

CAMEL CENTRIC PROVERBS OF THE BERHALE DISTRICT, AFAR REGION, ETHIOPIA: A COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS OF PASTORAL WISDOM

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the rich oral traditions of the Berhale District in the Afar Region of Ethiopia, focusing specifically on camel-centric proverbs. In this arid landscape, the dromedary camel is not only a biological necessity for survival but also a foundational pillar of cultural identity. Using a purposive sampling approach across 5 kebeles and 90 households, the research collected proverbs in the Afar language, which were subsequently translated into Amharic and English. The results, analysed through narrative synthesis, revealed that these proverbs function as a vital Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) for resilience, conflict resolution and camel management. A key finding of the study is the direct link between oral camel-centric proverbs and practical husbandry, categorised into five thematic areas: (1) Social Status, Wealth and Identity; (2) Intelligence and Navigation; (3) Biological Nature and Psychology; (4) Medicinal and Life-Sustaining Value; and (5) Legal Integrity and Traditional Law. The study concludes that documenting these linguistic treasures is essential for preserving pastoral wisdom. Furthermore, it suggests integrating this indigenous knowledge into modern camel management and regional educational policies to enhance camel productivity and safeguard cultural heritage.

Key words: Afar region, Berhale district, camel proverbs, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), paremiology

At the heart of the arid Afar Region, the Berhale district serves as a gateway to the Danakil Depression, one of the most inhospitable yet culturally rich environments on Earth. In this landscape of extreme heat and salt-crusts plains, the dromedary camel (*Camelus dromedarius*) is far more than a head of livestock; it is a foundational pillar of economic survival, social status and cultural identity. For Afar pastoralists, the camel represents a living archive of resilience, providing the principal vocabulary for their moral, philosophical and ecological worldview (Tadesse *et al*, 2014).

This study explores the intricate relationship between the Afar people and their camels through the lens of paremiology: the systematic study of proverbs. In Berhale, proverbs are not merely decorative speech; they function as a communal survival manual. These short, meaningful sayings capture hundreds of years of desert experience and community rules in a way that is easy to understand. Whether they are teaching the necessity of patience during a drought or the nuances of tribal leadership, the camel serves as the ultimate metaphor for the human experience in the desert (Balehegn, 2016).

Despite the rapid modernisation of agricultural practices, these oral traditions remain the primary vehicle for transmitting Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within pastoralist communities. They provide a practical framework for survival by teaching the community how to interpret climate signals, read weather patterns and provide specialised care for their animals. Beyond physical survival, these proverbs facilitate social harmony and conflict resolution by utilising traditional metaphors to mediate disputes and maintain communal cohesion (Abokar, 1987). Ultimately, they reflect a deep ethno-veterinary philosophy and a profound respect for the camel's biological endurance and its essential role in the household.

Contemporary research frequently focuses on the biological and physiological aspects of camel productivity, such as genetics, nutrition and disease. However, the rich oral traditions and indigenous narratives surrounding them are often overlooked and rarely documented. This research gap is critical because, as the Afar region faces increasing climatic volatility and the rapid erosion of traditional

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oral cultures, this living data is at risk of being permanently lost.

Without systematic documentation, the specialised ecological and veterinary insights embedded in Afar proverbs remain inaccessible to modern livestock management frameworks. Furthermore, there is a lack of localised research that treats paremiology as a functional diagnostic tool for understanding pastoral resilience. This study aims to fill this critical gap by collecting and analysing specific camel-centric proverbs from the Berhale district. By explaining their deep meanings in clear language and preserving them in their original Afar context, this work seeks to safeguard the unique voice of the Berhale people and integrate desert wisdom into the broader discourse of modern livestock management and cultural preservation. The primary objective of this study is to document, categorise and analyse camel-centric oral proverbs in the Berhale district of the Afar Region, evaluating their role as a functional Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) for pastoral resilience and livestock management.

