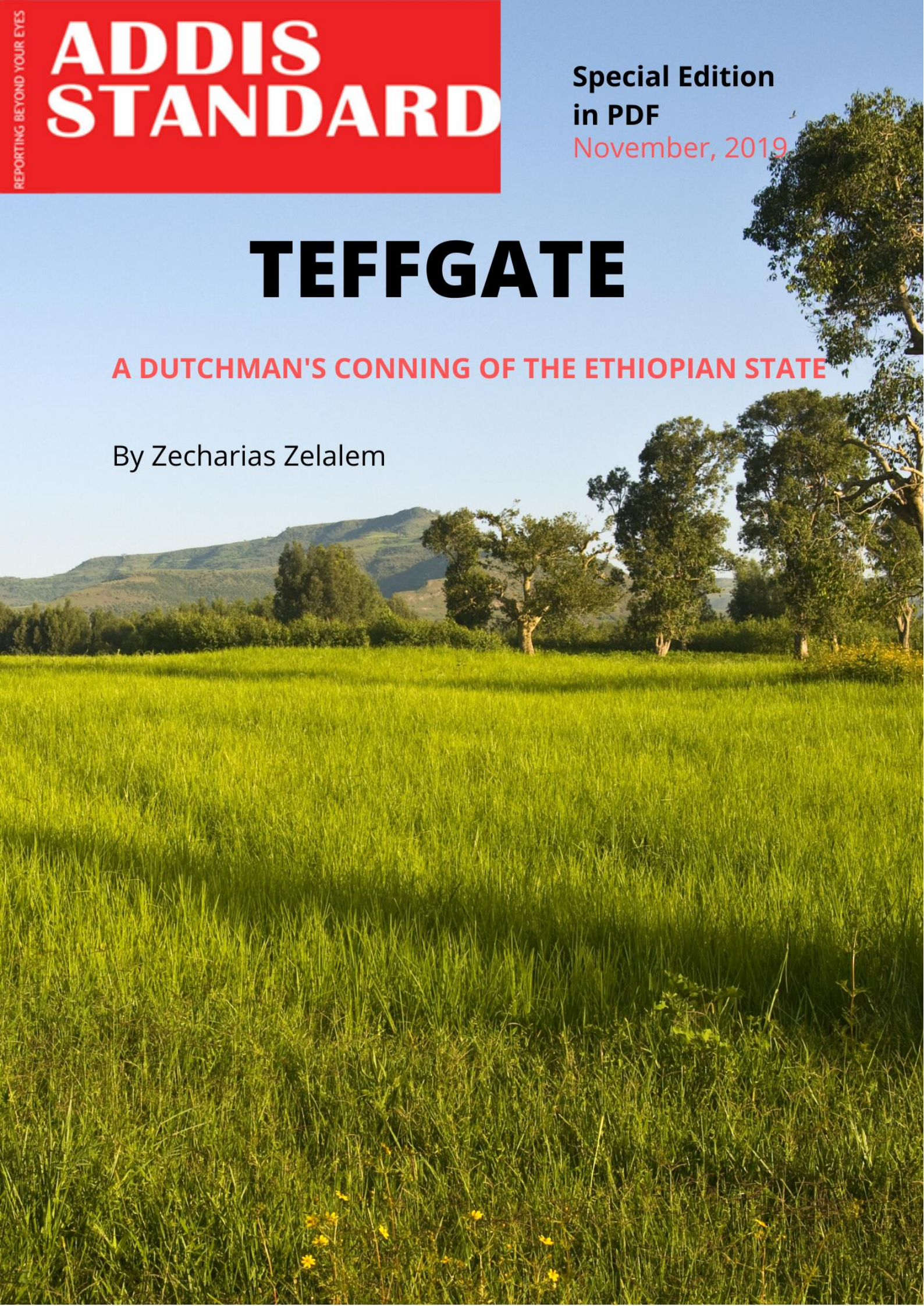


TEFFGATE

A DUTCHMAN'S CONNING OF THE ETHIOPIAN STATE

By Zecharias Zelalem



In February of this year, Ethiopians on social media were in a celebratory mood when the news broke of a nation's festering wound being apparently bandaged up. The wound emanated from the knowledge that a Dutch food company, Ancientgrain BV, held a patent which monopolized trade of products made from teff, an Ethiopian grown grain and key ingredient in the country's national staple bread, Injera. Today, that patent is no more, and the court ruling certifying this was cause for joy. After having been widely deemed as nothing less than the theft of Ethiopian traditions and even cultural appropriation, Ethiopians demanded answers. Nothing justified the maintaining of a teff related patent in the name of a Dutch company founded in 2002 soared in recent months. It culminated with a Dutch court ruling against Ancientgrain BV in a related case against Dutch company Bakels Senior and its subsequently invalidating the patent. On February 6th 2019, the Netherlands' embassy to Ethiopia confirmed the ruling via its official Twitter page and that a judge believed the patent lacked "inventiveness."

