

## MANAGING INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT THROUGH INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS- CASE OF SILTIE AND MAREKO COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The main objective of this study is to investigate the role of local governments and indigenous institutions in managing ethnic conflict between Silte and Mareko ethnic group in Southern Ethiopia. To attain this objective, the study employed both secondary and primary data sources. The primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. Secondary data were obtained through a critical review of related literature and documents. Both primary and secondary data were organized thematically and analyzed through systematic interpretation and triangulation of various sources. The finding of the study uncovered that the sources of the conflict lies in the economic, social and political realms. The conflict management interventions employed both formal and informal mechanisms to deal with the conflict. The formal mechanism via local governments took over border demarcation project, whereas the informal/indigenous dealt with the contested resource based conflict. The indigenous mechanism via elders has proved less effective to address the scarce resource problem and has remained a challenge to local peace. Finally, this study suggested that respective local governments along with local peace actors should responsibly work together to manage the problem in constructive ways. In addition, certain transformative actions should also be made in the post border demarcation to nurture local peace.*

**Keywords:** conflict management, Silte, Mareko, indigenous

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the contemporary world, state restructuring has become a global phenomenon. In almost all corners of the world, there are movements aiming at redesigning structures of states in response to demands of communities for recognition of their identities and increased participation in the political realm (Asnake, 2004:1). It is very widely assumed in the literature on the problems of ethnicity that state formation and nation building in Africa derive from the arbitrary colonial carve up, without the slightest concern for the interests and identities of African peoples. Such kinds of cases are common and easily understandable in many African countries. Diversity, however, is not solely the result of European colonialism.

For long time, diversity in almost all African countries has officially been rejected as something backward, while in practice, political, social, cultural and even economic life has based itself on this form of commonality. Thus, it is not simply the fact that a state has several ethnic groups or nationalities, whose boundaries and identities are in constant flux is the problem, but it is how the differences among the groups manifest that makes diversity problematic (Osaghae, 2004:167).

The post-1991 politics of Ethiopia witnessed a major departure from the past in terms of political and structural dimensions. The political dimensions anchored on the principles of “unconditional” rights accorded to “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” to exercise ‘self-determination, including secession’ (FDRE Constitution, 1995: Art.39/4), reinforced the ethno-national sentiments and tendencies across the polity. Federalism in the Ethiopian case is, therefore, sought to provide possibilities for self-administration for the country’s ethnic groups. In light of the changes in the pattern of the relationships between Mareko and Siltie,

this study attempts to investigate the problems of the ethnic conflict between Siltie and Mareko ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACHES ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

It is argued that, so as to make use of the presumed benefits of conflicts and deal with the destructive aspects, interventions must be carried out. As such, many conflict theorists have provided theoretical and analytical orientations as major modus operandi. These are 'conflict management', 'conflict resolution' and 'conflict transformation.' The methods of intervention in any types of conflict have to be associated with understanding the very nature, causes, and dynamics of the conflict. These three approaches do have their own unique features to make intervention in the conflict.

Conflict management theorists see conflicts as an inevitable fact of life, born out of different values and interests between and within communities. As conflicts are considered to be inescapable and their solution is considered unrealistic, they can only be managed constructively. Conflict management is the most effective, when it addresses both the disputant's difference in interests and their divergent and mutually hostile interpretations. Indeed, an exclusive focus on either is considered biased and counterproductive. The best that can be done in violent conflicts is to manage and contain them with possible hope of finding a settlement (Wallensteen, 2007:50; Miall, 2004: 3).

Conflict resolution refers to all process oriented activities that aim to address the underlying causes of direct, cultural and structural violence. It is a situation where the conflicting parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities; accept each other's continued existence as parties and cease all violent action against each other. As a result of this, it is more than the absence of war (Wallensteen, 2007:8). In essence, it is about solving the problems that led to the conflict by addressing the fundamental and deep-rooted source of conflict (Miall et al., 2005:29).

Theorists of conflict transformation argue that contemporary conflicts require more than the refraining of positions and the identification of win-win outcomes. The very structure of parties and relationships may be embedded in a pattern of conflictual relationships that extend beyond the particular site of conflict. Therefore, a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict in transformative approach. Its focus is heavily on long term commitment, aspect of justice, grass-root involvement and deep-rooted structural factors behind conflicts (Miall, 2004: 4).

