

The wereda authorities are unable to withstand the temptation of huge bribes and allegedly claim to have decided – in consultation with regional government – that these new constructs can be deemed as legal expansions and classed as houses as long as they are roofed.⁶⁰ Consequently, this has encouraged the proliferation of illicit land acquisition, resulting in the creation of new urban centres where subsistence production should be taking place in order to ensure the food security of the area. Given the high inflation caused by the ASOM wealth and the new purchasing power of just one part of the population, the illicit land acquisition has contributed to the worsening livelihood and increasing food insecurity of the new ‘safety net’ people.

According to Wegel Tena residents, the prices of everything have skyrocketed to the extent that even eggs, chickens and chili peppers – produce for which the area is traditionally known – have become so expensive that they are priced as though they have been imported from neighbouring weredas.⁶¹ While in the area, I conducted a comparison of the market value of basic supplies from the city of Dessie – the seat of the South Wollo Zone – and from the Delanta market. Except for eggs and chickens, almost everything else was much more expensive in Delanta than in Dessie – and, shockingly, green peppers were being sold for 1 birr each in the rural market of Tsehay Mewcha.

While illicit land acquisition and housing construction has gone unhindered by officials who have given ‘permission’ for it to take place, the food security of the majority of the people has been heavily impacted. The ASOM wealthy have indeed benefited massively from the situation and had enough money to be unaffected by the huge rise in inflation caused by the injection of new wealth and revenue into the local economy, but the way of life and the sustainability of the rest of the population was left in jeopardy, constituting a major source of insecurity for society.

The breakdown of law enforcement and judicial institutions

Law and order is one of the rudimentary functions of any form of government; thus, the lack of law and order represents a failure in the operational and institutional standing of the government and represents a high-impact source of human insecurity.⁶² The events that have unfolded in the states and societies of the Horn of Africa attest to this. To set law and order in the context of emergent mining insecurity, the Great Lakes Region and other parts of Africa have witnessed the utter collapse of state institutions and their replacement by private security and military contractors or illicit armed groups.⁶³ Besides the mining factor, there are multiple historical factors that have resulted in these outcomes – but Ethiopia in general and the Ethiopian highlands central to the history of hierarchical state organisation in particular are exceptions to the rule.⁶⁴

What happened in Delanta after the advent of ASOM, however, constitutes a major departure from both the traditions of the local people and the culture of the nation overall. The Delanta society belongs to the highlander Amhara people, who historically have had strong respect for the institutions of law and the courts. The popular Amharic phrase '*Be Hig Amilak* [I beseech you by God the lawgiver]' used in the context of conflict and to forestall the wealthy and powerful is an important indicator of the metaphysical and social construction of law and order in the society. '*Be Hig Amilak*' is an invocation of the rule of law, of respect for the supreme law of God and society, and a reiteration of the legal principle of equality before the law – i.e. that no one is above the law. It also carries a metaphysical connotation that breaking the law is contravening the order of society and nature, as established by an all-powerful creator – be that a divine one or the supreme authority (sovereign covenant) of the people. '*Be Hig Amilak*' can also be interpreted as the last line of defence and a warning to potential violators and aggressors that failing to respect the law justifies taking harsh measures in response. Ignoring the '*Be Hig Amilak*' warning is a grave offence against the natural order of law that breaks the sacred and supreme covenant between men, and between man and God.

This is evident from the next step that comes when the warning of '*Be Hig Amilak*' has been disregarded. The wronged party invokes another phrase and calls on the people to witness what comes next, saying '*Emagn Hunugn* [Please witness the injustice and stand with me in the court for whatever thing comes hereafter]', a warning that underscores the justified nature of any harsh response that may follow. The same concept is phrased similarly but not identically in Tigrigna, the closest linguistic and cultural group, as '*Ziban Higi* [I beseech you not to be above the law]' or '*Ziban Gereb* [I beseech you not to be above the covenant maker]'.⁶⁵ The Amharic version carries more weight in terms of invoking metaphysical connotations. In the Tigrigna language, the term focuses on the fact that no one is above the law and that the people are responsible for maintaining the rule of law, but the Amharic goes even beyond that. Another comparison can be made with the concept in *Afaraff*, the language of the pastoralist Afar people who are often misrepresented as being lawless; they use '*Cigi Megan* [I beseech you to honour the law]', which shows how the idea of the rule of law is deeply entrenched in the psyche of the people.

When considering the ASOM-related lawlessness in Delanta as a matter of public security, it must be viewed in the context of the cultural background of this historically God-fearing and law-abiding people. While there may be a history of pre-existing violence and a lack of respect for law and order in some areas where crime increases as the result of valuable resources being discovered, in the case of Delanta there is no such history. However, it should be noted that Delanta is infamous for perjury, as has been briefly mentioned.