"Congratulations!" It came from Fitsum Arega, the then chairman of Ethiopia's Investment Commission, now Ethiopia's ambassador to the United States. "This is great news. I hope we can learn from this that our national assets must be protected by Ethiopians & friends of Ethiopia," he tweeted.

The court decision was made in November of last year, but it was upon Ambassador Fitsum Arega's congratulatory announcement that most Ethiopians were informed of the ruling. His message on Twitter was followed by hundreds of congratulatory tweets as Ethiopians deemed the ruling to be the amending of a great injustice. The news made headlines and the country's radio waves echoed the news across the land.

"It was the right decision," said Tariku Beshah, father of two who was raised in a farming community in the country's rural Gojam region. "We were raised being told that Teff was actually discovered in Gojam. Where I am from, we believe it is Gojam's gift to the entire country," he told *Addis Standard*. "For someone from Europe to claim it as his own is a bad joke!"

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claim it as his own is a bad joke!"

The Dutch patent may be cancelled, but teff related intellectual property rights held by the same Dutch company in a number of jurisdictions, including at the European Union's patent office, remain valid. A legal battle may still ensue, as Ethiopia has promised to go to "war" over teff.

“Ethiopia has already deployed a law firm to fight the Teff case internationally,” the country’s Attorney General Berhanu Tsegaye stated in his reaction to the news. The ruling has apparently bolstered Ethiopia’s case. Eight months later, there is still no information as to what action the Ethiopian government has taken or if indeed it actually hired lawyers to go after the remaining patents.



Teff farmers in Ethiopia (Photo: A Davey)

Businessmen in the Netherlands going to great lengths to legally declare themselves the “inventors” of teff preparation methods provoked outrage amongst many. But the recently cancelled Dutch patent was actually obtained in 2003, nearly 16 years ago. The story of how the owners of Ancientgrain BV earned recognition as the “discoverers” of skills honed and perfected for millenia in Ethiopia is a fascinating one. It could be seen as yet another case of the European corporate world swindling Africans out of their resources.

However, it is also a story of shocking incompetence and carelessness on the part of Ethiopia’s government institutions that led to Ethiopians paying dearly and surrendering, virtually unopposed, the rights to one of the hallmarks of Ethiopian tradition and cuisine.

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NL1023978C2
NETHERLANDS

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Other languages: [Dutch](#)
Inventor: [Jans Roosjen](#)

Worldwide applications
2003 - [NL](#)

Application NL1023978A events ⓘ

- 2003-07-22 • Application filed by Soil & Crop Cruise Control B V
- 2003-07-22 • Priority to NL1023978A
- 2003-07-22 • Priority to NL1023978
- 2005-01-25 • Application granted
- 2005-01-25 • Publication of NL1023978C2
- 2014-06-13 • First worldwide family litigation filed ⓘ

Info: [Non-patent citations \(5\)](#), [Legal events](#), [Similar documents](#), [Priority and Related Applications](#)

Patent NL1023978c2 pertaining to the ownership of Teff processing knowledge. Listed as its "inventor," Jans Roosjen.

The dynamic duo: Roosjen and Turkensteen

For the past decade and a half, the patent claiming outright ownership to preparation and mixing techniques for the teff grain varieties was owned by a shadowy character in 67-year-old Dutch national Jas Roosjen. Roosjen worked as a researcher at an institute for soil borne diseases before embarking on the journey that would see him stake a claim for the Ethiopian crop. There is little in the public domain on him and he has generally refrained from speaking publicly about his own endeavours. What is known is that he prefers to let his longtime partner, friend, fellow Dutch national and co-owner of Ancientgrain BV, Johannes "Hans"

Turkensteen, do all the talking for him. Turkensteen has been Roosjen's trusted accomplice for decades. Turkensteen's background in finances also made him a prime candidate for overseeing the business side of things at the company. The duo agreed that there was a potential in the Ethiopian grain, due to its gluten free low fat properties. With Roosjen as Director, the two founded Soil and Crop Improvements (S&C) in 2002 and it is under this name that the company first set foot in Ethiopia. Since 2002, the company has made numerous name changes and by 2017 had been renamed Ancientgrain BV. Despite the renaming and numerous personnel changes, Roosjen and Turkensteen have always remained at the helm of the company and appear to have made extensive efforts to conceal their tracks. They went as far as declaring bankruptcy in 2007 and closing their business, only to transfer their patent and company assets to a new company...which curiously, operated from the same address and was owned by the same individuals.



Jans Roosjen, who claims to have made teff processing discoveries is the "inventor" behind the patent



Hans Turkensteen, longtime associate and business partner of Jans Roosjen

The scope of their dealings in Ethiopia is well documented in a meaty 200+ page 2012 report “The Access and Benefit-Sharing Agreement on Teff Genetic Resources” published by Norwegian researchers Dr. Regine Andersen and Dr. Tone Winge. A highly accredited professional with dozens of peer reviewed research and articles on biodiversity, Dr. Andersen’s interest in Ethiopia hasn’t waned since 2012. She informed *Addis Standard* that she is currently in the process of authoring an article on the productivity of community seed bank initiatives in Ethiopia. While that report appears to center around a successful program, her report she worked on with Dr. Winge six years ago highlighted the manipulative tendencies of the Dutch company’s executives, in particular Hans Turkensteen, and endless blunders committed by relevant Ethiopian authorities that resulted in the decades long fiasco.