Having looked at the above three approaches of conflict intervention mechanisms, this study employed conflict management to analyze the conflict situations related Mareko and Silte ethnic groups.

## **INDIGENOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION INSTITUTIONS**

Indigenous conflict resolution institutions are made by the people and derive their legitimacy from participation and consensus of the community (Abera, 2003 in Alula and Getachew, 2008:1). Murithi (2008) also notes that, indigenous conflict resolution institutions are locally organized institution working according to the custom of the given society. For Isak (1997 in Tarekegn, 2008:11) indigenous conflict resolution institutions are long-persistent social practices, rooted in local cultural settings, aiming at resolving conflicts, reducing tension, and rebuilding social relationship.

According to Muruthi (2008:17), the term 'indigenous' refers "to that which is inherent to a given society." Looking the concept indigenous in light of conflict management, Jacobs (2005; cited in Mutisi, 2009:29) refers to those methods that exist within a particular cultural context for dealing with disputes. With reference to Africa, Zartman (cited in Mutisi, 2009:30) asserts that conflict resolution mechanisms can only be labeled indigenous if "they have been practiced for an extended period and have evolved within African societies rather than being the product of external importation." These concepts entail that indigenous conflict

resolutions institutions are practices that are derived from the custom, traditions and worldview of the society. In this article, 'indigenous conflict resolution institution' refers to the resolution of any types of conflicts that are resolved outside the formal court system.

## **FORMAL INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS IN MANAGING BORDER CONFLICT**

An inevitability of conflict in every state governance system requires an institutional framework and mitigation strategy in order to manage conflicts in constructive ways. States based on their own state structure, formally establish and empower institutions to deal with conflicts and work to maintain peace and security within their own territorial jurisdictions. Exploring the potentials of the Ethiopian federalism as a way of managing or rather living with conflicts, Tsegaye (2010:57) argues that conflicts are bound to be with us always. We won't "resolve" them. Nor can we eradicate them. However, he underlines that we can prevent, manage and even transform them when we are lucky. Federalism, thus, with all its limitations helps in this venture.

The House of Federation (HoF) is the representative body of the nations, nationalities and peoples of the country is the most important and relevant constitutional organ for conflict management. To this purpose, the House (HoF) is vested with the constitutional mandate to manage conflicts as enshrined in the FDRE Constitution under Article 62(6) which empowers the House "to find solutions to disputes or misunderstandings that may arise between states".

The Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFedA) is another competent state institution to play a key role in conflict management. Pursuant to Article 11 of Proclamation No. 256/2001, the MoFedA has the power to: (a) in cooperation with the Regions, ensure that public peace and order is maintained; (b) without prejudice to the provisions of Articles 48 and 62(6) of the Constitution of the FDRE, facilitate the resolution of misunderstandings arising between Regions.

In addition to the above institutions, conflict management institutions are also hierarchically established at both regional and local government levels throughout the country. These institutions are duly conferred relevant power and responsibilities to manage conflicts and to ensure peace and security in their respective administration. At regional state level, institutions include: regional security and administration bureau, regional police commission, regional militia office. Moreover, at this level, Council of Nationalities' in SNNPR has special constitutional mandate to oversee conflict cases that may arise in the region (The Revised Constitution of SNNPR, 2001:Art.59/5). At local government state structure, conflict management institutions/departments are also organized and given relevant powers and functions to discharge their responsibility to conflict situations. These are commonly found at zonal, special *Woreda* and *Woreda* level.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY PEOPLE**

### **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF LIBIDO-MAREKO**

Libido-Mareko, who lives in the central plateau of Ethiopia, is one of the ethnic groups in Ethiopia. They are found between the longitudes of 38: 26' and 38: 33'E and latitudes of 7:55' and 8: 04'N (Senehizeb buklet, 2007). According to the data from Communication Office of Mareko *Woreda*, from 66 clan of Libid-Mareko around 49 clans are found in Mareko *Woreda*. The remaining clans of Libido-Mareko ethnic group live in Meskan and Silite *Woredas*.