The coming of the ASOM wealth has resulted in law enforcement organisations and the judiciary becoming akin to the playthings of the newly rich. Legality has been muted to the point that it is almost irrelevant to some people, owing to not only the insignificant cost of committing a crime but also to the absence of being held to account by the supposed lawkeepers. Arms and mineral trafficking have become normal practices that are carried out under the noses of the police and the local militia.⁶⁶ According to a wereda police commander, more than 64% of miners – including underage boys – possess arms which the police have no feasible way of either seizing or legalising.⁶⁷ The abundance of small arms and light weapons in the area is so great that, according to an elementary school teacher, one school was forced to require that students check their light automatic pistols into a storage facility before they go to class.⁶⁸ The sudden abundance of arms has been caused by a breakdown of law enforcement in relation to both supply and demand. On the demand side, besides the way in

which the possession of arms is perceived as a sign of masculinity, it was the attacks of armed robbers both at the *gudes* and along the transportation routes from the ASOM sites that gave birth to the new security need for the miners to possess arms or an armed security contingent of some sort. This situation has arisen as the result of the police and security forces being tempted by the huge gains they can make by accepting bribes from miners and traffickers to overlook their illegal possession of weapons. According to one wereda official, the ASOM capital has greatly frustrated the law enforcement and judiciary bodies, who have decided to benefit from the situation as best they can rather than fighting it and attempting to enforce the law of the land:

The police, judges and militia, in the face of the lucrative returns from ASOM and the illicit trade in opals and the arms involved, totally lost their rationale for upholding their legal duties. They are paid incomparably meagre remunerations. They relinquished the moral and ethical dimension of serving society for the opportunity of cooperating with the system they are meant to fight. Unfortunately, once they devolved in this way, they found it legally inconsequential and unwise to stand for law and society any more. Letting crime happen pays well. Those who tried to uphold their duties become victims of both open and discreet violence. From the top wereda officials up to the orderly militia bearing arms and the finance clerk, they all foregone their position and skills for ASOM rent collection.⁶⁹

To further elaborate on this theme, three real-life case scenarios will now be examined based on expert testimony and witnessed by myself in the field.

Few were standing up for law enforcement in the wereda regarding ASOM. According to one official working on proper certification, validation and inspection:

Top regional government officials and even authorities of the NBE are in on it at various levels. Let me show you a case with tangible evidence about how the legal establishment has formed an alliance with the criminal network. First, there are no clear revenue records of the royalties and tax collected, or even of the opals that are confiscated. This year, six quintals of first grade opals were brought through the campaign by our bureau into police custody. Two months ago, the finance office issued a bid for licensed collectors. On the day the auction, the six quintals of first grade opals were found to have been replaced by debris and *Ajar*. If legal accountability and culpability was in place, the people responsible would have been brought to a court of law – but nothing came of it. Why? Because the guardians are in league with the aggressors. Guess what happened after that: the same high grade opal was not trafficked illegally – rather it was given certification as having been legally produced without our knowledge and sold to the NBE, which announced in its annual reports that millions of dollars' worth of opals have been sold on the international market. This happened at a time when the NBE had tentatively halted the exporting of opals owing to the massive-scale exporting of illegally mined stones. What do you see in this connection? It is nothing but a vulgar criminality involving all from the poor miner in the hole right up to national-level authorities. The decision to go against this tide of corruption requires the realisation that you will pay dearly and a willingness to do so, including losing your own life.⁷⁰

This was confirmed by both a wereda administrator and the head of security affairs, who tried to explain it in terms of the fact that it has gotten out of control. Also, they placed the blame on the regional and federal government authorities for failing to institute a workable *modus operandi*, though there is no cogent reasoning in relation to the responsibility for law enforcement and that is in their hands. In short, it is mere rationalisation and blame shifting, calling to mind the famous metaphor of the hot potato where damaging decisions and actions – like a hot potato – are too hot to hold onto, so they are thrown at someone else, who in turn passes them along. This begins at the top of the chain and the hot potato begins its downward journey, leaping from the hands of other officials in the federal government to their

subordinates, all the way down to the local administrator and, finally, into the palms of the people who, having no subordinate to pass it onto, get their hands burned by the accusation that the blame ultimately lies with them. Truly the metaphor is apt – but as has been seen, while the miners themselves do hold some responsibility in the matter, it is the greater responsibility of those who are charged with making and keeping the law to keep the people in line by providing a structure and a system that both encourages citizens to abide by the law and punishes those who do not. In this case, it is those who do *not* turn to crime who are punished, as they are the ones who profit least from the ASOM, and they may fall victim to violence and even murder if they attempt to go against the corruption and obey the law. In such a sorry situation, it is evident why the wereda authorities resort to shifting the blame in their attempt to explain the cause of the anarchy – this time in the neighbouring weredas of Dawunt and Guba Lafto. This is how they frame their grotesque reasoning:

We cannot put all the blame on our law enforcement for two reasons: on the one hand the psychological hurt that the ASOM miners inflict on all of us including myself, the wereda administrator, by calling us safety net and their manners in daily interaction for the mere reason of living within our legal means is a major issue. On the other hand, opal mining is regional in nature – it connects different actors, unless an integrated effort is committed to fighting lawlessness. Dawunt and Gubalafto, the adjacent weredas, had the same challenges; but they followed a totally different approach in addressing it. In the beginning, while our law enforcement here was doing their level best in the cut-throat struggle against illicit opal trafficking and mining as per the law, the other two weredas legalised it. Sadly, their justification was that by assigning the law enforcement to this duty the police has become corrupt. Thus, to safeguard the law enforcement from descending into institutional corruption, they preferred to legalise the mining and allow transactions with the stones like they are cereal. Yet still we tried to control it, even though it went badly, as the different system across the border incentivised illicit mining and trafficking through the borders of the two weredas. As the challenge got stronger and stronger and the pressure on the law enforcement even heavier than before, our law enforcement began faltering and at last was dragged down into the decadence of opal rentierism.⁷¹

The regional nature of the mineral transactions and production and the need for a coordinated effort raised by the wereda administrator are truly a genuine concern. Also, the procedure followed by the adjacent weredas – which, according to government sources, was carried out with the support of the president of the region – to legalise illicit and corrupt acts under the justification of ‘avoiding corruption’ is both sardonic and perverse.⁷² However, the overall justification is purely blame shifting, which is viewed by the officers as blame being put onto them and they are pushed further towards corruption by it.

