

Competing orders and conflicts at the margins of the State: Inter-group conflicts along the Ethiopia-Kenya border

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Abstract

In this paper, the interplay between various competing orders among three ethnic groups on the margins of the Ethiopian state that have overlapping presence along the Ethiopia-Kenya border is analysed. The paper probes into complex and intertwined causes of inter-group conflicts by going beyond the commonly asserted resource scarcity and ethnicity assumptions, arguing that any attempt to establish sustainable peace becomes futile without assessing inter-group conflict within a context including historical, environmental, political, economic, cultural and institutional dimensions. The paper also conceptualises the state as an active player in inter-group relations, as it plays a fundamental role in instigating and/or resolving conflicts based on its political, economic and

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strategic interests. Taking the case of inter-group conflicts among three groups inhabiting border areas along southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, and by employing actor-oriented perspectives, the paper argues that the involvement of competing interests and claims on the side of the Ethiopian state, local communities and individuals, both in the instigation of conflicts and peacebuilding processes further complicates the situation. It concludes that inter-group conflict and attempts at peacebuilding in the region are to a large extent influenced by national political dynamics, changes in traditional institutions and cross-border relations.

Keywords: Inter-group conflict, peacebuilding, competing orders, Ethiopia-Kenya border.

Introduction

Inter-group conflicts in pastoralist and agro-pastoralist regions of eastern Africa have increasingly become the defining features of the region, causing major humanitarian, security and political challenges to states and local communities. In this regard, the southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya pastoral frontiers are typical examples of areas where conflict has become recurrent with a convergence of complex and multi-layered actors and causes (Bassi 2010; Oba 2013). Although there is no major divergence on the consequences of such conflicts in terms of humanitarian crisis, political instability and economic impacts, there is no consensus among researchers and policy makers on the causes of conflicts and the actors involved, as well as on peacebuilding processes.

Ascribing inter-group conflicts in post-colonial Africa to ethnicity and resource scarcity is the dominant feature of literature on conflict studies, political science and international relations (Dunn 2001; Zeleza 2008). The resource scarcity theory was built on positivist epistemological thinking and posits that there is paucity of natural resources and an irrational competition among people to gain maximum access. This continues to be a predominant discourse in conflict studies of pastoral and agro-pastoral regions in developing countries (Hagmann 2005:3).

In fact, from a rational choice theory and entitlement perspectives, pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities' exertion of different strategies in utilising common resources can be interpreted as a systematic and rational approach for human-environment interactions (Bogale and Korf 2007:746). Likewise, some scholars (and the western media) try to attribute conflict in Africa to primordial and instrumentalist notions of ethnicity (Dunn 2001:51). Invariably, ethnicity and resource competition are interconnected factors; with ethnic identity – a socially constructed phenomenon – influencing people's perceptions about their rivals while scarcity of resources at their disposal eventually instigates conflict between ethnic groups (Azarya 2003). These theses will be analysed in detail later in this paper.

In contrast, there are emerging scholarly works that question these perspectives, arguing that while ethnicity and resource scarcity are salient factors in inter-group conflict, a comprehensive understanding of such conflicts demands an in-depth analysis of the complex interplay between actors, interests and strategies. This is because, for ethnicity and resources to cause conflict, there would be an actor or force that mobilises people and changes their perception on their identity vis-à-vis others, resource availability, ownership, utilisation right and governance. Hence, it is the volatility of ethnicity that can be activated by ethnic entrepreneurs for different purposes, and the activation of people's perceptions of their resources that both act as potent forces in reactivating past inter-ethnic antagonisms (Hagmann 2005; Regassa 2010, 2012a).

This paper argues that inter-group conflicts in Africa, including the recurrent conflicts on the margins of the Ethiopian state along the Ethiopia-Kenya border are caused by a complex interplay of factors and the involvement of actors, and should not be just reduced to ethnicity and resource scarcity. Preconceived assumptions about ethnicity and resource scarcity as the predominant causes of inter-group conflicts are regarded as too reductionist, and as a too simplistic starting point for

planning peacebuilding mechanisms. Moreover, the presence of competing institutions with different approaches to conflict resolution further complicates the situation.

The paper also addresses the complexity of conflict factors and actors in inter-group conflicts and the predicament of peacebuilding in such regions. This is done through the analysis of the notion of competing orders. This refers to contradictions in conflict research involving epistemological perspectives, multi-layered actors and institutions. The Ethiopia-Kenya borderland is an interesting scene because it is a frontier where three ethnic groups – Borana, Gabra and Garri – transcend national boundaries both in terms of settlement and of kinship relationships. Moreover, the border town of Moyale, on the Ethiopian side, is contested between different actors ranging from local rival groups to regional states and the federal government. This paper considers the state as an active agent in instigating conflicts, and also a self-proclaimed negotiator based on its political, geopolitical and economic interests. That is why understanding conflict and peacebuilding processes in such a context demands a more nuanced contextual analysis of the complex interplay of actors, institutions, historical narratives, local and national political dynamics, and cross-border relations.

