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**POST-1991 INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN
SOUTHEASTERN WOLLO: THE OROMO AND
THE AFAR**

Endris Ali Haider

Abstract

The article deals with inter-ethnic tensions between the Afar and the Oromo in southeastern Wollo following the introduction of the new federal form of government in Ethiopia. The region Southeastern Wollo has been historically inhabited by the Afar, Oromo, Argobba and Amhara ethnic groups. These ethnic groups had been interacting for the last several centuries. Before 1991, there were changes in the territorial restructuring of this region for administrative convenience and for easing tensions that erupted from time to time. The communities inhabiting this region had lived peacefully except with some intermittent conflicts due to their competition for grazing and agricultural lands. The situation had been largely changed with the introduction of the new ethno-linguistic regional administrative structure in 1991. Data for this study was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Besides consulting written materials, valuable data from field work and archival sources of the various administrative offices of the Oromia special zone in Amhara region have been closely examined. In addition, knowledgeable oral informants were also interviewed to collect information pertinent to the issue under consideration.

Key Words: Afar, Oromo, Ethnic Conflict, Ethiopia, Ethnic Interaction, Southeastern Wollo

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Ethiopia is a home for several ethnic-groups speaking different languages and espousing different religions and culture. The peoples of Ethiopia had been involved in different socio-political-economic interactions among each other for many centuries. “This complicated pattern of contacts and relations between the various groups can be understood on the basis of specific ethnic and religious structures rooted in Ethiopia’s historical development.”¹

Ethiopia as a sovereign country was able to successfully deal with foreign aggressors and was able to protect its culture and national interest for a long period of time. Ethiopians have a good experience of setting aside their disagreements and standing together whenever foreign aggressors invaded or threatened to invade their country. As described by Rubenson, “there was a resemblance of the idea of nationhood in the guise of hatred against the whites.”² This was the result of a skillful leadership of its leaders, the strong nationalistic pride and solidarity of its people that eventually kept the impregnability of the country to external aggressors.³ The Italians in an attempt to invade Ethiopia in the 1890s believed that Ethiopians were incapable of acting out as patriotic nationalists; hence, they assumed incorrectly that tribalism could divide Ethiopians which would eventually make it hard for them to fight against European colonialism.⁴ However, their assumption was proved to be futile as the Ethiopian people successfully repulsed the Italian aggression with a strong sense of unity in diversity. “It is not difficult to imagine how the history of Ethiopia would have turned out if the people were

1 Alexander Krylow, “Ethnic Factors in Post Mengistu Ethiopia.” In Abebe Zegeye, etal (eds.) *Ethiopia in Change, Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy*, (London: British Academic Press, 1994),p.231

2 Sven Rubenson, *the Survival of Ethiopian Independence*. (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University press, 1976), P.241

3 Ibid.

4 Ayele Bekere. “Remembering Adwa: Ethiopia’s Victory in 1896 Halted Italy’s Ambitions in Africa” *Tadias Magazine*, March 2, 2009

locked in their respective ethnic particularism in the face of foreign aggression,"⁵ argued Rubenson.

The Ethiopians particularly since the early 1990s have been entangled with various forms of ethnic conflicts. These internal conflicts pose serious challenges to maintain their best collective experiences of resisting outside enemies and to work towards bringing national unity, economic prosperity and building a democratic system. "Ethiopians in particular are now embroiled in ethnic conflicts more than a century after a victory [at Adwa] that was seen by many as the conclusive proof of the existence of an Ethiopian nation free from the kind of conflicts."⁶

Following the demise of the Derg regime in 1991, the newly established EPRDF government had introduced an ethnic-based federal system of state structure. This transformation was seen by some analysts as "both radical and pioneering." It was radical because it came up with the principle of allowing self-governance rights to regional states which were used to be administered under a unitary state, and pioneering because "Ethiopia has gone further than any other African state in using ethnicity as a fundamental organizing principle."⁷

However, the new political arrangement and the subsequent restructuring of regions based on ethnic lines was not without problems as it brought "sets of opportunities and challenges" in the process of managing inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in the country.⁸ One of the serious challenges that the Federal Government