While in the field, I witnessed a series of incidents that are relevant to the endemic corruption and the loss of law and order in the region, many of which involved illicit ASOM miners and suspected traffickers – and even those caught red-handed – mocking the profession of the police officers and taunting them with the advice that the officers should quit their jobs and join the miners and traffickers instead. These scenes were shocking and confusing to witness – this role reversal between the usually assertive Ethiopian police officers and the meek citizens. In another incident, a policeman was assaulted by two ASOM miners and took them to court, but his case was thrown out. At a command post meeting, I was allowed to carry out a conference FGD, during which the officer cried and begged the authorities to take his gun and leave him alone, as he preferred the life of an ordinary citizen with honour than being a humiliated police officer. In one incident, police officers begged a trafficker to allow them to take him into custody, but he resisted, repeatedly insisting that if they took him into custody he would immediately be released, but then he would be their enemy. He threw insults at the

police officers, describing them as being like the dogs who belong to his friends. People gathered around and beseeched the trafficker to go to the police station and honour the law. The '*Be Hig Amilak*' metaphor has now become that of the police officers rather than the suspects due to this shift in authority, with the balance of power now firmly favouring the criminal networks. The trafficker went to the police station in the end but was immediately released as he had predicted; he watched and laughed as the arresting officer was reprimanded by his superior for being rude to the suspect.

One last striking case which highlights the graveness of the situation with the legal system is the lack of convictions being made and upheld against arms traffickers. At the time of writing, only one arms trafficker has been taken to court, prosecuted and convicted – but he was allowed to go free, released from jail by the police after a huge pay-out. The trafficker was caught in possession of 30 AK-45s and 18 pistols, allegedly believed to have originated from the military base of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in western Ethiopia. Despite being convicted in a court of law and sentenced to 12 years in prison by a judge, he was set free only a few days later.

It is clear from the above evidence that the legal institutions of the wereda and their law enforcement functionality have completely broken down due to the fat purses of the illicit ASOM miners and opal traffickers, while the residents of the area live under a cloud of fear of falling victim to assault or other crimes. The institutional mandate and the spirit of the law and the judicial establishment have been castrated, and violent crimes including rape go unpunished, while illicit miners and traffickers operate with complete impunity.

Bala bitesa, cave collapses and violent deaths at the ASOM sites

Another distressing security concern is the violent deaths that occur in and around the *gudes*. Most of the mines consist of narrow, horizontally dug holes that are 100–180 m in length. Once inside, even the most powerful torch cannot cast a light very far. The miners have to crawl on all fours and must take regular breaks during the digging in order to get fresh air – but even so, most miners are still affected by respiratory disease. Also, the chemicals in the wet clay in which the opals are found is toxic, causing most miners to have aches and rashes on their skin. Miners are instantly identifiable from their appearance, due to their general poor state of health and the stains left on their clothes by the wet clay. Another health complaint often mentioned by the miners is the presence of stinging bugs, as well as the intestinal disease caused by miners defecating and urinating in the holes so they can keep on digging rather than losing time to exit the holes and void their bowels more hygienically.⁷³

To relieve the suffocating and cramped conditions of these narrow tunnels, some miners have resorted to digging tunnels that are high enough to stand in beyond the tunnel entrance, with heights of up to 3 m. However, this comes with a much greater risk of cave collapse, incidents of which took the lives of more than 56 miners in only six months across three ASOM sites.⁷⁴ According to the focus group informants, the miners are constantly working with the spectre of death hovering over their heads. They are gambling with their lives by taking the chance of making a fortune at the risk of suffering the terrible fate of being buried alive.⁷⁵ There are two basic causes and consequences of this thinking. Primarily, ASOM miners are given sites without any kind of formal study of their geological and environmental conditions, in addition to the miners having a lack of training on everything from mining techniques to safety inspection. No government organ has paid any attention to the physical security of these miners. Secondly, the horrific deaths from cave collapses are caused not only due

to the indiscriminate banging and digging that can cause an area to become structurally unsound, but also by deliberate acts of demolition.

Some parts of the caves and tunnels are left intact to form supporting pillars, locally known as *balas*. These *balas* are an easy target for illicit robbers, who demolish them so that the cave collapses and exposes the opals that were hanging on the cave walls while also getting rid of the legitimate ASOM miners, who are buried alive in the collapse. This cruel act of pillar demolition is known locally as *bala bitesa*, an enterprise that yields huge returns at the cost of the lives of the miners who have toiled for months to excavate the site. *Bala bitesa* is one of the greatest nightmares of every miner because of its fatal consequences.⁷⁶ The absence of security at the ASOM sites makes *bala bitesa* a very easy and lucrative method of robbing the sites, as they do not have to confront the miners and the resulting cave collapse will usually reveal huge amounts of high grade opals. The situation is so severe that many of the miners now associate the finding of high grade opals with death; during interviews with some of the miners, they whispered that the stone demands the blood of the miners in order to be relinquished from the earth. They think that the stone – which they call ‘the thing’ as though it is an evil spirit that is too abominable to call by its real name – requires human sacrifice.⁷⁷

Due to an acute awareness of the risk of both accidental cave collapse and or *bala bitesa*, the miners live in constant fear for their lives. Furthermore, even when the miners attempt to guard themselves and their sites, armed opal robbers often come under the cover of darkness, violently beating and sometimes even murdering the *gude* guards if they show even the slightest resistance. Generally, those who are unfit to mine the sites such as children, adolescents and the frail are charged with guarding the *gudes*, so they are the most vulnerable to becoming victims of violent attacks. Even the nights of the busy traffic days of mining, when minding sites are filled with strong adult men, are accompanied by gunfire and hand grenades being thrown by illicit ASOM miners and robbers.