Striking a deal in Addis Abeba

It all started in 2002 when Turkensteen visited Ethiopia in search of opportunities for S&C as a company. He would present himself as a company owner interested in creating a partnership on teff research that would yield mutual benefits for both Ethiopian farmers and Dutch researchers at a university.

This isn’t entirely untrue as according to the report, S&C had indeed struck an agreement with Larenstein University in the Netherlands and had given Turkensteen their blessing prior to his departure for Ethiopia. The Larenstein University of Applied Sciences had an interest in researching potential benefits of teff farming and agreed in principle to working alongside S&C in an attempt at enhancing their understanding of what has been labeled the “supergrain.” But exactly how was S&C able to gain the endorsement of a respected Dutch academic institution?

Dr. Jan Vos, who worked at the University’s Centre for Crop Systems Analysis in Wageningen explained how they were coaxed into agreeing in principle to a collaboration with S&C.

In an interview with *Addis Standard*, the now retired Dr. Vos reiterates that there was no such talk of a patent when S&C approached Larenstein University. Quite the opposite in fact.

“Turkensteen claimed there was also something in it for Ethiopia,” Dr. Vos who retired in 2013 told *Addis Standard* in an email. “There was going to be a fund to finance activities with teff and Ethiopia and by Ethiopians.”

“Turkensteen claimed there was also something in it for Ethiopia,”

Dr. Vos

Dr. Vos said that the addition of a new crop would be welcomed by farmers and enhance what he calls crop rotation. “Longer rotations contribute, in general, to a healthier cropping system because soil borne pests and diseases build up at a slower rate or do not occur at all,” he explained.

“Their (S&C’s) story sounded convincing: setting up a teff value chain in the Netherlands would not hurt in any way the interest of Ethiopia and would be interesting for Dutch farmers. We would have new extra source of gluten free flour, providing coeliac patients with a richer diet.”

In Ethiopia, Turkensteen met with members of the government run Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization (EARO). He sold them a proposal for a joint agricultural research initiative that would see S&C obtain teff and cultivate it in the Netherlands to observe baking quality and production. S&C had a number of researchers on its payroll by then. In the end, Turkensteen came to an agreement with the EARO. All results of teff related research would be shared amongst the involved parties. The data was supposed to enhance and improve production efficiency of Ethiopian farmers. Newly developed varieties of teff at laboratories would be co-owned between researchers at both Larenstein University and S&C with royalties paid to the Ethiopian government. This led to the signing of a 2003 Memorandum of Understanding between the S&C and the EARO in Addis Abeba. Larenstein University wasn’t present during negotiations.

“To strengthen the position of Ethiopia as a leading Teff producer in commercializing the international market for Teff products,” was listed among the MoU’s stated objectives.

A number of controversial provisions in the MoU render things somewhat murky. Article 7 for instance reads “S&C shall not pass the seeds of (teff) varieties to a third party for research purposes without a written consent of EARO.” With this, it appeared that Ethiopian interests were safeguarded.

However, what it actually entailed is that the Dutch company, although prohibited from delivering the seeds to third party researchers, had nothing forbidding it from handing it to a third party for commercial purposes. The embedded wording must have been missed by Ethiopian negotiators.

Article 4.2 meanwhile states that "as long as breeder rights last, S&C has the right to use Ethiopian released varieties worldwide under the conditions of payment of property rights to EARO..." before article 6.2 states that the payment of property rights by S&C would be "up to the decision of EARO)." This appeared to have locked property rights and usage of teff in Ethiopia's favour.

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Not so, according to the report by Dr. Andersen and Dr. Winge. The Norwegian researchers explain that "up to the decision of EARO" meant that a legislative move on grain breeding property rights would have to be agreed to, something that would not happen quickly or at all because "plant breeders' rights had become a controversial political issue in Ethiopia." This paved the way for S&C gaining the right to use the obtained teff with no payments whatsoever to the EARO. It is why many believe that the MoU was nothing more than an elaborate scam designed to nab the raw material Turkensteen and Roosjen desired for their company. Despite the ambiguity of several of the provisions that virtually gifted S&C free access to Ethiopia's prized natural resource, it was signed by the EARO's then Director General Dr. Demel Teketay Fanta and given the organization's stamp of approval on April 12th 2003.