Materials and Methods

Study Area and Environmental Context

The research was conducted in the Berhale district of the Afar Regional State, Ethiopia, a strategic pastoralist corridor located approximately 647 km northeast of Semera and 908 km from Addis Ababa. Geographically, Berhale serves as a critical transition zone to the Danakil (Dallul) depression, characterised by one of the most extreme thermic environments on earth. Situated at a mean altitude of 621 meters above sea level, the district is defined by its hyper-arid climate and fragmented volcanic landscapes. These environmental constraints render the area largely unsuitable for diverse livestock production; consequently, the dromedary camel (*Camelus dromedarius*) has emerged as the dominant species. According to recent livestock census data, the camel population in Berhale is the most significant in the region (Afar BoFED, 2024), providing a unique socio-ecological laboratory for investigating the intersection of indigenous pastoral wisdom and desert survival.

Research Design and Sampling

To ensure data reliability, this study employed a purposive sampling approach. Five administrative units (kebeles) were selected from the district's nine units based on high camel density and geographic accessibility. Within these kebeles, households were randomly identified, resulting in a total of 90

participating households. To deepen qualitative insights, the study utilised Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Key informants included respected community elders, clan leaders and experienced herders recognised for their mastery of Afar oral literature. Focus group discussions were conducted in each kebele with 6 to 8 participants per session. This layered strategy allowed for the triangulation of data and ensured a representative communal perspective.

Data Collection and Language

Primary data were acquired through direct field visits and systematic interviews. These sessions prioritised the documentation of oral traditions, focusing on the historical origins of specific proverbs and their application in traditional Afar law. To preserve cultural nuance, all proverbs were first recorded in the native Afar language. Subsequently, recordings were translated into Amharic and English. This process included a communal validation phase, where local informants reviewed the translations to ensure they accurately reflected collective wisdom. Qualitative data was further enriched by field observations of traditional camel husbandry to verify how oral proverbs align with real world management practices.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, the qualitative data were organised, transcribed and coded. Narrative analysis was employed to map the prevalence and spatial distribution of camel traditions. These findings were interpreted through narrative synthesis, revealing how these proverbs function as a vital Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) for resilience and conflict resolution. By establishing a direct correlation between oral traditions and practical husbandry, the analysis provides a robust framework for understanding the camel's multifaceted role in Afar society.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrated a profound and direct correlation between Afar oral proverbs and the practicalities of camel management. These proverbs were not merely linguistic artifacts; they function as a living manual for survival in the arid Danakil corridor. The results were categorised into five thematic areas that represented the multidimensional role of the camel in Afar society and direct link between oral camel-centric proverbs and practical husbandry, categorised into five thematic

areas: (1) Social Status, Wealth and Identity; (2) Intelligence and Navigation; (3) Biological Nature and Psychology; (4) Medicinal and Life-Sustaining Value; and (5) Legal Integrity and Traditional Law.

Social Status Wealth and Identity

The results of this study demonstrated that in the Berhale District, the dromedary camel is not merely a biological entity but the primary architect of social hierarchy and individual identity. The proverb "*Gala ittu mayyu num, abba mayyu*" (A father is not a father if he fails to leave a camel) suggests that fatherhood is defined by the successful transmission of pastoral assets. In Afar tradition, a father's legacy is measured by his ability to provide his offspring with the means of survival in the Danakil depression. Without this transfer of living capital, the patriarchal bond is viewed as functionally incomplete, echoing the findings of Tadesse *et al* (2014), who noted that livestock remains the most vital inheritance in pastoralist societies.

Furthermore, the categorisation of human status based on livestock ownership "*Gala itta num numma num*" (A man with a camel is a complete man) versus "*Beera itta num, gilaal num*" (A man with goats is half a man) reveals a sophisticated socio-economic ranking. While goats and cattle provide immediate subsistence, only the camel offers the long term resilience and mobility required for the salt trade caravans of Berhale. The economic disparity expressed in the proverb "*Gala laaqi inki taba qidimmay*" (One camel is equal to twelve goats) is not just a calculation of market price, but a reflection of the camel's superior buffer capacity against the recurrent droughts of the 21st century (Balehegn, 2016).

The psychological weight of camel ownership is summarised in the rhetorical question: "*Gala mayyu num, mannal giclo?*" (Why would a man without a camel carry himself with pride?). In the Afar customary law, camels are the currency of blood wealth and legal guarantees. A man without a camel lacks legal insurance necessary to navigate communal disputes. Thus, the camel acts as a social shield; its absence renders an individual vulnerable, reinforcing the conclusion that in the Afar Region, the camel is the ultimate symbol of human dignity and community standing (Abokar, 1987).