Another source of insecurity that I witnessed is the very dangerous nature of the landscape. Some of the *gudes* are located on cliffsides, and often children and women fall off of the unimaginably steep slopes of the rudimentary trails that they must follow up the cliffsides in order to collect low grade *Ajara* opals. No one has taken any action to mitigate the dangers involved, meaning that women and young girls who provide food and drinks for the miners must carry cumbersome loads on their backs through these dangerous places, facing the possibility of death every day. It is under such harsh conditions the opal is mined causing immense fear and risk of life, the reduction of which no one has given any attention. Thus, it is not only the human element that constitutes a source of insecurity but the environment itself, which presents huge physical dangers and threat to life at the ASOM sites, thus presenting a long-term security threat.

Environmental degradation

One of the criteria used by the Mining and Energy Bureau for EIA is environmental sustainability. According to regulations, ASOM sites are supposed to be verified annually in regard to environmental sustainability in order to continue operating.⁷⁸ During the period of this study, 21 of the ASOM sites were inspected and found to be in a poor condition. The Mining and Energy Bureau had issued orders for the closure of 7 of the ASOM sites with the worst conditions, but none of these orders have been enforced due to corruption. Except for Selam-Minichil ASOM sites in Tesehay Mewcha, which critically regenerate the environment by using afforestation, filling old *gudes* and avoiding digging in fragile landscapes, almost all of the other 21 ASOM sites are destroying the environment.⁷⁹ Many of the ASOM

sites have even spread beyond their legal boundaries and encroached on other areas which are highly vulnerable to the pressure of the thousands of ASOM workers bombarding them daily. The impact on the river basins, streams and farmlands of the acidic material being excavated and the resultant debris is devastating.

A case in point involves the land of an elderly man named Mengistu Dessie which has been entirely covered with excavated debris from the Kok-Wuha site, completely destroying all the vegetation on his land. The problem was complicated because of the absence of a legal body to enforce a compensation mechanism or indeed any kind of accountability at all.⁸⁰ According to a wereda energy and mining expert, the problem is caused by the total absence of control and inspection:

The whole thing is a farce: for the process of application, inspection, validation, authentication and the approval of sales, the law has clear procedures. But no one wishes to see the law working because it the cost of doing so would be millions for those who can earn more by working against the law. The role of EIA, which should be done by our experts, is outsourced to private entrepreneurs. They have neither the expertise nor the mandate or even the feasibility of involving a third party with a visible vested interest to control the matter. They are given the license because of their close ties to people in high places in the regional government to collect tens of thousands from each case which should have been freely done by government experts. Because of this problem the environmental degradation in all mining sites immense; we can do nothing as the authorities are on the side of illegality rather than the rule of law.⁸¹

The environment is arguably the most precious asset , as it will be needed by the people who live in it when the opal boom is over and the resource has been exhausted. Thus, the massive damage being done to the environment could have long-lasting repercussions for human security far beyond this period, and is consequently one of the greatest sources of insecurity caused by ASOM.

Social anomie

The term 'anomie' refers to a state of defiant behaviour that eschews the normal social and ethical standards, in this case the state of lawlessness and amorality that has come about due to the sudden emergence of new wealth. Here, the term 'anomie' is used in the sense of Robert K. Merton's definition, which is in turn based on Emile Durkheim's conceptualisation.⁸² Anomie often occurs as a result of disjunction between social prescription and proscription on the one hand, and the reality of one's lived experience on the other.⁸³ It can also be brought about when a society undergoes economic transformation that begins in very distressing and poor conditions, as is the case with Delanta.⁸⁴ Therefore, this section looks for indicators of the normative breakdown caused by the emergence of ASOM wealth in Delanta as an aspect of social insecurity. In doing so, reference is made to the old societal prescriptions and proscriptions compared to the new customs of a society that has been reshaped by the advent of ASOM.

The de-sacralisation of religious traditions and institutions

Delanta's society is known for its observant religiosity based on the ETOC creed, taking the view that holy sites, monasteries and church are sacred ground that should not be disturbed for any worldly reason. Most important is the sacredness of the arch of the covenant known in Geez the classical language and script of the clergy as *Tsilat*, or *Tabot* which represents the copy of the holy arch of the covenant that characterises the nature of *Tabot-Christianity* in

Ethiopia.⁸⁵ The Delanta area is historically known for being a sanctuary for the sacred religious heritage that is associated both with the monasteries and the churches in the area, as well as for sacred relics left by Emperor Tewodros during his troubled times in the region. Respect for the sacredness of ETOC religious sites and relics has been a fundamental part of society's morality.

One of the problems caused by ASOM is that it is being carried out on sacred religious ground. For instance, in Tsehay Mewucha, three major sites lie at the heart of the monastery and on the sacred ground of a church. Not only is the mining taking place there, but all manner of crimes take place at ASOM sites, from prostitution to assault and robbery all the way through to murder, showing utter contempt for traditional values.⁸⁶ Even some of the priests have organised themselves into a cooperative named after one of the saints, Aboye-Gebremenfeskiduas and engaged in an ASOM operation mining, rather than upholding their sacred religious obligations. In Selam Minichil, ground that was traditionally reserved for resting the *Tabot* on during the Epiphany festivities was taken over by an ASOM site expansion. As a result, a new location had to be chosen, far away from the original one.⁸⁷ Worse still is the prevalence of the theft of *Tabots* and other holy relics, which was not common in the area before the emergence of ASOM.