9 Approval

For Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization

Name and Signature _____

Title: _____

Dated: _____

For Larenstein University

Name and Signature _ Henk Dijk _____

Title: _ Director_of Larenstein Transfer _____

Dated: _____

For Soil & Crop Improvement

Name and Signature _ Hans Turkensteen _____

Title: _ Director _____

Dated: _ March, 26 th 2003 _____



GIVE AWAY: The first signed agreement that in many ways opened the door for the handing over of the property rights to Teff. Signatures of Dr. Demel Teketay and S&C's Hans Turkensteen certifying the agreeing to the controversial Memorandum of Understanding. Larenstein University weren't present and would sign weeks later upon hearing of the deal

Also controversial was the amount of teff requested by S&C. Most involved look back in hindsight and agree that the 1,440 kg of teff was far too much for only research purposes and should have rang alarm bells.

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After the deal was inked, the transfer of teff from Ethiopia to the Netherlands was finalized. Shortly afterwards, in July of 2003, S&C, making the most of what was little more than doublehanded trickery, applied for the infamous Dutch patent that would later render it a villain in the eyes of many. Nobody in Ethiopia was informed. The fact that it happened, perhaps a mere month after Turkensteen's return from Ethiopia clearly suggests that there was little sincerity in the intentions of the people at S&C; the end goal was profit at Ethiopia's expense. Dr. Andersen agrees.

Addis Standard contacted Dr. Andersen to get her thoughts on the agreement signed by Dr. Demel Teketay that landed S&C with a massive payload of teff for nearly nothing. Upon being asked if there had ever been a sincere attempt at etching a mutually beneficial deal between the Dutch company and Ethiopia, she answered in the negative.

"The leadership at S&C was not sincere about this (helping Ethiopians)," Dr. Andersen confirmed. "I think some of the fellows involved in S&C may have wanted to create a fair access and benefit sharing agreement."



Dr. Regine Andersen. On the news of the patent invalidation, Dr. Anderson had expressed her belief that it was a positive development but that the battle wasn't over. "The invalidation is very good, but still it is valid in several other European countries. The patent application should never have been approved, as it does not represent a novel step in terms of an invention."

In exchanges with *Addis Standard*, Dr. Andersen explained that conflict arose within the company when individuals disagreed with the direction the S&C heads were taking the company. It led to resignations. The moment it obtained the raw material, S&C started straying away from its pledges to invest in research and instead began pursuing business endeavours. Dr. Vos noticed this at the time and told *Addis Standard* that this, among other things, contributed to the University of Larenstein severing ties with Roosjen and Turkensteen.

"Things changed," said Dr. Vos. "There were stocks. To our surprise S&C informed us they were dropping Dutch teff production and were going to satisfy the demand for teff that they had created via international trade."

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"S&C had promised to pay some funds to support our research but we never received it. Despite this, Turkensteen later filed a financial justification of expenditure of funds that incorrectly mentioned us as receivers of funds." Dr. Vos added that this was the last straw. "We broke our relationship, or further ignored both Turkensteen and Roosjen."

Dishonesty was deep rooted in the S&C organization, as Turkensteen had also promised to set up a foundation to enhance Ethiopia's agricultural infrastructure and

provide funding of 20,000 Euros annually. This, among other pledges, never transpired.

The deal signed in 2003 ended up selling Ethiopia dry. Dr. Demel Teketay Fanta is today a professor of Agricultural Sciences at the University of Botswana in Gaborone. He didn't respond to emails sent to him by *Addis Standard*. The University of Botswana also failed to respond to inquiries by *Addis Standard* to get in touch with him.



Dr. Demel Teketay, who as Director General of the EARO inked the deal that paved the way for S&C siphoning off thousands of kilograms of teff for virtually nothing. It was this donation of sorts that launched teff as a business in the Netherlands (Photo: TWAS Directory)

Dr. Andersen and Dr. Winge's 2012 report states that the EARO and Dr. Demel Teketay acted alone in enacting the Memorandum of Understanding, without the knowledge of other institutions.

The deal signed in 2003
ended up selling Ethiopia dry.

But according to the proclamation that established the EARO, this couldn't be true. Article 6 of [Proclamation 79/1997](#) states that the EARO would have the power to "formulate agricultural research strategies, develop work plans and programmes and

implement when approved by the government.” According to protocol, someone higher up in government would have to have approved the controversial MoU for Dr. Demel Teketay to have signed the dotted line. Any blame therefore, would also be shared with one or more unnamed officials who were part of the ruling party in 2003.

Whatever the case, S&C proceeded to operate secretly and without informing the relevant Ethiopian authorities. They applied for patents from the European Union and several countries across the continent. Towards the end of 2003, murmurs in agricultural circles grew and the news finally reached the Ethiopian embassy in Amsterdam. By then, it should have been fairly obvious that the S&C’s Hans Turkensteen, a smooth talking Dutch businessman, had hoodwinked Ethiopian officials. The result of his charade? Jans Roosjen was now the sole uncontested proprietor of teff processing methods and was successfully marketing it while the Ethiopian farmers who toiled and supplied him with his original produce were left, on the fringes.