Administratively, the Mareko *woreda* is one of the thirteen *Woredas* that make up today's Gurage zone of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State. The *Woreda* is located in the eastern corner of the zone where they share boundary with Oromiya regional state, Silite Administrative Zone and Meskan *Woreda* in east, south, and north respectively. The *Woreda* consists of 26 rural *kebeles* and the administrative centre is Koshe, which is 160 K.m far from Addis Ababa and 82 k.m from Wolkite, the capital

of Gurage Administrative Zone. Mareko *woreda* is one of the largest districts in the Gurage zone administration of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State. According to the data from Central Statistics Agency (2008), the *Woreda* has a population of 81,892 in which 50.2% of them are male and 49.7% are female. The *Woredais* inhabited by Libido – Mareko, Gurage, Silite, Oromo, Amhara, Hadiya and other ethnic group. The Libido- Mareko ethnic group is the Cushitic language speaking society which is surrounded by the neighboring Semitic language speaking societies (Sodo, Mesqan and Silite). The language they speak is collectively known as *Marekegna*.

The ethnic group has a complex clan system by which conflict is often managed. The ethnic group is made up of more than 66 clan and more than 100 sub clan and detailed families, which have its own role in indigenous conflict resolution institution. Among Libido- Marko, decent and clan categorization is core of social organization. They trace decent in depth and they recon up to seven to nine generation patrilineally. Terracing decent through the mother side is unacceptable, though unofficial matrilineal concept is observed in the ethnic group. The Libido- Mareko is patriarchal society where the males are heads of households and follows a patria local settlement pattern.

### **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF SILTIE PEOPLE**

Dearth of literature on the historical account of the Siltie people has been the major challenge to describe the past about this people. Most of the studies conducted before a decade present the Siltie as one group of the Gurage people. However, relatively a good account about the Siltie people has recently come from researchers in the field of social anthropology. The major historical views related to the origin of the Siltie people are discussed as follows. The genesis of the Siltie attributes to the eastern part of the country, particularly from Harar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This view is well narrated by Siltie elders. According to the elders, the peoples were part of the troops of “Ahmed Gragn” that came from Harar and remained in the Gurage land (today’s Siltie land) after they defeated the then highland Christian rulers (Worku, 1991:12; Denberu et al., 1995:17; Markakis, 1998:131). To this end, Trimmingham mentioned that the predominant Muslim communities of Siltie, Hulbareg, Azernet-Berbere, Wolene Gedebano, Wuriro and Zeway (Zay) trace their decent from the eastern part (Harar).

### **THE NATURE AND CONTEXT OF THE BORDER CONFLICT**

In order to adequately deal with any conflict, it is necessary to understand its historical context in the sense that it helps to understand the problems that are linked to things that happened in the past. Though it is difficult to identify the exact time and context in which the conflict started in relation to the case at hand the existence of conflict and competition since in the long past. In connection to this, Kairedin (2012:66) remarked that: *...the Siltie communities were in conflicts and at times at war with their neighboring groups such as Mareko, peoples. Generally, the basic causes for most of the conflicts in the area were competition over resources, particularly land among the ethnic groups as well as rivalries for territorial and political hegemony.*

The defeat and incorporation of both Gurage and Siltie land into Meneilk’s empire had brought an adverse effect to both communities. Regarding the territorial administration of the area in the aftermath of the conquest, John Markakis (1998:132) wrote the following:

*Abyssinian rule brought most of the Gurage groups into one administrative unit. Gurage land became an Awraja (sub-province) of Shoa province, extending from the Omo River in the west to Lake Zeway in the east and the Awash River in the north to the Kembata region in the south. Gurage Awraja was subdivided into five sub-Woredas. Woreda boundaries were arbitrarily drawn and did not separate communities along clans, linguistic or religious lines. The congregation of most Gurage (silte) into single administrative unit was the first stroke in the process of fashioning a single Gurage ethnic identity.*

In relation to the conflict situation in the contested area, competitions and conflicts have been common between the two communities since the earlier period including the time of Haile Selassie and *Derg*.

Following the decision to establish separate Siltie administrative zone in 2002, border demarcation was drawn between Siltie and its neighbors including Gurage zone but mainly with Meskan *Woreda* not with *Mareko wereda*. During that time, attempts were initially made to make the border demarcation between the two communities but soon interrupted. Thus, conflicts and competitions have been there for resources such as grazing land and water point even long before the separation of the two communities. Nevertheless, the conflict over these resources have received wider attentions and considered to be the whole issue of the two *Woreda* beyond those two *Kebeles*.

### **SOURCES OF THE BORDER CONFLICT**

As an inevitable aspect of a social reality, conflict can be ignited by different factors and causes. To understand the case of a given conflict, it is fundamental to identify the causes of the potential and the existing conflicts.