"*Gala mayyu num, haxaat mayallu.*" "*ግመል የሌለው ሰው ስለዛፍ ብዙ አያውቅም፡፡*" meaning a man without a camel does not talk much about trees. This finding highlights that ecological knowledge in the Afar region is a direct function of ownership. Because

camels are specialised browsers that rely on high altitude acacia and desert shrubs, the owner must possess an intimate, expert level understanding of the local flora to ensure herd health and productivity. A man without a camel is effectively silenced in communal discussions regarding land management, grazing rights and resource allocation. This suggests that environmental literacy is not merely a skill, but a social privilege and a prerequisite for having a voice in the community's decision making processes (Balehegn, 2016).

"*Beera deecat gala ma-deecan.*" "*የፍየልን ቀልድ ለግመል አይቀለድም፡፡*" meaning the jokes made about goats are never made about camels. This proverb establishes a clear cultural distinction between different livestock species. While goats are viewed as common, replaceable assets and are often the subject of lightheartedness or jokes in pastoral discourse, the camel is treated with a specific gravity and dignity. This reflects the species' superior economic and survival value in the Danakil corridor. In the Berhale district, this translates to specialised management practices where the camel's welfare is prioritised above all other animals. To treat a camel with the levity of a goat is to disregard the foundation of Afar survival, emphasising that the camel occupies a sacred, high status category within the pastoral psyche (Abokar, 1987; Getachew, 2001).

II. Intelligence and Navigation

The results in this category illustrate that the Afar people do not view the camel as a passive beast of burden, but as an active, intellectual partner in desert survival. The proverb "*Gala gita iyyu*" (The camel is a pathfinder and surveyor) highlights the animal's cognitive ability to navigate the featureless and dust-choked terrains of the Danakil Depression. In a landscape where sandstorms can erase human-made landmarks, the camel's spatial memory provides the primary security for salt caravans. This aligns with the ethno-ecological observation that camels possess a biological compass, allowing them to identify seasonal grazing routes and trek across vast distances without losing their orientation.

One of the most striking findings is the designation of the camel as "*Gala lee injinier iyyu*" (The camel is a water engineer). In the hyper arid Berhale District, where water sources are often hidden or subterranean, pastoralists rely on the camel's acute sensory perception to locate water. This engineering refers to the animal's ability to sense moisture in the air and detect underground aquifers long before

human observers. By following the camel, the Afar pastoralist accesses a natural sensor for life sustaining resources, a practice that forms a critical part of their Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) for drought adaptation (Balehegn, 2016).

Furthermore, the characterization of the camel in the proverb “*Gala massoyya, kalah massoyisih mayyu*” (The camel is a leader, not a follower) reflects a deep respect for the animal’s independent decision making. Unlike cattle or sheep, which require constant prodding, the camel is trusted to lead the way. This inherent leadership, coupled with the wisdom that “*Gala gita yaaxige*” (The camel knows the way), suggests a relationship of mutual trust. As Abokar (1987) noted in comparative pastoral studies, the camel’s navigation is seen as divinely or instinctively guided, making it the moral and physical leader of the caravan. Ultimately, these proverbs prove that the Afar’s survival in one of the world’s harshest environments is technically supported by the camel’s superior environmental intelligence.

III. Biological Nature and Psychology

The findings in this category reveal a sophisticated Afar understanding of camel

psychology, moving beyond simple animal husbandry into the realm of animal sentience and emotional intelligence. The proverb “*Gala mecla yaaxige*” (The camel is both merciful and vengeful) serves as a primary behavioural guideline for herders in Berhale. It suggests that the camel possesses a long term memory for both kindness and mistreatment. This psychological complexity requires the pastoralist to maintain a relationship based on reciprocal respect rather than force, as a slighted camel is believed to harbor a grudge (Balehegn, 2016).