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with one or more unnamed officials who
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“Most Outrageous”

Hans Turkensteen and Jans Roosjen very likely thrived by remaining in obscurity. The Ethiopian government, perhaps with the 2005 elections in mind, could have likely been less than willing to publicize the disaster which would be exploited in propaganda terms by its political opponents. But the rest of the world would get a whiff of what S&C were up to when their exploits literally earned them an ironic accolade at an international awards ceremony.

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The 2016 Captain Hook Awards for Biopiracy

Poster promoting the 2016 Captain Hook Awards, which are given by the Coalition against Biopiracy organization

The Coalition against Biopiracy is an organization formed in 1995 with the objective of protecting the world's biodiversity. It strongly opposes attempts to patent biological matter, animals or plants. In an attempt to condemn violators, it launched an annual "Captain Hook awards" program, where it "awards" the year's worst perpetrators of biopiracy.



Jim Thomas (center) of the Coalition against Biopiracy spoke to *Addis Standard*

British national Jim Thomas, is a member of the Coalition against Biopiracy and an Executive Director of the Canada based ETC group, dedicated to ecology and combatting biopiracy among other causes. With decades of experience as a researcher and a campaigner lobbying for biological diversity, Thomas' passion for such causes and loathing of "biopirates" is exhibited in his appearing clad in a Captain Hook ensemble at the organization's award ceremonies. The [2004 edition](#) saw the Coalition against Biopiracy assemble at a hotel in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur to announce the "winners" of that year's awards. Among a number of winners in several categories in 2004, Soil and Crop Improvements (S&C) themselves were named the "Most Outrageous" biopirates.

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“Offering joint ownership of Ethiopian teff to the Ethiopian government is like asking Ethiopia to betray its farmers and become “equal partners” in a shameful and offensive act of biopiracy,” reads the Coalition against Biopiracy [communique](#) from 2004. The communique mentions that Hans Turkensteen told the Coalition against Biopiracy that he planned on seeking intellectual property rights, “with or without” the Ethiopian government.



Image from 2004 in Kuala Lumpur shows Jim Thomas (center) dressed as Captain Hook and colleague Alywin Darlen Arnejo (left) prior to their naming of Dutch company S&C as the “most outrageous” biopirate that year (Photo: The Star)

For S&C it was a PR disaster. When news of the Captain Hook award reached the Netherlands, officials at Larenstein University moved to disassociate itself from S&C. The award and the university’s stance left Turkensteen irate.

“The university has to stop this bullshit!” an enraged Turkensteen told the university’s [Resource](#) magazine a few weeks later. “I think the position the university has taken in supporting us is good, but I can’t appreciate that it is apparently ashamed of us and doesn’t want to be associated with us.”

The magazine had also contacted Pat Mooney of the ETC group who accused S&C of “playing games with the Ethiopian government.”

When asked what he thought of his “award,” by the same magazine in 2004, Turkensteen scoffed. “That organisation (Coalition against Biopiracy) in Canada is a

splinter group of anti-globalists,” he raved. “What we are doing is very legitimate. I think it is strange that the university is taking so much heed of the organisation.”

15 years later since announcing the award, Jim Thomas, still at the ETC group and based in Montreal, heard about the February cancellation of S&C’s Dutch patent.

“Wow,” was his initial reaction, upon hearing of the development, clearly astonished.

“This is great news,” Thomas told *Addis Standard*. “We have always had a firm stance against such practices. Civil Society branded this patent on Teff as unjust and outrageous fifteen years ago. It’s a shame it took the courts 15 years to catch up. What is needed is clear rules to prevent patents on lifeforms, including crops, in the first place.”

Thomas made it clear in his conversation with *Addis Standard* that his organization went to great lengths to warn Ethiopian government officials of the dangers of working with a company like S&C. They even invited government officials to attend the Captain Hook awards ceremony in Kuala Lumpur.

Thomas made it clear in his conversation with *Addis Standard* that his organization went to great lengths to warn Ethiopian government officials of the dangers of working with a company like S&C.

The Captain Hook awards ceremony of 2004 is when Ethiopians first became aware of the existence of S&C as a company and the fact that it held a monopoly on the trade of teff in the Netherlands. The bad publicity it garnered the company may have prompted it to make changes. Among these changes, finalizing the first of many name changes. S&C was no more and the company decided to rename itself to the name of what was initially its own subordinate, Health and Performance Food International (HPFI). Also, in the aftermath of its being slammed as a company threatening to chase after teff rights without Ethiopian government involvement, it relented on a refusal to hold discussions with Ethiopian officials in an attempt at appeasing outraged biologists and environmentalists.

By this time, the public at large was well acquainted with who Hans Turkensteen and Jans Roosjen were. There was documented evidence that their company S&C, now named HPFI, had no interest in setting up any ventures that would prove beneficial to Ethiopian farmers and that its stints in Ethiopia were motivated by little

more than greed. This greed factor provoked the ire of an international biodiversity conservation group which went as far as openly lambasting them as “most outrageous.”

By this time, it would make sense if Ethiopia sought legal measures to reclaim what belonged to the country’s farmers. After all, the Ethiopian government had been virtually cheated out of teff property rights and repeatedly lied to by Turkensteen in the process of agreeing to the controversial MoU.