Black magic and the mystification of the 'stone'

According to informants, black magic used to be strongly condemned in the region, and thus was only practised with the utmost secrecy, under the fear of harsh social consequences and religious ostracism if the practitioner was exposed. Thus, there were few black magic practitioners of ETOC origin in the area, and they kept this part of their lives strictly private. After the emergence of ASOM however, black magic of all kinds that aims to harm others, offer protection by rendering the user bulletproof or invisible, or bring good fortune in finding a rich opal vein has become big business. The obsession with the 'stone' and the tantalising power of the wealth that it brings has mystified the opals to the extent that most if not all of the miners seem to believe that their success in obtaining opal wealth is owed to some form of black magic or to the sacrifices made during the mining process. An entire class of witches, spell makers and dark priests has emerged to serve the lucrative market of selling their incantations and wards for between 5 000 and 15 000 Birr just to tattoo a single magical symbol on the buyer's left hand, or for the purchase of an amulet or charm. I was surprised to see that almost every ASOM site that I visited had its own black magic experts, and during my interviews not even one miner doubted the expediency of this practice.⁸⁸

Because of this development, many people are in conflict with their friends, extended family and even their spouses and children. One informant told me that he does not allow his wife to touch his left hand or sleep to the left of him because this would break the spell and he would then be exposed to the risk of death by cave collapse or other causes such as illness or murder.⁸⁹ It is clear that the opals have been imbued with a mystical power by the miners, which has resulted in the decay of the social and spiritual values of the traditional morality.

Prostitution, sexual assault and HIV

Before the advent of ASOM, prostitution was a relatively discreet and infrequent practice in the town of Wegel Tena. Now, however, it is so common that the pimps have actually brought in young girls from all over the country to serve as commercial sex workers, something that was shocking to witness. According to the FGD informants, the average payment for one night with

a prostitute is Birr 5 000, and there are also people who pay more than this amount to persuade the prostitutes who are suffering total physical breakdown caused by constantly engaging in sexual relations to carry on working regardless. One of the worst cases of this resulted in major ureteral surgery.⁹⁰ The ASOM miners are said to have gone to major cities like Bahir Dar and Dessie just to have sex. Furthermore, although it is hard to confirm this assertion with reliable evidence, there were plausible rumours about sexual assaults being committed on young boys in the mines.

The rampant wildness of the sex market in the areas surrounding the ASOM sites and inside the caves with the women and girls working in different functions was frightening to behold. It has prompted a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) to distribute condoms in an attempt to limit health and reproduction risks. To the dismay of the wereda's health office, which has done nothing to educate the people about the risks of engaging in sexual acts, the number of cases of HIV/AIDS has grown by 24% compared to the pre-ASOM levels. However, according to the NGO, the figure itself is doctored and believed to be far higher than that, but they are not allowed to share this information.⁹¹ What makes this even more disturbing is the fact that very young boys and girls are at the centre of the problem, making this not just an issue of sex workers, but of paedophilia. These children are falling victim to the amorality that has arisen as a result of the breakdown of norms across all aspects of society due to the extreme riches brought about by the ASOM.

School drop-out rate

Keeping children in school is one way of instilling moral and ethical standards and distancing them from the adult world in order to protect them from premature exposure to experiences and environments that will harm them or negatively influence their development. The legislation of the International Labour Organization (ILO) against child labour exploitation is doubly relevant to the mining sector, because of the danger not only of physical harm, illness and death, but also the potential to fall victim to sexual abuse. In the Delanta context, despite the clear legal prohibition of children from engaging in labour of any sort, let alone something as dangerous and unpleasant as ASOM, children are allowed to work under the pretext of the 'compassionate' grounds mentioned above. One quarter of the miners are children and adolescents who should be spending their time in a classroom and not in the dingy and dangerous opal caves. When I was interviewing children who looked to be between the ages of 8 and 12 years, I asked them their age; they responded by claiming that they were 18 and showed me their official identification cards – and even savings account books from the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE).

According to the Wegel Tena CBE branch accounts officer, boys come to them to open accounts with support letters and formal kebele residents' identification papers. The bankers cannot reject them because they are bearing adult identification papers. He even showed me the archival records of some of the children's savings accounts.⁹² The cumulative effect is that children are being kept away from school and missing out on a vital education. According to informants in the wereda's education office, it has become very hard to find more than one third of the children in class. Teachers have to provide a daily lecture on the importance of education and the short-lived nature of the lucrative ASOM wealth. The parent-teacher committee have to be on constant watch to try to prevent children from sneaking out of class to go and work in the caves – but this does not work. The tragedy is that even some of the teachers have succumbed to the temptation of the opals, abandoning their profession to become ASOM miners.⁹³ An elementary school principal that I interviewed said that

he had legal permission to become a miner because the head of the wereda's education office was involved and was determined to make sure that no teacher would miss out on the chance to benefit from the ASOM operations.⁹⁴

During my field observations, students still carrying their text and exercise books were seen in significant numbers collecting *Ajara* in the caves. Getting access to huge sums of money without the maturity to even have a chance at knowing how to manage it has resulted in these teenagers drinking, engaging in sexual practices and unscrupulous behaviour. The most disturbing part of all this is that society has accepted this cheerfully because the people can benefit from rich youths who are happy to spend money excessively without a second thought. And not only are the schools losing more and more of their students, but the value and nobility of learning is being challenged at a fundamental level, with education being derided as a futile waste of time. This, indeed, constitutes one of the worst forms of anomie, and the idea of a reckless, undeservedly wealthy and uneducated generation of youth entering adulthood in this way is a frightening one; these boys and girls of today are the men and women of tomorrow, and it is hard to imagine that they will make good choices or be concerned about working for the betterment of their communities after having had such damaging formative experiences. Thus, the breakdown of education represents yet another dimension of the insecurity brought about by the advent of ASOM in Delanta.