Data for this paper was collected through intensive fieldwork conducted from July to December 2015 in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. However, this paper does not claim to dwell on cross-border conflicts. Rather, it focuses on conflicts on the Ethiopian side of the border but integrates data from northern Kenya for information on mobilisation of kin groups across the national border during conflict and conflict resolution. While in-depth interviews and focused group discussions were used as methods of data collection, grounded theory was used during the data generation, categorisation and analysis process because as Emerson and others (2010) argue, it enables us to create categories and assemble concepts. The subjects involved in this research are members of traditional

institutions, local elders, local government officials, cross-border traders and members of local communities from the three groups (Borana, Gabra and Garri).

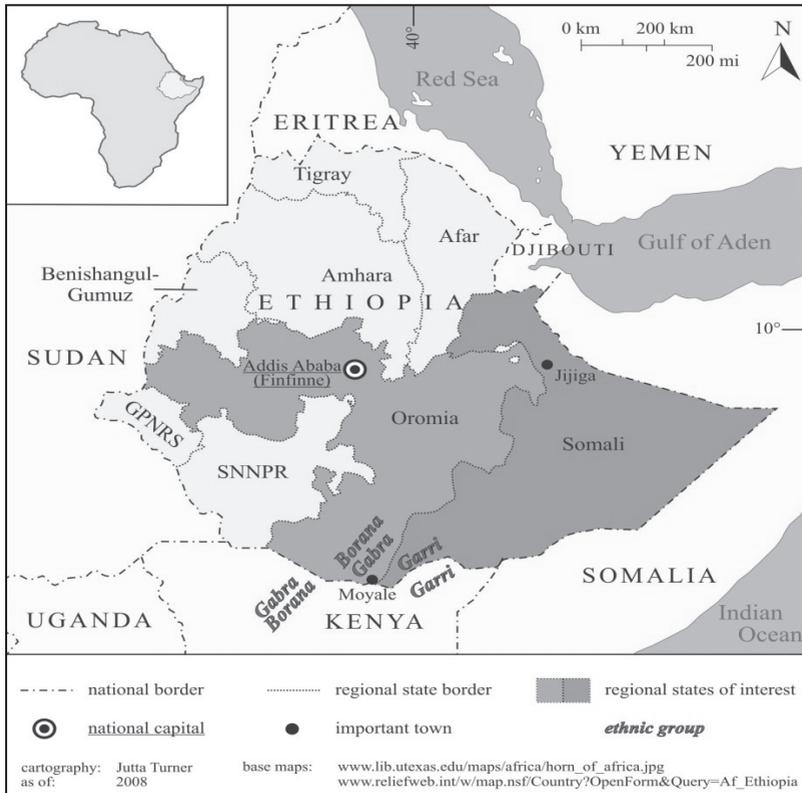
The paper is divided into three sections. The section that follows presents the context of the study, arguing that the contested frontier should be discussed in the light of historical, geographical and political contexts. In the second section, competing orders and narratives related to pastoralist conflicts are critically evaluated, deconstructing the notions of ethnicity and resource scarcity and discussing the state as an active player in conflict and in peacebuilding. In the third section, by identifying key actors and causes in the conflict, the paper analyses challenges to building sustainable peace in the region. The last section gives a brief conclusion.

Producing the context

The study area straddles both sides of the Ethiopia-Kenya border and provides unique features containing not only diverse ethnic groups and identities but also overlapping cultural repertoires transcending the geographical boundaries of two countries. On the Ethiopian side, the Borana, Gabra and Garri live side by side though their territorial possessions have been fluid across time (Oba 2013:215–216). The Gabra and Borana speak the Oromo language and are among the groups making up the broader Oromo nation. According to the post-1991 political and administrative reordering of Ethiopia along ethno-linguistic lines, the two groups form the Borana zone in the Oromia national regional state (Adugna 2009). The Garri, however, are part of the Somali clans who have progressively been expanding to Borana land since early 20th century (Bassi 2010:228) and currently live in the Somali national regional state as well as in the Borana zone. These three groups also live on the Kenyan side of the border in counties such as Moyale, Marssabet, Isiolo and Sololo.

In terms of livelihood engagements, all of these groups are pastoralists and thus rangeland, water wells and customary institutions regulating interpersonal and societal relations, human-environment interactions and rangeland management remained crucial among all of them (Tache and

Oba 2009; Bassi 2010). In the past, these communities shared resources and resolved conflicts through customary institutions where inter-group and trans-boundary relations were carefully negotiated on the basis of local customs, traditions and reciprocity embedded in their culture, institutions and rituals.



Source: Adugna 2009, with permission.

According to Adugna (2009), rather than being a constraint to inter-group interactions, national borders serve as economic, political and cultural resources for kin groups across different sides of the Ethiopia-Kenya border during conflict, conflict resolution and political mobilisation, and at times of drought and other forms of natural or human induced crisis. Conversely,

the strategic geopolitical and economic importance of the border between the two countries made it one of the contested spaces among many actors including the federal state, Oromia national regional state, Somali national regional state, the three groups, and settlers who are engaged mainly in informal cross-border trade.