By this time, it would make sense if Ethiopia sought legal measures to reclaim what belonged to the country’s farmers.

In the face of overwhelming evidence that they were dealing with dishonest individuals, the business partnership would not be ruptured. The Ethiopian government decided it was best to proceed with negotiations that would see HPFI agree to a new deal. The decision not to launch a legal battle was apparently made out of the fear that such a drastic measure would hamper trade and discourage Europeans from investing in Ethiopia.

But Dr. Andersen believes the Ethiopian government had no choice but to sit down with HPFI. When asked how she felt upon hearing that Ethiopians were still willing to do business with a company that had claimed ownership of teff in the Netherlands, she told *Addis Standard* that the government’s previous failures left them with no choice.

“The Ethiopian government did the only right thing in the situation they were in,” Dr. Andersen reiterated. “By then the genetic material had already left Ethiopia. Ethiopia had the choice between negotiation or not having any agreement at all.”

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Dr. Andersen

Parties agree to improved agreement

It was clear that the MoU deal was disastrous and did not uphold Ethiopia’s interests. Whether or not there were repercussions for those involved in the signing

of that deal isn't clear. What is clear is that the EARO would not be allowed to oversee a new deal on its own. This time, it collaborated with the Ethiopian Institute of Biodiversity and Conservation (IBC) to sign the amended April 2005 Teff Agreement. Designed as an improved deal, it stipulated Ethiopian government involvement in everything from patent rights to okaying any transfer of genetic material to a third party, researcher or not.

The new deal seemed somewhat foolproof, and was lauded as an achievement by the Ethiopian government after the fiasco of 2003. There would be no underhanded tactics and in very specific language it was rendered clear that Turkensteen and Roosjen would be unable to profit from teff or teff processing methods. There would be a research endeavour involved with the benefits to be reaped by both Ethiopian farmers and Dutch researchers. Larenstein University's involvement was promised and the Ethiopian negotiating side went as far as making sure an official from the Dutch embassy in Ethiopia signed his presence as a witness.

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and was lauded as an achievement by the
Ethiopian government after the fiasco of 2003.

Ideally, this would have been sufficient to ensure Ethiopia wouldn't remain empty handed after the blunder that saw them ship loads of teff to the Netherlands for free. However, perhaps the Ethiopian negotiating side should have taken even more precautions considering that by then it had been established that the HPFI leadership had no sincere intentions of giving back to the community they had virtually plundered in 2003. For one thing, a simple call to Larenstein University would have confirmed that despite Turkensteen's assurances, they weren't consulted about the Teff Agreement and in fact had no further desire to work with Turkensteen and Roosjen.

"After the graduation of a PhD student, our involvement (with Turkensteen and Roosjen) was reduced to zero," says Dr. Vos. "Because of the turmoil, I did not follow what happened to the teff production and trade in the Netherlands. There are retailers who sell teff, but I have no idea about the value chain."

Despite lying about the university's involvement, Turkensteen et al were still bound by an agreement that saw them make major concessions in favour of Ethiopia. But the Dutch would still get the last laugh. What followed was a well planned ruse that would void the teff deal and abdicate the Dutch company from remaining committed to its terms of agreement.

Fool me twice...

In 2007, Jans Roosjen and Hans Turkensteen founded another company, Prograin International/Ecosem. In April of that year, it announced that it was cancelling the planned research initiative in Ethiopia, citing costs. This was in violation of the 2005 agreement. In 2008, Prograin International/Ecosem appeared on the Dutch patent office's website as the new patent holder for the teff processing methods, meaning that Roosjen and Turkensteen had officially transferred the patent from their old company, to the new one they created in 2007. Then suddenly, in 2009 HPFI declared bankruptcy.

Ethiopian officials were kept in the dark. No one was notified about the founding of a new company. And it was via the grapevine that the Ethiopian government finally found out that a court in the Netherlands had authenticated HPFI's bankruptcy.

But the Dutch company's executive's actions certainly weren't those of owners on the brink of financial ruin.

Zelege Woldetensae of the IBC determined that there was no indication that the company was experiencing hardships. "They (HPFI) had been growing teff in the Netherlands, Spain and Romania, which it sold for as much as 100 euros a kilo," he told [Addis Fortune](#) in 2012.

"They (HPFI) had been growing teff in the Netherlands, Spain and Romania, which it sold for as much as 100 euros a kilo,"
Zelege Woldetensae

Zelege added that despite supplying growers with teff across four continents, HPFI cut Ethiopia out of all business endeavours. By the time of the bankruptcy declaration, Ethiopia had pocketed a measly 4,000 Euros out of the deal.

When HPFI execs claimed the company was teetering on the brink of collapse, it was actually expanding and outsourcing internationally. It even went on a media charm offensive to allay fears over the Captain Hook award.