Furthermore, the observation that “*Gala qidimih yidwiye*” (A camel weeps when it senses its own slaughter) humanises the animal, reflecting a deep ethno-biological empathy. This proverb underscores the Afar belief that the dromedary possesses a high level of self-awareness and premonition. This spiritual connection is further evidenced in the maternal proverbs “*Gala isí baxa naba xagaruk yaaxige*” (A camel can identify its offspring from a distance). These sayings highlight the camel’s superior sensory and intuitive capabilities.

A particularly significant finding for the ethno-veterinary section of this study is the proverb “*Gala*

Table 1. Categorized Camel Proverbs Representing Social Status, Wealth and Identity in the Berhale District (Afar, Amharic and English).

Afar Language (Qafár af)	Amharic Translation	English Synthesis
<i>Gala ittu mayyu num, abba mayyu</i>	ግመል ያልተወልሀን አባት አባት አትበለው።	A father is not a father if he fails to leave a camel as heritage.
<i>Gala itta num numma num</i>	ግመል ያለው ሰው ሙሉ ሰው ነው።	A man with a camel is a complete man (full status).
<i>Gala beertih faldem, kasare</i>	ግመልን በፍየል የቀየረ ከሰረ፤ ፍየልን በግመል የቀየረ ከበረ።	Trading a camel for a goat is the path to economic ruin.
<i>Gala laaqi inki taba qidimmay</i>	አንድ ግመል የአስራ ሁለት ፍየል አቻ ነው።	One camel is [economically] equal to twelve goats.
<i>Gala mayyu num, mannal giclo?</i>	ግመል የሌለው ሰው ምን ወዲያ ወዲህ አስባለው?	A man without a camel has no reason to carry himself with pride.
<i>Gala naba sadaqa iyyu</i>	ግመል ትልቁ ሰደቃ ነው።	The camel is the highest form of social capital and religious merit.
<i>Gala mayyu num, haxaat mayallu</i>	ግመል የሌለው ሰው ስለዛፍ ብዙ አያወራም።	Ownership dictates environmental literacy; without a camel, one lacks a social voice.
<i>Beera deeclat gala ma-deeclan</i>	የፍየልን ቀልድ ለግመል አይቀለድም።	Reflects the dignity and gravity of the species; it is never treated with the levity of goats.

Table 2. Categorized camel proverbs representing intelligence and navigation in the Berhale district (Afar, Amharic and English)

Afar Language (Qafár af)	Amharic Translation	English Synthesis
<i>Gala gita iyyu</i>	ግመል መንገድ ቀያሽ ነው።	The camel is a natural pathfinder and surveyor
<i>Gala lee injinier iyyu</i>	ግመል የውሀ መሀንዲስ ነው።	The camel is a “water engineer” (finding hidden sources)
<i>Gala massoyya, kalah massoyisih mayyu</i>	ግመል መሪ እንጅ ተመሪ አይደለም።	The camel is a leader by nature, not a follower
<i>Gala gita yaaxige</i>	ግመል መንገድ ያውቃል።	The camel possesses an innate map of the desert
<i>Gala isí gubax yaaxige</i>	ግመል የራሱን ሀገር ያውቃል።	A camel always knows the way back to its home territory

isí abbah xagaruk raqte" (A camel may withhold milk if its specific milker is absent). This points to a unique individual to individual bond between the camel and its primary caretaker. It suggests that milk let down is an emotional response triggered by the presence of a trusted human partner. In the Berhale district, this behavioural trait reinforces the importance of the owner's physical presence and constant care. As noted by Tadesse *et al* (2014), such indigenous observations of animal behaviour are not mere myths but are grounded in the biological reality of how stress and trust affect oxytocin and milk production in dromedaries.

IV. Medicinal and Life Sustaining Value

The findings in this category underscore the specialised role of camel milk as a biological and cultural asset in the Berhale District. The proverb "*Gala han dawa iyyu, maane hinna*" (Camel milk is medicine, not just only food) is a cornerstone of Afar ethno-medicine. It reveals that pastoralists do not view the milk as a simple calorie source, but as a prophylactic and therapeutic agent. In the harsh environment of the Danakil Depression, where modern medical facilities are often distant, camel milk serves as a vital resource for treating ailments ranging

from gastrointestinal issues to nutritional deficiencies. This indigenous perspective is increasingly supported by modern biochemistry, which identifies camel milk as having high concentrations of insulin-like proteins and protective antibodies (Tadesse *et al*, 2014).