The rise of the adafine (perjury) morality

As mentioned earlier, the society of Delanta has a whispered reputation of being historically prone to perjury. Although it is widely accepted that this was the case behind closed doors, it does not mean that it was openly proclaimed as part of the social and moral ethos of society. However, while it was perhaps something that sometimes happened quietly in the past, after the emergence of the ASOM, perjury has become an acceptable way of life in Delanta. Informants from all sections of the society told me that you must have *adafine* if you want to win your case in court. The most important point to reflect on here is that the ideas of justice, fairness, fear of God and honouring truth – which are fundamental elements of the traditional social organisation of Ethiopian society (at least in principle) – have been traded for a quick and very lucrative payday.⁹⁵ Social confidence, cohesion and solidarity have been shattered by a merciless pragmatism wherein perjury has become the norm and the courts of law and the legal system in general have been reduced to a mockery of what they once stood for.

Evidence from multiple methods of inquiry shows that people both consciously and unconsciously commit perjury and see it as not just the best way but perhaps even the only way to succeed and become a viable member of society, making this arguably the worst form of anomie for a society that had until recently been steadfast in its moral values.

The shifting landscape of insecurity and ASOM in the Delanta wereda

This study aimed to identify the major manifestations of insecurity associated with ASOM in the region under examination. The analysis of the information gathered from a range of sources has revealed a number of themes, which are summarised here with a view to promoting the improvement of both security in general and human security in particular in the Delanta area.

First, the society of Delanta has become infested with multidimensional sources of insecurity involving the role of multiple actors at every level of society, and although the problem has been examined in terms of its localisation to the area, there is a strong case to be made that there are sources of insecurity affecting the country at the national level. What is important is to recognise how swiftly this society shifted from a state of poverty and food insecurity to one of multifaceted insecurity that still includes food insecurity for the post-ASOM 'safety net' people who were previously above the poverty line, while the formerly impoverished are now endowed with riches beyond their wildest dreams. The very concepts of good vs bad, and the prescriptions and proscriptions of civilised society have been turned on their head. The transition to a strong cash economy has constituted multiple sources of both short- and long-term insecurity, which need to be addressed at multiple levels.

Second, those who have benefited from the ASOM have done so at the cost of the rest of wereda, resulting in a social conflict and dysfunction entailing the moral and ethical decadences of prostitution, perjury, and the de-sacralisation of holy places and objects.

Third, the severe damage to the environment and the growing acceptance of not just the practice of black magic but the need for it due to the mystification of the stone, along with other subversive customs such as the brutal *bala bitesa* and the dishonest *adafine* are all sources of insecurity that could have long-term repercussions. The insecurity is evident from the lack of interest in strategic assets like education and developing the skills needed for a profession. If the society ends up entirely based and dependent on a cash economy based on ASOM then it will be very vulnerable when the resources are depleted; not even diamonds last forever, but the moral, legal, religious and social ramifications of the way in which the society has broken down may be very hard to fight against or reverse once the ground is barren of treasure.

Fourth, the wave of violent crime and the destruction of the power and image of the law enforcement and judiciary, mediated by the abundance of arms trafficking, have reduced the society to a state of fear and danger. This situation limits the potential for individuals to realise their potential and curtails the pursuit of a regular way of life, which constitutes the core element of human security. Therefore, it is vital to make a coordinated effort to work on reversing these trends so that the respect for moral and legal rules can be restored and the wealth can be used to benefit all – whether directly or indirectly – rather than elevating one section of society while condemning another.

Lastly, the extreme threat to life from myriad sources, ranging from the growing HIV/AIDS pandemic spread through prostitution to the violent assaults and murders carried out over the opals along with the often-deadly conditions at the ASOM sites constitutes a severe source of insecurity, which is exacerbated by the prevalent belief that witchcraft is the only source of protection and good fortune that matters. On the other hand, paradoxical as it might seem, the illicit land acquisition that has led to the construction boom should not be mistakenly taken for a positive development, for two reasons: not only has it caused a decline in vital subsistence agriculture and hence made food insecurity in the region more severe, but there is no planning or investment in the kinds of infrastructure and facilities that will be needed if new communities are to be formed and sustained. Further, it is the part of the decadent consumerist culture of cash economy that has shifted the security landscape of Delanta wherein the abundance of wealth created by the opals has resulted in a multitude of physical, environmental and social sources of insecurity.

Embarking on a synchronised effort to continue maximising the great opportunity offered by the opal wealth while attempting to slow and ultimately reverse the descent into anarchy

and insecurity remains imperative. A coordinated effort for the restoration of positive social norms, values and practices needs to begin, along with a renewal of the function of law enforcement and the judiciary, and proper utilisation of the opal wealth, such as collecting taxes and royalties so that the conditions for the whole of the region can be improved. Addressing the overall safety and security of the current generation should be possible without closing the door on the future generation; however, if there is a failure to address the current ASOM-induced multidimensional insecurity then this could have ample repercussions on both the state and society for many years to come.