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This region has already been a serious test to Ethiopia's ethnic federalism due to frequent outbreaks of inter-ethnic and inter-group conflicts that required intervention by the federal government – as was evident in the call for a referendum in Oromia and Somali national regional states in 2004 (Tache and Oba 2009; Bassi 2010). Beginning from the early 1990s, the Borana-Somali conflict on the Ethiopian side of the border claimed the lives of many people, and led to cattle rustling, displacement of people and destruction of property (Abbink 1997; Clapham 2002). Because of

territorial claims involving many villages in some districts of the Borana zone and Somali region, the federal government arranged a referendum in 2004 on the arguable principle of minimum majority (i.e. 50% plus one) – leaving out substantive issues relating to historical, cultural and economic variables that the competing groups brought forward (Bassi 2010:235).

For example, in May and June 2015, conflict erupted between the Gabra and Garri over territorial claims as a result of the Somali's establishment of a new village under the Liban zone but crossing into the Borana territory that the Gabra use for grazing. Although there was no historical evidence showing Garri's territorial possession of and settlement in the currently contested village, the group, backed by the federal government in Addis Ababa, has continuously been expanding into Borana land. The federal police force intervened and temporarily stopped the conflict, but the situation seems to be waiting for just another igniting factor in the future. According to a Gabra elder from the contested village called Laga Suree, the conflict is purely a result of the Somali's territorial expansion on the one hand and the Borana zone's lack of autonomy to defend its territory on the other hand:

In the past, the three groups lived together, sharing resources without any problem. But now, after this issue of kilil [region] came, those in kilil 5 [Somalis] are continuously expanding to our land, taking portions of villages and establishing their own new villages. All these villages over there were our land. The Garri people came to this place very recently. They were supported by the government and took our land. Whenever we appeal to the Borana zone and Oromia region, they say it is beyond their authority pointing out that the federal government handles such issues. But the federal government does not respond (Anonymous informant, Laga Suree village, August 2015).

What is striking about inter-ethnic conflict in the region is the ease with which the conflict escalates across the border because of strong cross-border cultural, identity and economic ties between kin groups on both

sides of the border. In 2012 for example, conflict erupted between Borana and Gabra in Marssabit county of Kenya mainly due to contested claims and competition among local politicians following the constitutional devolution in the country. As a result, nearly 20 000 people crossed the border into Ethiopia while dozens lost their lives (Oromia Times 2012). Although the Borana and Gabra coexist in relative harmony in Ethiopia, the conflict on the Kenyan side of the border affected the level of trust and coexistence between those in Ethiopia as well. As informants from both groups in Moyale district in Ethiopia affirmed, members of the two groups crossed the border into Kenya to fight on the side of their kin during the conflict, which directly affected inter-group relations at home (in Ethiopia).

Competing narratives about pastoralist conflicts

Understanding competing epistemological contradictions in conflict research and situating discussions on peacebuilding within complex power relations between various actors gives us the insight to move beyond deterministic and reductionist approaches that tend to treat inter-group conflicts as driven by resource scarcity and ethnicity. By interjecting empirical data from the field, three epistemological flaws in the debate on inter-group conflicts among the three communities have readily been exposed and analysed. First, this paper deconstructs the epistemological basis for the direct correlation of resource scarcity and conflict, and argues for multi-dimensional interpretations of conflicts. Second, it scrutinises the ‘ethnicity’ factor because ethnicity as a social relation by itself is not a cause of conflict. Rather, it can be a potent force used in the mobilisation of ethnic groups (Regassa 2010:100). Third, when situated within the centre-periphery debate, literature on inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia rarely consider the state as an important actor in the conflict at local levels. An understanding of these three perspectives is capable of aiding a better comprehension of the conflict dynamics and peacebuilding processes. Indeed, the aim of this paper is to consider the state, pursuing its own interests, as a flexible actor both in conflict as well as in peacebuilding.

Built on the conventional positivist approach in investigating cause-effect relations between resource scarcity and inter-group conflicts, early works on conflict studies attributed local tensions, clashes, violence and war in developing countries to competition over resources (Homer-Dixon 1994). According to this notion, resource scarcity linked to climate change and population pressure constitutes the fundamental cause of conflict in developing countries, including Africa (Homer-Dixon 1994; Zeleza 2008). Homer-Dixon (1994:24) further connects inter-group conflict to resource competition because the control of natural resources would give the conflicting actors the leverage to influence political and economic situations in the contested areas. Likewise, Azarya (2003:3) asserts, 'We regard conflict as endemic, a natural order of things as long as scarcity of resources exists'. This argument further reiterates that as long as scarcity is acute with critical consequences to resource users, conflict becomes inevitable and difficult to manage.