The social vitality linked to the dromedary is captured in the proverb "*Gala han aqbi, isí xonit mawaara*" (A camel herder never quarrels with his lover). This subtle yet powerful saying links the consumption of camel milk to physical stamina and reproductive health. In the Berhale community, this is understood as a reflection of the milk's high mineral and vitamin content, which sustains the herder's vigor through long treks in extreme heat. The peace in the relationship mentioned in the proverb is a metaphor for the herder's overall wellbeing and strength, derived from his unique diet.

Furthermore, the observation that "*Gala han madidda, mabullo*" (Camel milk is neither boiled nor churned) highlights a deep understanding of the milk's unique chemical properties. Unlike cow or goat milk, camel milk does not easily coagulate or curdle under traditional processing methods, nor is it typically boiled, as the Afar believe this kills its medicinal potency. This indigenous knowledge aligns

Table 3. Categorised camel proverbs representing biological nature and psychology in the Berhale district (Afar, Amharic and English).

Afar Language (Qafár af)	Amharic Translation	English Synthesis
<i>Gala mecla yaaxige</i>	ግመል አዛኝም፤ ቂመኛም እንስሳ ነው።	The camel is emotionally complex both merciful and vengeful
<i>Gala qidimih yidwiye</i>	ግመል ሊታረድ ሲል ያለቅሳል።	A camel weeps when it senses its own slaughter
<i>Gala isí baxa naba xagaruk yaaxige</i>	ግመል ልጄን ከርቀት የመለየት ችሎታ አላት።	A camel can identify its offspring from a great distance
<i>Gala isí abbah xagaruk raqte</i>	ግመል ባለቤቱ ካልመጣ ወተቱን አይሰጥም።	A camel may withhold milk if its specific milker is absent

Table 4. Categorised camel proverbs representing medicinal and life sustaining value in the Berhale district (Afar, Amharic and English).

Afar Language (Qafár af)	Amharic Translation	English Synthesis
<i>Gala han dawa iyyu, maane hinna</i>	የግመል ወተት ምግብ ብቻ አይደለም መድኃኒትም እንድ ።	Camel milk is a therapeutic medicine, not just only basic nutrition.
<i>Gala han aqbi, isí xonit mawaara</i>	የግመል እረኛ ከፍቅረኛው አይጣላም።	Camel milk provides the herder with vitality and health.
<i>Gala han madidda, mabullo</i>	የግመል ወተት አይፈላም፤ አይገፋም።	Camel milk has unique properties; it is neither boiled nor churned.

Table 5. Categorised camel proverbs representing legal integrity and traditional law in the Berhale district (Afar, Amharic and English).

Afar Language (Qafár af)	Amharic Translation	English Synthesis
<i>Gala gembisah madaayay</i>	ውሽት ግመልን ያቆማል እንድ አይዛዝም።	Emphasises absolute truth; deception cannot grant legitimate legal ownership.
<i>Gala mada gaba maqaane</i>	ግመል ካሳ የሚሆነው በተገደለው ነው።	Establishes the camel as the blood price.

with scientific findings regarding the heat sensitive protective proteins in camel milk. As noted by Balehegn (2016), these specific handling practices are essential components of an Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) that preserves the nutritional integrity of the desert's most valuable liquid resource.

V. Legal Integrity and Traditional Law

A significant finding of this study is the integration of the camel into the structural framework of Afar Customary Law. In the Berhale District, the camel is not merely an economic asset but a supreme judicial and ethical instrument. This role is demonstrated through two primary legal functions: the regulation of ethical trade and the settlement of major criminal offenses.

"Gala gembisah madaayay, baxissam hinna." "ወሽት ግመልን ያቆማል እንጂ አይገዛም፡፡" meaning lies may stop a camel, but they cannot buy it. This proverb serves as the primary moral regulator for the local camel market and the salt caravan logistics of the Danakil Depression. The community elders maintain that while a lie may cause a temporary delay in a transaction, it can never confer a socially recognised title of ownership. This finding emphasises that the Berhale camel industry is built on a foundation of Absolute Truth. In high-stakes pastoral environments, contractual honesty is essential for maintaining the communal trust required for long distance trade and resource sharing (Abokar, 1987; Getachew, 2001).