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Haile Gebrselassie and Tigrai Online

As part of his charm offensive, Hans Turkensteen recruited one of the most well known personalities in Ethiopia, none other than long distance running legend and two-time Olympic champion Haile Gebrselassie. In a poor quality [recording](#) that was later uploaded to Hans' YouTube account, Haile is made to read a prepared statement praising Turkensteen and Roosjen's initiatives in Ethiopia and goes on about it in monotone. Lacking in his trademark vibrant enthusiasm, Haile's demeanor in the video is reminiscent of hostages in terrorist video releases coerced into reading statements criticizing their governments.

As part of his charm offensive, Hans Turkensteen recruited one of the most well known personalities in Ethiopia, none other than long distance running legend and two-time Olympic champion Haile Gebrselassie.

"One of the examples for the world," begins Haile, "is the agreement on teff. I am proud that I could help the government and the company HPFI in 2003 and 2004 to close this agreement. I certainly hope that this agreement will be followed by many others. I wish you a lot of success to implement the code."

Besides this open endorsement, it isn't clear if Haile Gebrselassie ever helped HPFI in any other shape, way or form.



Haile Gebrselassie lavishes praise on HPFI for reaching a deal with the Ethiopian government. It is unclear if Haile was sufficiently informed about the activities of HPFI's owners, Hans Turkensteen and Jans Roosjen

Also part of Turkensteen's media charm offense was getting published in Ethiopian media. He submitted a defense of his company's record and managed to get it

published on an Ethiopian outlet [Tigrai Online](#). Interestingly enough, Turkensteen writes referring to his company as "S&C" despite dropping the name, perhaps to avoid casting a spotlight on HPFI's under the table activities.

In the poorly written editorial, Turkensteen defended his applying for teff related patents. "Please understand that a company as Soil and Crop needs a patent to protect its 3 million investment program on the application of teff in modern western nutrition," Turkensteen wrote. "Through the profit of Soil and Crop the Ethiopian farmers benefit and can use their part of the profit to create a better future for themselves originating from their Teff."

In the Tigrai Online article, he promises that the company will financially back over 18,000 Ethiopian farmers in partnership with the German government. He never kept his word. It isn't clear if there had ever been contact with the German government on such a project to begin with. All that is known is that HPFI transferred its teff patent and most of its assets to the Prograin International/Ecosem company. Now, they had a monopoly over teff and no obligation to respect the terms of the 2005 Teff Agreement. With nothing to show for their efforts, save a transfer for 4,000 euros, Ethiopia was once again left empty handed and ripped off.

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Despite the supposed bankruptcy that he claims kept them from doing their part in the Teff Agreement, in 2010 Turkensteen organized a [major teff related event](#) in the town of Fromista Spain, celebrating the 1000th ton of teff cultivated in that country. High profile people including the town's mayor were present as Turkensteen presented teff related products and spoke of their endless benefits. The event had a large turnout.

"This event was a step in the right direction," he stated afterwards. "A great number of people attended and participated with a lot of enthusiasm and attention. We achieved the goal we had set for this event with 100%."

In their report on the event, Spanish business website Transfer LBC referred to Turkensteen as the "Commercial Director of Prograin International," while referring to someone named Yolanda de Prado Egiguren as being from the "Communication Department of Prograin International in Spain." This suggests that a year after the

bankruptcy declaration, Turkensteen and Roosjen's teff related business had become a well established multinational corporation, complete with staff and an office in Spain, able to entice the wealthy to attend investment seminars.



Turkensteen (far right) introducing prospective investors in Spain a variety of teff related products. "Teff is the cereal of the future," he told them. (Photo: Transfer LBC)

Jans Roosjen and Hans Turkensteen managed to outplay the Ethiopian government and successfully escape their responsibilities that were mandatory under the Teff Agreement guidelines. The self induced "bankruptcy" permitted them to continue profiting from the unchallenged monopoly they held over most teff related products. Which might leave some asking, what was the role of the Netherlands in all this? They were party to the agreement and even signed on as a witness.

Addis Standard contacted the Dutch Foreign Affairs Ministry, which in turn forwarded our message to the Dutch embassy in Ethiopia. The ambassador clarified that the government of Netherlands was merely a spectator to the signing of a questionable business deal, not an active participant and thus wasn't mandated to have a say.

"We appreciate it that Ethiopia always was aware of the legal complexities surrounding the matter," Ambassador Bengt van Loosdrecht explains.

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of the legal complexities surrounding the matter,"
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The Ambassador went on. "While private companies have the right to seek patents, other parties have a right to seek a court's decision." He appeared to express relief with the recent cancelation though, admitting that the patent was becoming

“contentious” for Dutch-Ethiopian bilateral ties. “We confirm that the court in The Hague nullified the patents on the processing of teff held by a Dutch company. We are pleased that a court has handed down a decision and clarified this business matter.”