Notes

1. Mesjasz, 'Security as a Property of Social Systems', 4.
2. Kaldor, 'Human Security'; Lederach, *Building Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*; Sen, 'Development as Freedom'.
3. UN, 'An Overview of the Human Security Concept and the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security'; UNDP, 'Human Development Report'; Gómez and Gasper, 'Human Security: A Thematic Guidance Note for Regional and National Human Development Report Teams'.
4. Mesjasz, 'Security as a Property of Social Systems', 5, 8–9, 19; Mesjasz, 'Security as a Property of Social Systems'; Liotta, 'Boomerang Effect', 36; Knudsen, 'Post-Copenhagen Security Studies', 5; Krause and Williams, 'Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies', 29; Fischer, 'Nonmilitary Aspects of Security: A Systems Approach'.
5. Kaldor, 'Old Wars and New Wars'; Sen, 'Development as Freedom'. Authorities on African history have made claims that resources like ivory, gold, oil, gemstones and precious metals have always brought misery of all kinds a for Africans. While worrisome, these claims are hard to dispute.
6. CASM, *Artisanal Mining in DRC*, 1–2.
7. Hruschka, 'Artisanal Small Scale Gold Mining-Challenges and Opportunities for Development: twenty years of SDC involvement'; Hentschel, Hruschka, and Priester, 'Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining Challenges and Opportunities', 6; ICMM, *Working Together*, 27.
8. Against the backdrop of the historical experience of African misery with ivory, gold, and oil; more recently, the horrendous stories from the DRC, Zambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone of the diamonds, copper, tantalum, and gemstones that attracted the tentacles of transnational corporate interests, criminal networks, security companies and traffickers demonstrate that various actors continue to shade blood red what should be the blessing of new wealth and regional and national prosperity across the continent. Edward Zwick's movie *Blood Diamond* is an accurate portrayal and classic case of this reality.
9. CASM, *Artisanal Mining in DRC*, 36; Hruschka, 'Artisanal Small Scale Gold Mining-Challenges and Opportunities for Development: twenty years of SDC involvement', 7; ICMM, *Working Together*, 56; Grant, 'An Over View of Artisanal Mining in Liberia', 13.
10. MoME and GSE, 'Opportunities for Gemstone Development in Ethiopia', 20.
11. MoME and GSE. 'Opportunities for Gemstone Development in Ethiopia'.
12. *Ibid.*, 5.
13. MoME, 'Artisanal Mining Activities in Ethiopia: Challenges and opportunities', 19; MoME and GSE, *Opportunities for Gemstone Development in Ethiopia*; MoME, *Implementation of Flexi Cadastre*; AMTCCD, *Report of the Artisanal Mining Transaction Coordination and Cooperation Desk*; CASM, *Artisanal Mining in DRC*.
14. The government has enacted various laws that address mineral operations in Ethiopia, including the ASGM, including Mining Operations Proclamation No. 678/2010, Mining Operations Regulations No. 182/1994 (amended under Regulations No. 27/1998), Mining Income Tax Proclamation No. 53/1993 (amended under Proclamation No. 23/1996), and Transaction of Precious Minerals Proclamation No. 651/2009.
15. MoME, *Artisanal Mining Activities in Ethiopia*, 4; MoME, 'Artisanal Mining Activities in Ethiopia: Challenges and opportunities', 24.
16. MoME and GSE, *Opportunities for Gemstone Development in Ethiopia*, 10.

17. MoME, 'National Report on Mining', 12.
18. The *wereda* is the lowest administrative unit in the Ethiopian system of government and consists of subunits called *kebeles*.
19. Rondeau, 2010, 90–91.
20. MoME, 'Artisanal Mining Activities in Ethiopia: Challenges and opportunities', 24.
21. AMTCCD, *Report of the Artisanal Mining Transaction Coordination and Cooperation Desk*, 23.
22. MoME, *Artisanal Mining Activities in Ethiopia*, 18.
23. 'People Died of Opal Mining Accident'; MoME, *Artisanal Mining Activities in Ethiopia*, 19.
24. MoME, 'Artisanal Mining Activities in Ethiopia: Challenges and opportunities'.
25. Interview with S. Teshome (an ASOM miner) conducted by D. Getye on 27 February 2014 at Kok-Wuha ASOM operation.
26. Interview with Asnake, W. (ASOM miner) conducted by D. Getye, on 2014, February 25 at kok-Wuha ASOM operation site.
27. Interview with Seble, T. (Wegel Tena Wereda mining and environment protection expert) (conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 14 at Wegel Tena Wereda mining and environment protection office.
28. Interview with W. Asnake conducted by D. Getye on 25 February 2014.
29. Interview with S. Teshome (an ASOM miner) conducted by D. Getye on 27 February 2014 at Kok-Wuha ASOM operation.
30. Interview with Yodit, A. (Commercial Sex Worker) conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 18 at Wegele Tena.
31. Interview with Seble, T. (Wegel Tena Wereda mining and environment protection expert) (conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 14 at Wegel Tena Wereda mining and environment protection office.
32. Interview with Police Constable Tilahun B. (Crime Prevention Unit) conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 13 at Wegel Tena Police station.
33. Interview with Mengistu, A. (Opal Collector) Conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 12 at Wegel tena; Interview with S. Teshome (an ASOM miner) conducted by D. Getye on 27 February 2014 at Kok-Wuha ASOM operation.
34. Interview with Teferi, G. (Selam Minichil ASOM Operation head) conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 15 at Selam Minichil ASOM Operation site.
35. Interview with Ermias Belay, Abbo ASOM Cooperative miner on February 21, 2014 at Tsehay Mewucha, interviewer Muauz Gidey.
36. DWCO, *ASOM Organising Principles*.
37. Ibid.
38. Interview with Habtamu, Z. (Delanta wereda cooperatives expert) conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 21 at Delanta wereda cooperatives office.
39. Ibid.
40. DWFO, *ASOMs Revenue Records*, DWMEQ, 2013–2014.
41. FGD-Urban, *Post-ASOM Delanta Reality*.
42. Interview with the head of the Delanta Wereda administration and security affairs conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at the Wegel Tena office; interview with Delanta Wereda Administrator conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at Wereda Administration office; interview with Delanta Wereda police department head conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 23 Wegel Tena police department.
43. Gezae Desta. 2009. Artisanal Small Scale Gold Miners in Tigray. MA theses. IPSS, AAU, Addis Ababa.
44. Interview with the head of the Delanta Wereda administration and security affairs conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at the Wegel Tena office.
45. Wegeltena Wereda Finance office, 'Local Market Price Assessment Report.'
46. Interview with Delanta Wereda Administrator conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at Wereda Administration office. All quotations from interviews and discussion groups are translated or paraphrased for English language use where needed by the author.
47. Interview with Abate, G. (ASOM Miner) conducted by Tizazu on 2014, February 11 at Kok-Wuha ASOM operation site.