Such an assertion is, however, too reductionist and flawed. Firstly, it reduces complex causes of inter-group conflicts to resource scarcity, thereby trivialising the local people's ability and skill in negotiating and adapting to changing environmental conditions. Secondly, it is based on simplistic cause-effect relationships without probing into how local processes are influenced by extra-local forces, phenomena and actors (Hagmann 2005; Tache and Oba 2009). Moreover, the assumption detaches the biophysical environment from the cultural environment and thus constrains us from understanding how 'conflicts are emerging and developing on the basis of the meaning and interpretation people involved attach to actions and events' (Hagmann 2005:19). Such a deterministic notion of population growth, resource scarcity and social strife also does not indicate empirical reality, particularly in pastoralist parts of the study area. The fact that Ethiopia's pastoralist regions, including those along the Ethiopia-Kenya border, are sparsely populated and have a very low population growth rate, but do experience recurrent conflicts refutes the association of conflict with population growth. In addition, in the past the groups managed

and regulated their rangeland through traditional customary institutions within the context of scarcities (Legesse 1973; Bassi 2010). Therefore, the assumption does not have strong empirical ground because the people maintained peace even under circumstances of resource scarcity in the past.

The second major gap in the literature on inter-ethnic conflicts in Africa is related to the fixation on ethnicity as a key trigger of conflict. Influenced by western academia and the media, particularly after the early 1990s in the context of major inter-ethnic conflicts and wars in different parts of Africa, some scholars consider both the primordialist and instrumentalist notions of ethnic identification as major triggering factors for inter-ethnic conflicts (Azarya 2003). However, such fixation on the binary perspectives related to resource greed and ethnicity has actually made it difficult to understand discursive aspects of conflict in which different actors with various levels of power relations, interest and network are visibly or invisibly involved (Dunn 2001:51).

In the context of Ethiopia as well, many scholarly works emphasise the ethnicity factor for post-1991 inter-ethnic conflicts in the country, arguing that ethnic federalism has reactivated dichotomies and antagonisms, and administrative and resource boundaries have taken ethnic dimensions (Abbink 1997; Schlee 2003; Berisso 2009). While this argument is valid, its fundamental weakness is its assumption of conflict as a direct result of ethnicity without probing into the complex factors behind it. However, according to previous empirical studies regarding conflicts between the Guji and Gedeo, and between the Guji and Burji in southern Ethiopia, for instance, ethnicity was not a cause of the conflicts in both cases; but ethnic dichotomies were reactivated for mobilisation of the society during the conflicts (Regassa 2012a, 2012b). That is why understanding the national political discourse, local inter-ethnic relations and the role of actors in the conflict is imperative to gaining comprehensive insights into inter-ethnic conflicts and to pursuing peacebuilding processes that address the issues at stake.

This perspective was emphasised by a key informant from the Gabra community in Moyale district of Ethiopia who associates inter-group conflicts with what he considers ‘people in the politics’ rather than ethnicity. According to the informant, government authorities have been working on polarisation of ethnic differences rather than building on historical and cultural commonalities.

The third fundamental point that limits the understanding of inter-ethnic conflicts, particularly in pastoralist areas, is the failure to recognise the state as an active actor in conflict, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. From an actor-oriented perspective, Bryant and Bailey (1997) and Long (2001) argue for positioning the state as an active actor in development intervention, environmental degradation and conflict. As a rejoinder to the environmental scarcity-conflict hypothesis, Peluso and Watts (2001:7) argue for the deconstruction of any consideration that the state is a neutral mediator in inter-ethnic conflicts because economic and political interests of government authorities complicate conflicts and make conflict resolution and peacebuilding difficult. Further, from the political ecology perspective, Robbins (2012) brings up issues of power and discourse, and how major actors including the state play active and invisible games to control environmental resources, territories and spaces, thereby exacerbating conflict.

In the case of Ethiopia, apart from reconfiguring administrative structures along ethno-linguistic lines, the post-1991 experiment with ethnic federalism has redefined traditional resource utilisation and management strategies in pastoralist regions along ethnic-based territorialisation. This is in contradiction with the pastoralists’ customary regulations and rangeland management strategies (Tache and Oba 2009:422). By redefining physical boundaries and activating ethnic boundaries, the formal institutionalisation of ethnicity as a mobilising force brought latent elements of dichotomies and antagonisms between former friends, while sometimes bringing former enemies together in alliance (Berisso 2009). Moreover, the empirical data from the Borana, Gabra and Garri communities showed the federal government’s partiality in the management of inter-group

relations. According to interviewed Borana elders from Moyale district, the federal government considers them as its enemies because the Garri and sometimes the Garba give false information alleging the Borana youth to be members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). As a result, the federal government sides with the Somalis as a mechanism of punishing the Borana. A key informant from the Garri community in Moyale town also indirectly confirmed the Borana elders' complaint against government's lack of impartiality, stating that the Borana shelter the rebel group and that it would not be possible to ensure peace in the region unless they stop sympathising with what the elders call the *shifta* (rebels).

These sentiments echo the concern that the federal government has, since the withdrawal of the OLF from the transitional government in 1992, been very cautious in dealing with the Oromos (Clapham 2002). In other words, the fact that the OLF and the Borana belong to the broader Oromo nation has put the Borana at a disadvantage in their relations with the federal government. They have, in significant ways, become victims of the national political dynamics – being sidelined by the federal government on questions of territorial rights and access to customary resources. Therefore, the state remains the central actor in igniting inter-ethnic tensions, using its power for systematic control of the society.

