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State Territorialization at the Margins: Property Formalization and Paperwork in the Ethiopian Somali Frontier

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This paper scrutinizes property formalization as an integral part of state territorialization and demonstrates how bounded spaces are fused with political authority. Despite a long history of contestations over land in the Ethiopian Somali frontier, state law gained significance as a regulatory frame to grant and secure property rights of ethnic Somalis in the city of Jigjiga. In the city's land registry archive, this increased the amount of paperwork through which the relation between the Ethiopian state and Somali citizens has been remade under ethnic federal rule. Based on ethnographic and archival research in Jigjiga, this paper examines the writing practices and performances of land governance experts at different sites of paperwork where property relations are brought on paper and drawn together into law and institutional hierarchies. It reveals property formalization to consolidate state-citizen relations in symbolic and material form: in the city's expansion area where law is entangled within an emerging property landscape, and in the city's registry archive where legal documents are preserved. On that basis, this paper captures state formation as both a cultural and material process. It does so by highlighting the mediating role of bureaucratic actors and artifacts in the inscription of the state's symbolic languages in an emerging property landscape.

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