5 Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, p.3

6 Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia (eds) *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory Against European Colonialism.*, (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), p.5

7 Donald, Levine, *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective*, David Turton (ed), (Ohio University Press, 2006). p.1

8Asnake Kefale, *Federalism: Some Trends of Ethnic Conflicts and their Management in Ethiopia*, in *the Quest for Social Peace in Africa: Transformations, Democracy and Public Policy*, (Addis Ababa: OSSREA, 2002), p.67

cannot still resolve is delimiting the boundaries of the regional states. This is mainly because the system is proved to be incompatible in dealing with the complex administrative and political issues arising from the diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups inhabiting the newly carved administrative regions.⁹ This in turn had produced interminable inter-ethnic confrontations and violent conflicts in almost all places where geographical boundaries were redrawn by dividing ethnically contiguous areas.

According to Abbink, “insecurity over boundaries, and over local authority and in the absence of strong central political administration have led to violent confrontation” among the various ethnic groups.¹⁰ Some of the reasons for violence include robbery, cattle raiding, claiming the territory of others by force, and at times they escalated from small skirmishes to large scale warfare.¹¹

Ethnic Relations between the Oromo and the Afar

The problems indicated above have been very common in the escarpment areas of Southeastern Wollo and Northeast Shewa where there has been an intense competition over access to natural resources among the Afar, Oromo and Argobba ethnic groups. When the EPRDF seized power in 1991, the boundary of these ethnic groups was decided on the basis of their habitation where the majority of the Oromo in Northeast Shewa and Southeastern Wollo were to be incorporated into the Oromia zone of Amhara Regional State. The previous regimes in the past had made frequent changes in the administrative divisions. This was mainly done to ensure their

9 Ibid.

10 Jon Abbink, “Ethnic conflict in the Tribal Zone: the Dizi and Suri in Southern Ethiopia”, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 31.4(1993), p.675

11 Getachew Kassa, “the Gari and Borana Conflict in Southern Ethiopia: Past and Current Attempts of Mediation and settlement”, in *the Quest for Social Peace in Africa, Transformations, Democracy, and Public Policy*, (Addis Ababa: OSSREA, 2002) p. 53.

political control over the population.¹² In the 1880s and 90s the Oromo who inhabited Cheffa were ruled by the Wollo and Shewan rulers.¹³ In the imperial period and in the early years of the military regime, the area to the northeast of Borkena River was put under Wollo administrative region while south and west of Borkena River was part of Shewa governorate general. During the Derg, the major part of the now Oromia zone was placed under south Wollo administration.¹⁴ Under the current zonal administrative structure, among the 10 Amhara Regional State zones four of them have common borders with the 3 administrative zones of the Afar National Regional State. This had profoundly changed the pattern of relationship among the various ethnic communities living in the various administrative regions. As Ali has clearly stated the situation:

The current political context has also exacerbated the traditional competition over access and use of resources (pasture and water) and territorial disputes. Claims and counter claims over the control and ownership of resources found at the frontier between the pastoral and sedentary areas have escalated after the introduction of ethnic federalism. The nature of competition over land and natural resource is changing from access and use to permanent claim to own land excessive control of critical natural resources found at the frontier.¹⁵

Like the pastoralists, the highland farmers, due to environmental degradation and scarcity of resources, recurrent drought, increased poverty and demographic pressure, began to infringe into the

12 Degefa Tolossa, *Rural Livelihoods, Poverty and food Insecurity in Ethiopia: A Case Study at Erenssa and Garbi Communities in Oromia zone, Amhara National Regional State*, (Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science & Technology, 2005) P. 15