Multiple actors, causes and the predicaments of peacebuilding in the region

In terms of categorising actors, the state (still heterogeneous and with varying degrees of interest), traditional institutions, local communities, NGOs, and other individuals engaged in cattle rustling and theft, and smugglers were found to be the major actors in the conflict. All these actors subscribe to different perspectives of causes and claims of entitlement and advance various understandings of peace. While the state and local communities practise conflict resolution initiatives using their own approaches, various NGOs try to play the role of bridging the state-society rift and at times try to bring the two together. Beyond the resource scarcity thesis, therefore, this paper found multiple causes of the conflict, broadly

categorised into political, economic, cultural, geographical and identity issues. These two aspects of the conflict – multiple actors and multiple causes – together complicate the peacebuilding process and exacerbate conflicts, and will thus be analysed below.

The duality of the Ethiopian State in the conflict

Beginning from the colonial period, both the British and Ethiopian imperial rulers had competing geopolitical and economic interests in the wider Horn of Africa that made pastoral communities victims of predatory state systems for much of the colonial era, and after (Schlee 2003; Oba 2013). This is because of the states' extractive approaches of resource exploitation and due to the dominant notions of denigrating pastoralist modes of livelihood as backward (Behnke and Kerven 2013). On the Ethiopian side, pastoralist groups have long been considered as security threats to successive regimes in the country because of their cross-border relations, their inhabiting of peripheral regions which the state considers as ungoverned, and their easy access to firearms (Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008).

The state is, of course not monolithic. If anything, it maintains a variety of interests, and institutions, and is constituted of individuals who subscribe to different values, cultures, religions, gender perspectives and so on. As Migdal (2001) argues in his notions of entanglement of state in society, the conventional perspective considering the state as constitutive of uniform perspectives and interests is misleading. Similarly, Long (2001) clearly explains cases where different state institutions advance different interests. The state is constitutive of internally heterogeneous entities that one way or another compete, contest, negotiate and come to terms based on interests, power relations, agencies and networks within and beyond its heterogeneous structures and individuals (Bryant and Bailey 1997; Long 2001). In this regard, the Ethiopian state could be seen from three different levels in the context of this study: as the federal state, the Oromia national regional state, and the Somali national regional state.

Before interrogating the roles of the state in conflict and conflict resolution in the region, it is important to briefly discuss the historical roots of contradictory competing orders between the Ethiopian state at the centre and its peripheries. The centre-periphery relation echoes how contrasting worldviews are produced, institutionalised and communicated (Donham 2002; Markakis 2011). Following the imperial conquest that created the modern Ethiopian empire in the late 19th century, the narrative of depicting culturally, religiously, economically, and politically distinct peripheries as backward, violent, wasteland, empty and untamed resources became a dominant marker of state-society relations (Markakis 2011:30). Such denigration of peripheries reminds us of what Das and Poole (2004:19–20) opined on how the state uses different technologies of power to ‘manage’ and ‘pacify’ subjects on its margins considered as unruly and violent. Through disciplinary and coercive power, successive regimes in the country tried to pacify, manage, govern and bring the subjects on the margins of the state from the ‘state of nature’ to the ‘state of law’ (Korf et al. 2015:886).

While discussing the federal state and its interests, it is important to distinguish between ontological contradictions and geopolitical interests, both of which complicate local inter-ethnic relations and efforts at peacebuilding in the region. Ontologically, for the federal government that inherited the dominant and salient cultural and political identities of the centre, governing and subjugating the people in its margins is considered as a civilising mission. As a result, it resorts to implementing coercive administrative apparatus to incorporate them into the administrative, cultural, economic and political logic of the mainstream society.

Conversely, local communities consider peacebuilding as a holistic process in which human-human interaction as well as human-nature relationships are governed by cultural values, customs and belief, rather than regulated through top-down state administration. Moreover, the government’s ethnic-based federal arrangement has been blind to traditional resource regulations, coexistence and reciprocity between pastoral communities.

It rather disrupted the system by activating territorialisation of space, an act contrary to customary resource governance, utilisation and ownership rights (Tache and Oba 2009).

Politically, the federal state seems to have been playing a strategy of decentring conflict and reserving the role of mediator for itself, which gives it the leverage to exercise authoritative power. A member of *Caffee Oromia* council – a regional state’s legislative house – powerfully reflected on the federal government’s strategy of playing the Garri and the Borana against one another:

The Garri came to this land during the last years of the imperial regime. Some of them came during the military period but the majority were brought by the current government and resettled on Borana land in 1990s. Some came during the referendum in 2004 to add votes for their Garri kin. You know what? This Moyale town is located at border between Kenya and Ethiopia; and on border between Oromia and Somali regions. I guess the government wants to keep this town under its control or at least wants to keep it under the control of two competing groups – the two regions. It doesn’t trust Oromia because of the OLF, and it doesn’t trust the Somali because of the Al-Shabab and also other rebel groups on their side. It is an economically important town. All commodities enter via this border from Ethiopia to Kenya and vice versa (Anonymous MP, Moyale town, August 2015).