"Gala mada gaba maqaane." "ግመል ካሳ የሚሆነው... በተገደለው ነው፡፡" meaning a camel is not compensation for [minor] loss, but only for a life taken. This finding highlights the highest legal status of the camel as the exclusive currency for blood price. In Berhale, livestock are categorised by their sensible utility; while goats or cattle may be used to settle minor civil disputes, the camel is reserved strictly for the loss of a human life. By establishing the camel as the biological and legal equivalent of a person. This serves as a powerful deterrent against inter-clan violence and ensures communal harmony (Kassa, 2001; Kelemework, 2011). The camel, therefore, acts as a specialised tool for restorative justice, where its high value is used to heal the ultimate social disagreement.

Conclusion

This study in the Berhale District of the Afar Region underscores that the dromedary camel is far more than a biological asset; it is a profound cultural institution and a sophisticated Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS). Through a paremiological analysis

of camel-centric proverbs, this research reveals a deep-seated ecological intelligence. The community's recognition of the animal as a water engineer and a pathfinder demonstrates an environmental literacy that is essential for survival in the hyper-arid Danakil depression. Furthermore, these proverbs function as a communal survival manual, providing a robust framework for social hierarchy, conflict resolution through traditional law and ethno-veterinary medicine.

A significant finding is that while modern agricultural science focuses primarily on livestock productivity and genetics, Afar pastoralists prioritise the emotional and psychological bond with their animals, valuing the camel's mercy, memory and leadership. The status of camel milk as a therapeutic agent rather than a simple food source further highlights the specialised role this species plays in human health and regional resilience. Ultimately, these linguistic treasures are the primary vehicles for transmitting centuries of environmental observation. Their erosion due to modernisation poses a direct threat to the resilience of pastoralist communities.

Based on the findings of this study, several strategic interventions are proposed to bridge the gap between indigenous wisdom and modern livestock management. First, the institutionalisation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is essential; Ethiopian agricultural and livestock policy frameworks should move beyond purely biological metrics to formally incorporate the socio-ecological wisdom found in oral traditions. By utilising traditional figure of speech for camel behaviour and water sourcing as early warning indicators, national drought resilience and climate adaptation strategies can be significantly enhanced. Second, to prevent the extinction of this desert wisdom, the Afar Bureau of Education and Culture and regional universities should prioritise curriculum based preservation and digitalisation. Integrating camel-centric proverbs into local primary school curricula and systematically archiving these traditions will ensure that the unique linguistic heritage of Berhale is preserved for future generations. Finally, collaborative extension services should be established through a systematic program for continuous training that facilitates a two way knowledge exchange between veterinary services and community elders. Rather than a top down approach, this model recognises that pastoral environmental literacy is a sophisticated diagnostic tool that effectively complements modern meteorological data.

In summary, the digitalisation and documentation of these linguistic treasures is far more than an act of cultural archiving; it is a mechanical necessity for preserving pastoral wisdom in a rapidly changing climate. This research suggests that integrating indigenous knowledge into modern camel management and regional educational policies is the most viable and sustainable path toward a resilient future for the Afar people and their unique heritage.

Declarations

Availability of Data and Materials

To maintain academic transparency and accountability, the primary datasets generated and analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Ethics Approval

This study was executed following the established ethical protocols for agricultural and social research. All participating pastoralist households provided informed verbal consent after being briefed on the study's purpose. Participants were assured of complete anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses prior to the data collection process.

Manuscript Status and Originality

The author certifies that this manuscript is an original work that has not been published elsewhere, in part or in full and is not currently under consideration by any other journal.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted without any commercial, financial, or personal affiliations that could represent a potential conflict of interest. No external influence or funding impacted the objectivity of the presented findings.

Author's Contribution

KA was solely responsible for end to end which includes the initial conceptualisation, study design and primary field data acquisition in the Berhale district. Performed all qualitative and statistical analyses, interpreted the results and drafted the original manuscript to be published.

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