48. Interview with Mengistu, A. (Opal Collector) Conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 12 at Wegel tena.
49. DWPD, *Crime and Victimization Before and After ASOMs*.
50. Ibid.
51. DWPD, *Crime and Victimization Before and After ASOMs*.
52. Interview with an anonymous informant conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 23 at Wegel Tena.
53. Interview with Yodit, A. (Commercial Sex Worker) conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 18 at Wegele Tena.
54. Interview conducted by M. Gidey on 22 March 2014.
55. ASAO, *Security Threat Assessment*.
56. SDPCP-FGD, *ASOM-Induced Violent Crime*.
57. FGD-Urban, *Post-ASOM Delanta Reality*.
58. Interview conducted by M. Gidey on 22 March 2014.
59. Ibid.
60. Interview with Delanta wereda administrator conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at Delanta wereda administration office.
61. The term '*gereb*' in the Tigrigna language literally means 'the river' and it stands for the covenant of the locality which is the supreme lawmaker in the customary legal system of Tigray. Similarly, '*Ziban Bayto*' and '*Ziban Weyane*' are also used in Bayto and Weyane, referring to the peoples' assembly and the people's revolution.
62. Sharamo and Mesfin, 'Regional Security in the post-Cold War Horn of Africa'.
63. CIFOR, 'The Formalisation of Artisanal Mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda'; Hilson, Gavin 'Enclaves of Wealth and Hinterlands of Discontent: Foreign Mining Companies in Africa's Development'.
64. de Waal, 'The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power'.
65. Interview with Commander Tefera (Wereda Police Chief) conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 29 at Wereda Police Department.
66. Interview with the head of the Delanta Wereda administration and security affairs conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at the Wegel Tena office.
67. Interview with Ermias, B. (Wegel Tena high school Teacher) conducted by Tizazu on 2014, March 19 at Wegel Tena.
68. Interview with Anonymous police officer conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 9 at Tsehay Mewicha.
69. Interview with anonymous-police Inspector conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 19 at Tsehay Mewicha.
70. Interview with Anonymous security affairs expert conducted Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 12 at Wegel Tena.
71. Interview with Delanta wereda administrator conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at Delanta wereda administration office.
72. Interview conducted by M. Gidey on 22 March 2014.
73. FGD of ASOM Miners conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 24 at Tsehay Mewicha.
74. FGD of ASOM Miners conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 24 at Tsehay Mewicha.
75. Ibid.
76. Interview with Tewodros, A. conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, April 8 at Abo ASOM Operation site; Focus Group Discussion with Selam Minichil ASOM miners conducted by Muauz gidey on 2014, March 24 at Selam Minichil ASOM operation site.
77. Focus group discussion with Kok-Wuha ASOM miners conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 24 at Kok-Wuha ASOM operation site.
78. EIA-Regulation, *The EIA Regulation Manual of the Wereda*.
79. EIA-Report, *The EIA Report of ASOM*.
80. Second round focus group discussion with Kok-Wuha ASOM miners conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 29 at Kok-Wuha ASOM operation site.
81. Interview with anonymous wereda mining and energy expert conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, February 12 at Wegel tena.

82. Robert K. Merton. Social Structure and Anomie. *American Sociological Review*, Volume 3, Issue 5 (October), 1938, 672–682.
83. Garfield, 'The Anomie-Defiant Behaviour Connection', 272.
84. Zhao and Cao, 'Social Change and Anomies'.
85. Tibebe, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*.
86. Second round focus group discussion with Selam-Minichil ASOM miners conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 28 at Selam-Minichil ASOM operation site.
87. Second round focus group discussion with Selam-Minichil ASOM miners conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 28 at Selam-Minichil ASOM operation site.
88. Focus group discussion conducted by M. Gidey on 24 March 2014.
89. Interview Anonymous (Kok-Wuha ASOM miner) conducted by Muauz Midey on 2014, March 26 at Kok-Wuha ASOM operation site.
90. Focus group discussion with commercial sex workers conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 22 at Wegel Tena.
91. Interview conducted by M. Gidey on 15 March 2014.
92. Interview with health officer at ACCt conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 19 at Wegel Tena.
93. Interview conducted by M. Gidey on 13 March 2014.
94. Interview with anonymous elementary school principal conducted by Tizazu on 2014, March 12 at Wegel Tena.
95. Second round focus group discussion with Selam-Minichil ASOM miners conducted by Muauz Gidey on 2014, March 28 at Selam-Minichil ASOM operation site.

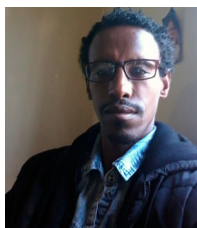
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