The above statement hints at the federal government’s strategy of decentring conflict from the centre, co-opting some groups and weakening others. It follows the strategy of strengthening the weak and weakening the strong so as to maintain a local power balance. Likewise, scholars have also documented how the OLF factor at the Ethiopia-Kenya border has influenced the government’s administrative approaches at the frontier, particularly in sidelining the Borana Oromo’s claims to customary land rights and conversely favouring the Somali’s eventual expansion to the Borana land over the last two decades (Tache and Oba 2009; Adugna 2009;

Bassi 2010). It is in this context that ethnicity is played out and past inter-ethnic animosities are reactivated in the process of serving the state's political and security interests.

The Borana zone in general and the Moyale district in particular are important in geopolitical and economic terms for the government in Addis Ababa especially because of its strategic location on the border with Kenya, along the main highway from Addis Ababa to Nairobi. An indication of the strategic importance of the area is evident in the establishment of a military radar station on the outskirts of Moyale town, which helps the regime to monitor liberation movements in the borderlands. Economically, the new plan to link the South Sudan-Kenya-Ethiopia pipeline through the town of Moyale would make it a major border business hub in the country. That is why, according to local sources, the federal government does not resolve land claims between the Borana and Somali over the town of Moyale. The two regional states also play the OLF factor for different purposes. While Oromia national regional state uses the OLF factor as instrument for suppressing dissent, the Somali national regional state has systematically exploited the national discourse that labels the Borana as sympathisers of the OLF in its claim for Borana land as it did during the 2004 referendum (Tache and Oba 2009; Adugna 2009; Bassi 2010). As a result, the conflict and peacebuilding process in the region has become much more complicated.

Traditional institutions and their co-optation

While the conflict can be traced to historical and political dynamics at the national level (Oba 2013), it is important to examine how traditional institutions of conflict resolution and peacebuilding were eventually reduced and/or how they contributed to the exacerbation of the conflict. The Borana and the Gabra are the groups with an egalitarian and democratic system of socio-cultural and political organisation called the *Gadaa* system, which enabled them to sustainably manage their rangeland, coexist with other groups and maintain social cohesion within their community

(Legesse 1973, 2000; Bassi 2005, 2010). The *Gadaa* system served as a strong institutional basis of inter-group coexistence between these groups and their neighbours, most of whom shared similar forms of socio-political organisation. Although the Garri do not subscribe to the *Gadaa* system of administration, clan elders played significant roles in conflict resolution within the group and between them and their neighbours (Schlee 2013). However, since the last few decades, these traditional institutions have taken ethnic lines in creating dichotomies rather than playing the negotiator role, building on common values and practices. The political background for the divergence of traditional institutions from the role of negotiating for social harmony to that of igniting inter-group animosity and differences is closely connected to the post-1991 political order in the country and is discussed below.

The post-1991 regime in Ethiopia is strongly engaged in a 're-traditionalisation' process through which it ambivalently 'empowers' traditional institutions and at the same time co-opts them into official administrative structures (Regassa and Zeleke 2014:49–50). The government resorted to appropriating indigenous institutions and co-opting local leaders as instruments of broadcasting state authority and ideology to the society via these channels. In the case of the Gabra and Borana, for example, local elders from both groups asserted the co-optation of *Gadaa* leaders (*Abba Gadaa*) into the government system, citing instances of these traditional leaders being invited to attend government meetings and receiving orders from the officials to convince the community to implement government policies and programs. A Borana elder from Dirre district commented as follows:

In the past, *Gadaa* elders governed the people according to *Gadaa* rules and norms. Now, they serve only as mouthpieces of the government. They travel to Addis Ababa or Adama, stay in big hotels, are paid per diem, stay with big politicians and when they come back to the people, they become completely like the government officials. They don't perform according to traditional ways of governance. They talk the same way as

the government authorities talk their politics. These Gadaa elders seem to have forgotten the fundamental values and principles of the Gadaa system (Anonymous elder, Dirre, July 2015).

In line with the above claim, it is important to discern why and how the government co-opts traditional institutions and their leaders. During my fieldwork, I witnessed the entanglement of the state and these traditional institutions, with the former frequently inviting leaders of the *Gadaa* system for ceremonial blessings of public gatherings and festivals but without any meaningful engagement. During conflict resolution practices, for example, the government officials decide on how things should be handled and hand it over to the traditional leaders only to practise the rituals (Regassa 2012b). The government considers the *Gadaa* elders and other traditional institutions as competitive threats to its legitimacy and authority. As a result, it does not empower them to the extent where they could autonomously deal with important issues like inter-ethnic conflicts.