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ali Hassan, "Vulnerability to Drought, Risk and Famine: Local Responses and External Intervention Among the Afar of Ethiopia: A Study on the Aghni Pastoral Community," (Germany: University of Bayreuth, 2008), p.225

territories owned by the pastoral communities.¹⁶ In the region under consideration, there have been many places of contention between the Afar and the Oromo over grazing lands or agricultural lands. For instance, in Bati the Afar and the Oromo often clashed in places like Chachatu and Burqa right from the introduction of the new ethno-regional administrative system.¹⁷ The Afar people have had a historical claim over the area as it was their grazing land for many years in the past. On the other hand, as the Oromo have been expanding their agricultural farmlands into this area, they frequently clashed with the Afar pastoralists.¹⁸ Before fifty years ago the Oromo had largely inhabited the area extending up to Wore Wayyu and Wore Qallu and they were part of the Awssa district or *Awraja*.¹⁹ Their neighbors were the Aghini, Abusamara and Doda Afar clans.²⁰

In June and July 1991 a bloody fighting erupted between the Afar and the Oromo which resulted in the death of many people from both sides. The area was heavily destroyed and many of the Oromo left the area and retreated to Bati. According to oral informants a significant number of cattle were also looted from both parties. For instance the Afar had lost around 200 camels. Reconciliation was finally reached through government intervention and the traditional dispute resolution methods headed by the *Abbagars* and religious leaders in 1994.²¹ But no clear cut boundary demarcation had been made by the government officials and the area still remains one of the contested spots with a strong claim and counter claim by the Oromo

16 Dessalegn Rahmato, "Customs in Conflict: Land Tenure Issues Among the Pastoralists in Ethiopia", (Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies, 2007). P. 6.

17 Yassin Mohammed, "Regional Dynamics of Inter Ethnic Conflicts in the Horn of Africa: An Analysis of the Afar – Somali Conflict in Ethiopia and Djibouti." PhD Thesis, (University of Hamburg, 2010) p.225; Oral Informants

18 Oral Informants

19 National Archives and Libraries Agency(NALA),Folder No.64/ File No. 440/1 30/2070

20 Ibid.

21 Oral Informants

and the Afar. Later on, higher regional and zonal administrative officials, though unsuccessful, made some attempts to delimit the disputed boundary.²²

In most cases, attempts to draw the boundaries along ethnic lines could not resolve the recurring clashes between the neighboring Afar and their Oromo people because they were carried out without taking into consideration the local system of resource use.²³ The absence of long lasting solution in one way or the other contributed to the persistence of claims and counter claims over grazing or non-grazing lands, water points and forests.²⁴ The pastoral way of life has been under threat as a result of drought and environmental degradations which eventually forced them to make a gradual encroachment into the territories of their neighbors in search of water and grazing lands.²⁵ This has been very apparent in the dry seasons where the lowlanders moved their livestock into the agricultural fields and plantations of the highlanders which often led into conflict.²⁶ For instance, in October 1990 the Afar made incursions into Daway Rahmado where it sparked a bitter confrontation at Bora and it resulted in a number of human casualties.²⁷ Similarly the Rasa Amhara (in Northeast Shewa) were also faced this Afar incursion in February of the same year which triggered ethnic tension and conflict. The Argobba communities of the escarpment in Southeastern Wallo and Northeast Shewa had also suffered from the pastoral Afar incursion. In 1988 – 1989, the inter-ethnic conflicts between the Oromo, Argobba, Afar and Amhara in Northeast Shewa and Southeastern Wallo had contributed to the destruction of many

22 Dawe Harawa Police Office Archive(DHPOA), Folder No.37/File No.478/94

23 Ali Hassen, "Vulnerability to Drought ...", p.226

24 Ibid

25 Dessalegn, "Customs in Conflict...", p.6

26 Ibid.

27 Abebe, "*The Dynamics of Rural Polity...*", p.142

villages and the displacement from their territory of some Argobba communities.²⁸

