The gift of salt: a personal story from Lake Afdera

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I have in front of me a 4.8-kilogram file filled with documents that trace the story of how Lake Afdera in the Danakil depression, Afar region of Ethiopia has developed into the largest source of salt in the country. With a volcano in the background, which once shaped the landscape we see today, the lake lies 102 meters below sea level and has a surface area of around 100 sq. kilometers.

At a time of my first visit, the only presence in the area was a small military post up on the hill and some scattered nomadic groups camping amongst the rocks and boulders. The nomads were exposed to serious health risks and were under the care of the Afar Pastoralist Development Association (APDA) under the fervent leadership of Ismail Ali Gardo and his wife Valerie Browning, known as the ‘Angel of the African Desert’. This is how I was introduced to the area on the day of my arrival: the Angel of the Desert was lecturing to a large group of nomadic women, all huddled in a cave, listening to her eagerly:

Afar, desolate, silent and of an extraordinary beauty. Like the Dead Sea, the lake is supersaturated saline water. The lake is fed by very hot freshwater streams, with palm trees along their banks that offered the only shelter and comfort during the extremely hot days. I was told that until I arrived, no one had dared to swim in the lake until by jumping in, I proved there were no predators in the water, and that sinking was impossible. This was in 1999, and today Afdera is a very different site and sight.

Historical background on Ethiopian salt

In the north of the Danakil depression is an open-pit salt mine, which has been in use since the ancient times when salt was a currency. Low quality salt blocks or slabs are still mined there today. In more modern times, when Eritrea and Ethiopia were Abissinia, most of the region’s salt originated from the Eritrean coast of Assab and investments were made to enable salt iodization. However, the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which broke out in May 1998, left the latter without a salt supply. For a short time, the salt came to Ethiopia from Djibouti and Yemen; one of their most interesting ventures was at Lac Assal in Djibouti, where another depression salt-lake was being exploited for local use, and both governments hoped that a large joint venture would profit both countries. But while the venture had potential, other matters took priority for the Ethiopian government at the time.

Over the years, much has been written about salt in Ethiopia, but one report that mentioned Lake Afdera as a potential source of halite (rock salt) was what brought me to the site. But the real beginning was a story told to me by Benito Capodacqua, an Ethiopian-Italian salt technician whom I met and befriended in the course of my work there.

First saltpans in Afdera

In the late 50’s and early 60’s, Benito worked for an Italian businessman, Mr. D’Alessandro. An adventurer and dreamer, D’Alessandro was also a passionate and creative entrepreneur with a keen eye for opportunity. His project to produce salt in Afdera was not only successfully approved by the Ethiopian government, but it also won him a 5-year tax concession on production. And so in this lunar (and possibly slightly lunatic) landscape, without any machinery but filled with determination, D’Alessandro built the first saltpan, along with a 250 km dirt road connecting his business with the main road to Addis Ababa. After the five year period of grace, the government began to tax D’Alessandro, and as the years went by and production grew from strength to strength, the tax demands became higher and more aggressive. At least, until D’Alessandro was told that the only way his taxes would be lower is if he would sell a part of his enterprise. As the story goes, at this point, he opted to close down the entire operation.

It was Benito who showed me the foundation of D’Alessandro’s house, the location of the freshwater tank and workshop, and most important of all, the nea
network of 15 salt ponds with an access road for the workers to bring their harvest back onto dry land. It was a haunting sight: one could still almost feel the vibrant energy of the place and hear the tools and voices of the men at work, harvesting the salt. But the salt pans had been laid to rest under years’ worth of sand, their outline now barely traceable.

Developing the Ethiopian salt industry
The first document I find as I open the file is titled “Discussion on the Iodization of Salt,” dated 9–10 November 1998. It is the minutes of a meeting between Tigray Development Agency (TDA), Dutch Interchurch Aid (DIA), UNICEF, Afar Relief Association, and Afar Literary Association, convened to discuss salt iodization. As salt was a key part of the project, one of the listed action points was to discuss the plan with the clan leaders of Afdera. This, in my view, was the point that marked the beginning of a new era of salt production at the lake. A follow-up meeting on 15 December 1998 brought together another stakeholder group: mostly salt workers from the newly formed Afar Salt Workers Association (ASWA) and the Afar Pastoralist Development Association (APDA). Spearheaded by Bob Hedly of DIA, the other agencies (ASWA, APDA and UNICEF) all had crucial roles in driving the project forward. As a result, the first assessment mission to Lake Afdera (and my contract there as a Salt Consultant to UNICEF) was scheduled not long after, in January 1999. This was when I first met my team: Ishmail Ali Gardo (APDA), Benito Capodacqua, and Nur Murale (ASWA).

The assessment report detailed the lake’s surroundings, which we scouted for suitable salt production sites, although it was evident that salt could be produced easily. The report was visionary and optimistic about the prospects, even recommending that the salt association build a shed where salt could be iodized and sold directly to the passing trade on the main road, on its way to Addis. In fact, it went as far as to suggest that a large billboard should be erected to inform the truckers they don’t need to drive for hours to reach the lake!

Next to the report from this initial visit is another document, a letter from DIA dated 26th February 1999, addressed to UNICEF-Addis Ababa, notifying the office of a meeting with the salt groups keen to develop production and iodization at the scouted site. As Bob Hedly said at the time, although the project was very feasible, there were some logistical doubts, and it required funding. In May 1999, a “Region Two-Salt Production & Iodization Proposal” was agreed, and the implementing agencies DIA and UNICEF funded the US$ 54,000 budget. More visits to the site were undertaken in the intervening months. The ASWA membership grew to 57 (including myself), and as a result the association was able to raise funds to the tune of US$ 15,000.

By the year 2000, with the appointment of Mr Alimira Helem, a local manager, and Benito, the team was now 16-strong, and the construction work at the lake could begin in earnest. Food cost and salaries were paid to the workers through their membership fee, while donors funded the materials and equipment needed to build lake-site lodgings, a cafeteria, and a storeroom. Smaller equipment, including bamboo mats, nails, wood, shovels, wheelbarrows, inlet pumps, pipes, generator, and other goods were shipped in mostly by caravans of camels. There was, of course, no lack of serious issues such as a shortage of mosquito nets, provisions not arriving in time, or arriving late and spoiled. But there was no lack of enthusiasm either, and by May 2000, the first 200 quintals or 20 metric tons of salt were produced. This experience positively motivated the workers and ASWA, who were now even more keen to build new pans. Unfortunately, the project expanded out of control, and the over-eagerness of the local salt association attracted the interest of external businessmen, causing serious difficulties. Nevertheless, it forged ahead and has become what it is today: a major source of salt in Ethiopia.

In the aftermath
I returned to Ethiopia in November 2002, by which time the production sites had simply gone “viral,” smashing even the most optimistic forecasts. Today Afdera is a sprawling town, and the lake area once described as desolate, silent and of an extraordinary beauty is no more. But perhaps the impact it’s had on the region was as inevitable as the passing of time. And the benefits of iodized salt bestowed upon the region’s population are indisputable.

*This article is dedicated to Ato Benito Capodacqua.*