Ambassador Bengt van Loosdrecht told *Addis Standard* that Ethiopia was aware of what it got itself into (Photo: Ethiopian News Agency)

Despite the Ethiopian government claiming that it has attempted to cancel the patent in the past, there has never been a legal initiative launched by Addis Abeba. After successfully nullifying the Teff Agreement and the clauses demanding joint cooperation over teff, Roosjen and Turkensteen cut off all contact with anyone in Ethiopia. Under the name Prograin International/Ecosem, they continued their teff related business activities and were relatively unperturbed. Sometime afterward, they underwent name changes and registered new companies until they became known as Ancientgrain BV. Under that name, they entered a legal battle with another Dutch company that saw them finally lose their precious Dutch patent last November.

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Repeated attempts at contacting the officials at Ancientgrain BV were unsuccessful. Turkensteen would not respond to phone calls which all went to voicemail. Jans Roosjen did speak with *Addis Standard* after his wife answered the phone and passed it to him. When asked how he felt about the court ordered patent

cancelation, he feigned ignorance, claiming to be oblivious to what had played out in the courts.

"This is news to me," said the self acclaimed "inventor" of teff preparation methods. "I haven't heard about this."

"Ethiopia? Speak to my associate, Hans," he sound bewildered. This gives weight to the impression most have of the two men. That Roosjen is a less than knowledgeable, underling of sorts to a far more manipulative and business savvy Turkensteen, who calls the shots in their business relationship. "He can tell you what you want to know. I have nothing to tell you."



Roosjen (right) at an awards ceremony for contributions to his community in 2016. In a recent phone call with *Addis Standard*, the former Dutch patent holder for teff processing was unwilling to discuss his recent courtroom defeats

Despite his claiming to know nothing about the news, it appears that Roosjen not only knows about the news but has even taken action that could possibly shield him from a possible Ethiopian legal counterattack. The Dutch national Chamber of Commerce website has a list of the company's documented legal maneuvers, available to the public for a small fee. *Addis Standard* have accessed some of these files.

Houdini Act II?

On December 7th, the official Dutch court ruling made in November was published on the Supreme Court's website. *Addis Standard* has discovered that on the exact same day, Jans Roosjen and Hans Turkensteen submitted registration documents for a new company to the Dutch national registrar. Five days later, the new company was registered and officially founded. The company is named "Healthy Grains BV," and is registered to a residence in the rural town of Hooghalen, some 170 kilometers northeast of Amsterdam. The officially given address, a house near an intersection that splits the rural Hooghalen greenery, happens to be the same one that AncientGrain BV is listed at. The Dutch Chamber of Commerce lists the

property at the location as being one owned or in use by Turkensteen since at least 1996. On December 12th, Roosjen and Turkensteen were both named directors of Healthy Grains BV, extending their partnership into a seventh or eighth company name.

Why have the notorious duo suddenly decided to open a new company? It isn't clear. Indications point to a decision being made to ditch the name due to AncientGrain BV's recent bad press and making headlines for the wrong reasons. Perhaps it could be part of another deceitful maneuver that will have them transfer assets to the new company and file for bankruptcy under AncientGrain BV in an attempt at avoiding or at least stalling the paying of the hefty 130,725.22 euros compensation package to Bakels as ordered by a Dutch court. If so, Turkensteen would be running out of trump cards. It is highly unlikely that the same trick that got them out of the 2005 Teff Agreement in Addis Abeba, will get them out of a 2018 court ruling in The Hague.

The Dutch conmen, who took advantage of a lack of awareness in Ethiopia to launch their own teff mini empire, appear willing to fight for their remaining patents to the bitter end. A refusal to concede that they were in the wrong for attempting to patent indigenous Ethiopian traditions suggests this. In an August 2018 [interview](#) with Dutch journalist Jonathan Witteman, Roosjen was unapologetic and called the Ethiopian uproar about his then valid Dutch patent "absurd." An umpteenth name change that has them in charge of a "new" company in Healthy Grains BV, further confirms that old habits do die hard.



Harvesting teff in Ethiopia (Photo: The Perennial Plate)

Multinational corporations from the developed world gazing lustfully at third world based traditional and indigenous cultural food, flora and fauna, isn't a new phenomenon. The story of the outrage provoked by American food company RiceTec obtaining a patent for a breed of India's Basmati rice, is recalled by many. However, the endless blunders and mishaps that led to a Dutch company

monopolizing the teff market should be documented and analyzed to prevent cultural appropriation and theft of resources being carried out under the guise of trade. In this regard, the Ethiopian public has its own leaders, officials and institutions to point a finger of blame at. Despite the tragic nature of all it encompassed, the story of a company in rural Netherlands claiming ownership of one of rural Ethiopia's greatest treasures, is a fascinating tale of wool being pulled over an entire nation's eyes.

It isn't clear if the jostling for the gluten free supergrain will rage on. Addis Abeba had declared its intention to tackle existing patents in Austria, Italy and elsewhere, but eight months later it has nothing to show for it. They'd have quite the task on hand if they decide to act. After all, if the last 16 years are anything to go by, the villains in the script may have a trick or two more up their sleeves. There may be yet another plot twist in the battle for teff.

END