Beginning from 1991, there had been an outbreak of armed clashes between the Afar and Oromo Afar communities of the escarpment in Southeastern Wollo and Northeast Shewa.²⁹ According to Dessalegn, these armed clashes had been increasing from time to time where there was considerable damage on properties and loss of dozen of human lives.³⁰ Sometimes small scale altercations between two individuals may have conflagrated in to large scale conflicts. For instance on 3 September 1993 a minor encounter that broke out in Bora between an Afar and an Oromo had grown into a large scale conflict where large groups of people were involved and different kinds of weapons were used.³¹ The incident at Bora Saturday market was started with the death of two Afar men.³² In revenge for this, on 4 Oct. 1993 the Afar mobilized a large number of armed men with different weapons and destroyed about 200 Oromo houses, killed many peoples and took a significant number of cattle and camels.³³ The Oromo inhabitants were forced to retreat to distant places for fear of being persecuted by the well-armed Afar men.³⁴ In Daway Rahmado and Essaye Goula districts peace and security was jeopardized as the two ethnic groups were engaged in a full-scale confrontation. In a letter addressed to south Wollo administrative regional and police head office, it was indicated that, the Daway Rahmado police office was reluctant to notify higher governmental bodies and it was held responsible for the death of people and destruction of properties.³⁵ This might be attributed to “the prevalence of poor governance at local level where both the

28 *Ibid.*

29 Oral Informants

30 Dessalegn, “Customs in Conflict...”, p.6

31 Oral Informants

32 Dessalegn, “Customs in Conflict...”, p.6

33 DHPOA, Folder No.37/ File No.470/95

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

Oromo and the Afar accused local officials for their inability to intervene or to contain conflicts and seek legal solutions".³⁶

Many of the ethnic-based conflicts between the Afar and the Oromo were exacerbated by the availability of arms circulated and sold illegally in the area. This was mainly associated with the "large inflow of arms into the area" during the civil war between the insurgents and Ethiopian army. This had contributed to inter-ethnic feuds and frontier skirmishes after the down fall of the Derg and the introduction by the EPRDF regime of a federal state structure.³⁷ Informants also relate the instability in the regions due to the general political crisis in the country following the overthrow of the military regime and coming to the helm of power of the new government in 1991.³⁸ There was a problem in the restoration of peace and order particularly in the Oromo inhabited regions along the escarpment. In the rural areas of Dawway and Artuma, there were also armed bandits roaming around who created serious peace and security problem in the area.³⁹ The instability in the region was also exploited by ethnic-based armed resistance movements such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) which became abnormally aggressive.⁴⁰

In Garfa, Werra Wayyu and Dawway, OLF had gained a strong hold where it garnered considerable political support from the Oromo inhabitants of the region. Thus, OLF would become active in aggravating the ethnic tension between the Oromo and the Amhara and it even instigated the former to rise against and attack the latter.⁴¹

According to oral informants in Dawway the attempts of local government officials to maintaining peace and order was not as such successful. In the first two to three years of the transitional period, in areas where this study has been conducted, a significant amount of

36 Ali Hassen, "Vulnerability to Drought...", p.228

37 Oral Informants; See also Dessalegn Rahmato, "Customs in Conflict..." p.6

38 Oral Informants

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

armaments was openly sold by local traders in Bati and Bora markets. After a powerful order was passed to the local communities, many individuals began to hand over their arms to local officials. Particularly from Gerfa, Worra Wayyu, a huge number of different types of armaments were collected. While no attempt was made to disarm the Afar they remained armed. However, the majority of the Oromo accused the government of favoring the Afar not to disarm them.⁴² Many of the conflicts that broke out after 1991 between the Oromo and the Afar had significantly affected their economic transactions. After the outbreak of the conflicts people from the Afar lowlands refrained from coming to the Bora and Bati markets. In this regard it was the Afar community not the Oromo who suffered most. Moreover, in normal times, when there was such ethnic strains and fears of outbreak of disturbances there was an occasional ban on market gatherings where many of the Argobba, Afar and the Oromo ethnic groups would normally attend.⁴³ For instance, in a letter dated 8 October 2000, the Daway Rahmado district of the Afar Regional Sate had notified its neighboring Dawa Cheffa district that the Afar people were prevented from entering into the Oromo territory and, as a result, they were exposed to severe economic problems due to their inability to have access to the market centers.