In connection with government's appropriation of traditional institutions and its co-option of traditional leaders, it is important to discuss how this challenges peacebuilding processes. This can be explained in terms of the detachment of traditional values, norms and wisdom enhancing social harmony, reciprocity and coexistence from practices of conflict resolution. According to local informants from the three groups, ethnicity and local politics have changed the perspectives of traditional authorities from that of sharing common values and resources to creating dichotomies and asserting territoriality. As a result, these traditional leaders and their institutions have lost social legitimacy within the society. According to a Gabra elder:

In the past, Abba Gadaa lived with the society, respected the culture and norms and acted accordingly. Now, the Abba Gadaas, both from Gabra and Borana became politicians. They stay with politicians and now forgot what our society had in common with others. The same is true for Garri local elders. Their clan elders are more or less political appointees. They incline to ethnic loyalty rather than working for broader inter-group harmony and

coexistence. How can you expect peace between different groups in such situation? Politicians talk about difference than similarities. The same is true for these traditional leaders (Gabra elder, Moyale district, July 2015).

Borana informants share this view as well; and they opined that the fundamental problem militating against ending conflict and ensuring sustainable conflict resolution and peace formation is the decline in values embedded in the *Gadaa* system following the government's co-option of the institution and its leaders.

Local communities and their contestations

Ongoing conflicts between the Garri and Borana cannot be understood without tracing the historical processes of Somali expansion to Borana land and how political dynamics at the national level have continuously shaped their relationship. While the three groups had locally well-defined and mutually recognised territories even before colonial conquest in Kenya and Ethiopia, territories and resources within them were flexibly negotiated on the basis of customary institutions and forms of reciprocity (Bassi 2010). However, by systematically creating allegiance to the British colonial rulers in northern Kenya and the Ethiopian imperial regime, the Garri successfully pushed the Borana further west, claiming pasture and water grounds in the Dirre and Dillo districts. Although the Garri's alignment to the Somalia irredentist group during the 1977/78 Ethio-Somalia war had temporarily made them subject to the military regime's punitive actions, the post-1991 political change has shifted the game once again in favour of the Garri in their territorial claims of Borana land.

Conversely, the districts Moyale, Dirre and Liban where the Garri partly inhabit had historical, cultural and economic significances for the Borana Oromo because it was where Borana ancestors lived, practised rituals, grazed their livestock and dug deep wells for their livestock. These districts were among the best rangelands in the Borana zone, and the Garri and Gabra from both Ethiopia and Kenya got unrestricted access to its resources in the past through mutual negotiations (Oba 2013). For the three groups,

the connection between space, identity and resource, following the ethnic based federal arrangement, has become more contentious. As people whose culture is physically constituted and intertwined with their livelihood practices, access to a certain territory or lack of it hints at issues of identity, territoriality and culture, and this goes beyond existential livelihood concerns.

From the Garri's perspective too, the territorial claim has historical and economic (resource) reasons. The districts mentioned earlier where the Garri recently gained control are among the best rangelands compared to the arid and fragile districts in the eastern part of Somali national regional state. They trace their settlement in the Borana land to past historical phenomena for which the current generation would not be accounted. The Gabra on their part also have some claims of entitlement and concerns of being unequally treated under the Borana zone on the one hand and pushed by the Somalis on the other. According to Gabra elders, their numerical minority and their settlement between the Somalis and the Borana have put them on the disadvantageous side whenever conflicts arise between them and their neighbours. It is such conflicting claims of entitlement with historical, cultural, identity and economic attachments that instigate inter-group conflicts in the region. Therefore, territorialisation of pastoral frontiers into ethnically demarcated boundaries has changed the perception of people about resource, its utilisation and ownership vis-à-vis their rival 'others'. This makes the perceived or real condition of scarcity a potent rallying point for conflict although resource scarcity per se is not the underlying cause of conflict.

As part of local communities, but more specifically at the level of individual actors, the role of ethnic entrepreneurs – state representatives, smugglers and cattle raiders – in complicating conflict situations in the region should not be underestimated. As Migdal (2001) noted, we cannot plainly discern between the state and society as both are entangled into one another, and thus the state operates its agenda through its local agents who play double subjectivities. These individuals resort to ethnic repertoires to mobilise members of their group to their interest, usually for individual benefits and

at times to serve the interests of the state. In the local political landscape, there is an evident rift within the Borana and Gabra. During elections, local politicians emphasise the apparent differences between the groups, thus using society forces to mask their pursuit of private political interests.

From an economic dimension, the border town of Moyale is a hotspot and major hub for cross-border illegal and informal trade. In fact, this statement alludes to a wider perspective on the nature of borders in Africa, and how borders generally have been zones of anonymity and clandestine business (Adugna 2009; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013:9). The presence of the Borana, Gabra and Garri on both sides of the border enhances easy manoeuvring of the traders using their respective kin as reliable agents in the process. Traders activate the use of kinship networks to engage in informal and illegal activities such as contraband trade and cattle rustling. While this makes the border an economic resource, there are cases where individual smugglers blame members of rival groups when their goods get confiscated by custom controllers and this sometimes leads to conflict. In situations where ethnic dichotomies are polarised, inter-personal conflicts are easily translated into inter-ethnic conflicts.