The relation between the Afar and the Oromo living around the escarpment in Southeastern Wollo and Northeast Shewa had been historically characterized by ephemeral peace and hostility. What Abebe Kifileyesus observed about the relations between the Afar and the Argobba, is also true between the Oromo and the Afar. "The Afar and the Oromo are not really enemies in the strictest sense of the term but are not best friends either".⁴⁴ In most cases the Oromo have seen the Afar with suspicion. After reconciliation has been made, the Afar often violated the terms of agreement which they conceded with the Oromo.⁴⁵ In spite of the sporadic conflicts in times of drought and

42 Ibid.

43 DHPOA, Folder No.37/File No.477/1993 and Oral Informants

44 Abebe, "The Dynamics of Rural Polity...", p.142

45 Ibid.

when pasture was in short supply, harmonious relationship between the two communities is still maintained through trade, inter-marriage and through other social bonds and alliances.⁴⁶ But during violent conflicts “ethnicity or clan membership can become a significant factor around which forces can be mobilized.”⁴⁷ The two ethnic groups came into conflict on account of territorial claim; they mobilized themselves to seize the contesting places by force. The Oromo highland cultivators would start clearing forests and expanding their agricultural lands, diverting streams and rivers that flowed into the Afar territory. The Afar on their part would make every effort to maintain the flow of these rivers and get an easy access to the grazing lands and water points.⁴⁸ These are the two major existential problems that bedeviled the two ethnic groups. In the summer of 1994, a serious clash broke out between the Afar and the Oromo in Dawway. The Afar being better equipped began penetrating deep into the Oromo territories. In this conflict the Afar had lost 7 of their men while the Oromo lost one person. It was with the mediation of elders, religious leaders and the *Abbagars* that the situation was finally settled. As *Sheikh* Mohammed Riyan, a well-known arbitrator in the area, narrated the situation “it was the most serious and arduous one because large number of Oromo and Afar were involved.”

A reconciliation process was started at Berinsa Qori by *Hajji* Mohmmmed Sofian, a respected local religious leader. Consensus had been reached on condition that the Oromo should first collect their farm production. The two groups agreed not to enter into any kind of dispute until a general reconciliation was made. The reconciliation process was supported by the involvement of a joint peace committee established by local government officials and representatives from the two ethnic groups.⁴⁹ The intervention of the third party, i.e. the joint peace committee in the conflict resolution process is not,

46 Oral Informants

47 Ali Hassen, “Vulnerability to Drought ...”, p. 228

48 Ibid.

49 Oral Informants

however, without problems. Given the absence of clearly demarcated ethnic boundaries, however, the government's reluctance to officially delimit the boundaries on several contesting places had been a contributory factor for the recurrence of conflicts in the frontier areas. One of the serious problems for local officials to delimit the boundaries along ethnic lines was the presence of strong territorial claims in the frontier areas of the two ethnic groups and their constant encroachment into each other's territory.⁵⁰ Moreover, the Oromo looked at the Afar officials with suspicion and as being partial to their community; and even some of them were accused of assisting the Afar to rise against the Oromo.⁵¹ In most of the reconciliation attempts, the Oromo accused the Afar officials that they would not be willing to expose the culprits or to return looted cattle and camels.⁵² Given such mistrust and suspicion between the two communities which remained an obstacle to establish a long-lasting solution to the problem, sporadic and individual conflicts also aggravated their hostility. For instance in Sep. 1996, a conflict had occurred in the border of Qallu *Wereda* where an Oromo killed one Afar herder while moving his cattle for grazing. The Oromo inhabitants of the region therefore began to retreat for fear of retribution from the Afar.⁵³

On 30 October 1996, there was a plan to hold a meeting at Wodiragi in Afar region in which many district officials and other participants were expected to attend in order to discuss about the prevalent security issues in the border areas and the repatriation of cattle raided from both parties in the past. However, representatives from the Afar region were reluctant to return the cattle looted from the Oromo. In a letter sent to the Oromia Zone Administration Police, the Daway Rahmado police officer noted that the reluctance of the

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 DHPOA, Folder No.37/File No.488 /1988

53 DHPOA, Folder No.37/File No.475/ April 1987

Afar officials would probably lead to an outbreak of another conflict between the two ethnic groups.⁵⁴

On November 1997 another meeting was held at Harawa, a small district in Dawway where in several religious leaders, *Kebele* administrators, police officers from both the Oromo and the Afar had discussed issues regarding the conflict which flared up between the Afar and the Oromo. The long-existing antagonism and hostility between the Afar and the Oromo due to their traditional practices which included mutilating the genitalia as a trophy and the customary cattle raiding had posed serious challenges to improve their relations. In the many armed conflicts that broke out in the 1990s several people from the two sides were killed, countless number of cattle and camels were looted and many huts were burnt or destroyed.⁵⁵

After a series of peace initiatives made by religious leaders, *Abbagars* and the joint peace committee, the two neighboring communities agreed to settle their dispute at Birensa Qore.⁵⁶ With the help of a renowned religious leader, who has been recognized by both the Afar and the Oromo, the two ethnic groups were finally reconciled at Birrensa Qore on 4 February, 2002. Many regional and zonal officials from the Amhara and Afar National Regional States had been involved in this reconciliation process.⁵⁷ However intermittent conflicts continued to erupt between the Oromo in Bati Woreda and their Afar neighbors. Attempts of reconciliation at different times by the Administrative bodies from the two regional states were found to be futile. Due to lack of strong commitment from the political leaders and adherence to their own ethnic groups, several peace initiatives through traditional means of conflict resolution methods and the involvement of government officials were proved to be ineffective to bring an end to the recurring conflicts. Recently, excluding the government leaders, acknowledged

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid

56 DHPOA, Folder No.34/File No. 457/A/19 85

57 DHPOA, Folder No.37/File No.475/A/1985

religious leaders from the Afar Regional State and representatives from Oromia Special Zone of the Amhara Regional State initiated a new attempt of mediation.

Conclusion

Historically the inhabitants of southeastern Wollo had been interacted in various ways. The Afar and the Oromo had been interconnected through trade, marriage and other forms of alliances. With the exception of intermittent conflicts due to their competition over scarce resources, they had developed a kind of mutual friendship and alliance in times of difficulties such as famine and other forms of natural disasters. Following the demise of the Derg and the subsequent establishment of the new ethno-regional administrative structure in Ethiopia, inter-ethnic relations took a fundamentally new character. In Southeastern Wollo and Northeastern Shewa, there had been protracted conflicts between the Oromo and the Afar on account of competition for scarce resources. The two communities had been involved in claims and counter claims over the control and ownership of resources which had been apparent in the frontiers of the newly created regional boundaries. This problem is even more exacerbated by absence of good governance at the local level. The two ethnic groups involved into armed confrontations on account of territorial claims they espoused and their repeated attempts to seize the contesting places. Attempts of local government officials to contain conflicts along the frontier regions, if not to ensure long-lasting peace, were mostly unsuccessful. When there is an attempt to delimit the boundaries along such ethnic frontiers, it often resulted with a fresh flare up of clashes between the Afar and their Oromo neighbors. This has been largely due to the inattentiveness, deliberate or otherwise, of the mediators to take in to consideration of the local system of resource use. As a result, claims and counter claims over access to grazing lands, water points and forests still persist. The new federal form of government which has given self-administration to the newly carved regions, has unforgivingly failed to provide solutions to the recurrent conflicts

between the two ethnic groups. As a result of economic problems—limited resources and insignificant overall growth,⁵⁸—creating and delineating new boundaries has failed to solve the challenge of peaceful interaction of the two ethnic groups. Due to the incapability of the local governors to resolve the instability and violence that occurred in the frontier regions frequently, the central government sometimes deployed a military force to the area. This clearly indicates that the implementation of the new system of governance remains to be a source of dispute and conflict rather than a source of peace and coexistence. Unlike the various forms of interactive relationships they maintained in the past, the ethnic-based administrative arrangement has bred fear and insecurity between the two ethnic groups. It appears that this challenge may not be resolved in the foreseeable future.

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58 Jon Abbink, "Ethnicity and Constitutionalism in Contemporary Ethiopia" *Journal of African Law*, Vol. 41 (2), 1997, p.168

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