Cattle rustling has been common practices among pastoral communities in eastern Africa since the pre-colonial period (Gray et al. 2003). Cattle rustling is located within cultural and social dimensions as it gives the raiders the prerogative to demonstrate their capability, power and bravery both in the eyes of their victims as well as within their own communities. Cattle theft on its part is currently practised for the economic interests of individuals and as reprisal against any conflict or previous rustling/theft from a rival group. Cattle raiding is not a common cause of conflict in the study area, but it is practised after conflicts have begun. It is a common practice, which government authorities, NGOs and local elders have not been successful in eradicating. According to oral reports during the workshop organised by the Oromia Pastoralist Association (OPA) in August 2015, cattle theft is common on both the Ethiopian and Kenyan sides. A central difficulty in solving this problem is the fact that once thieves take stolen cattle to their villages, no resident will expose their

presence. The politicisation of ethnic differences, the decline of traditional institutions and the prevalence of recurrent conflicts have weakened old values of reciprocity and coexistence, and conversely enhanced antagonism and the covering up of morally unacceptable practices such as theft.

NGOs and their powerlessness

Another challenge to peacebuilding processes is related to the government's closer scrutiny and co-option of NGOs engaged in conflict resolution. Following the promulgation of 'Charities and Societies Proclamation No.621/2009' in 2009, the activities, areas of engagements and autonomy of Civil Society Organisations have been significantly restricted. This was done by mandating them to be registered under an agency governed by the federal government, placing a restriction on budget solicitation from abroad, and putting their jobs under strict scrutiny whether there is a political element to it or not.

To illustrate this clearly, a brief outline of the activities of an NGO called Oromia Pastoralist Association (OPA) that operates on peacebuilding activities in the region is informative here. I had the opportunity to attend a 'Peace Committee Follow-up Meeting' organised by OPA on 21 and 22 August 2015 in Yabelo town, Borana zone. The participants came from eight districts in Borana zone and each team presented security problems and peacebuilding activities they have been engaged in during the previous months. Out of six members from each district, four were government authorities at the district level while the remaining two were from local elders. Following the usual blessing by elders, an opening speech was delivered by the head of Security and Administration office of Borana zone. This highly placed official emphasised problems related to inter-group conflicts between the Borana and their neighbours including those from northern Kenya. The government official also talked about the challenges of maintaining peace and tried to blame local communities and individuals, whom he labelled as 'anti-peace groups', for prioritising their interests rather than working on peacebuilding for the communities. It was within this context that the discussion was started.

During the presentation and discussions, it became clear that most of the participants very cautiously reflected the complicity of the state in the conflict or as a challenge to the peacebuilding process. However, workshop conveners from OPA were careful not to allow discussion which might place incriminating responsibility on the government. In one instance, one of the participants from the local elders strongly raised points on the involvement of the government as one of the challenges but the workshop leader interrupted and suggested that the focus should be on any weakness of the committee or the society.

Thus, whereas NGOs rhetorically claim to be bridging the gap between government and society, in practice they align with government approaches, giving little or no focus to traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution. In this regard, even though OPA tries to transcend ethnic boundaries in bringing elders together for dialogue on causes, consequences and solutions to conflicts, it is strongly associated to the state. Inversely, it tries to maintain its legitimacy and credibility by focusing on the rhetoric of dialogue and cross-border relations unlike the government that emphasises structural approaches and ethnic boundaries. OPA does not however provide alternative approaches to ensure sustainable peacebuilding. Local communities also do not recognise OPA as a neutral NGO that could impartially and autonomously work on peace and conflict resolution.

Conclusion

Conflict in the region has many causes, and often involves various ethnic groups on both sides of the Ethiopia-Kenya border as well as other actors. In a nutshell, two interconnected issues complicate the conflict dynamics and peacebuilding process, and remain the bottlenecks for understanding the inter-group conflicts in the region. First, the involvement of multi-layered actors with competing interests and the persistence of multi-dimensional causal factors of conflicts remain the major challenges. Second, conflict resolution and peacebuilding practices in the region have been crammed with competing orders and perspectives on the side of actors involved. This paper found that although resources remain fundamental for

pastoralist livelihoods, and access or restriction to resources determines not only wealth but also socio-political dynamics in such contexts, conflict in the region is much more complex than the dominant narrative of resource scarcity. In the post-1991 period in Ethiopia, common resource areas have been territorialised according to ethno-linguistic lines, which created barriers to customary resource bases such as rangeland and water points that were in the past mutually utilised. Since territorial control enhances political power and economic interest of rival groups, the conflict can then be understood from a political ecology perspective as it proposes causal links to power relations and contestations over territories for socio-economic, political and ecological reasons. Geopolitical and economic interests of the state over the borderland have also complicated conflicts because the federal government uses contestations between the Borana and Somali as a strategic approach to maintain a power balance between the two rival groups and in turn uses them as a security strategy against rebel movements from both sides.

This paper calls for the government to refrain from utilising decentring of conflict and differentially treating citizens as strategies for its security and political control. Rather, as an active constitutive of state power, the government should empower traditional institutions and respect their values and autonomy so that they might practise conflict resolution to complement the state's peace building practices.

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