#### **Economic Issues**

One of the underlying structural sources of the border conflict between the two communities is competition over natural resources. Conflicts are often caused by intense competitions over scarce resources such as water and grazing land which are common among the lowland pastoral communities of the country. However, the scarcity of these resources in the highland areas is also the major sources of the conflict. The incompatible interests and views over the ownership grazing land have existed since the two communities came under one administration. According to Mareko Community over the grazing land, the grazing land was the personal holding of their forefathers and they inherited it from them. It was kept uncultivated since the period of Minilik. However, in the past especially during and after harvesting time, it was common to graze cattle freely anywhere including their community and neighbors. This condition later paved the ground for competition and conflict over the grazing.

Water is another source of conflict between the two competing communities. Though both communities predominantly engaged in agriculture on limited land, which is the sources of income. The scarcity of water for their cattle particularly in dry seasons made both communities compete to control the available water sources. The existence of water point beside the grazing land ignites conflict in different times. The incompatible interests and views between the two communities towards the grazing land, therefore, resulted in recurring conflicts.

The above discussions indicate that the existence of meager natural resources which are highly intertwined with economic needs and interests of both communities have brought them to conflict while they aspired to control these resources exclusively.

### **THE DEMAND FOR BORDER DEMARCATION**

The peaceful resolution of Siltie-Gurage identity based dispute through referendum accorded Siltie a separate administrative zone. This newly established zone demanded border limits with the neighboring administrative units. Because of this, border demarcation was drawn in 2002, between the new Siltie zone with its neighbors notably with Hadiya zone, Alaba *Liyu Woreda* and Gurage zone mainly with Meskan *Woreda*. However the border demarcation process between siltie and mareko is not done due to the strained social relations between the two communities in those early days of separation had forced both administrative bodies not to make the demarcation in fear of conflict.

## POOR GOVERNANCE

In addition to the above mentioned underlying sources of conflict, poor governance has also been identified as the other key structural causes of the conflict in the study area. This situation has been particularly prevalent at the grass-roots level of administration in both communities. *Woreda* and zonal officials have given less concern to the unaddressed problems of grazing land, water and the forest. One of the contributing factors for the communities to raise the question for the border demarcation was due to the existence of poor governance at the lower levels of administrative unit. The existence of poor administrative practices and lack of good governance exacerbated the grievances of the communities for its demand in addition to other issues and factors.

It's noted that local government bodies, instead of prudently identifying and solving the problems, put pressures and attempted to limit on the social and political rights of the people and undermining their demands. Thus, the absence of timely response along with the poor conflict management skills by respective local governments to address the problem, the zonal and regional government intervened to take actions in response to the repeated questions of the community that lasted for a decade. In line with this, the Council of Nationalities recently identified in its report that beyond the interest to live with the neighboring people that have similar psychological makeup, language, culture and history as reasons for border demarcation among zones, *Liyu Woredas*, *Woredas*, *Kebeles* and villages in the region, lack of good governance values like participation, transparency, inclusiveness and equity have contributed a lot in this regard (Conflict Assessment Report, Council of Nationalities, 2011:20). The existence of unaddressed conflict situation has remained a challenge to the local administration to mobilize the community for the local development activities.

## CATTLE RUSTLING

The practice of cattle rustling is proximate source to incite conflict in the study area. Both communities imparted that the practice of cattle rustling has been common and occasionally provokes conflict between the two communities. If a member of the community loses his cattle and did not get it back through elders' negotiation, then rustling takes place in revenge. Most of the time cattle rustling take place between those community members of *goto Kebeles* that are fiercely fighting for the grazing land and water. When such case happened and reported to the *Woreda*, the two *Woredas* usually inform the respective elders to investigate and convince their community to return the rustled cattle.

## THE JOINT TASK BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

In the border areas of the two communities, local governments and indigenous institutions have been working together to foster inter-community cooperation and maintain peace and harmony between the parties. Since the grass-root actors are the main local peace actors at the community level, the local governments have maintained formal relations with them while working at the grass-roots level. The existence of formally organized Peace Committee (PC) at different levels has further strengthened the joint task between the two institutions. In relation to this, PC was formed at both *Woreda* and *Kebele* in both communities. At *Kebele* level, the PC is chaired by the *Kebele* chairperson and other members that include *Kebele* council members, the representatives of youth and women civic associations, community elders, community leaders and religious leaders. The joint task between the *Woreda* and the community through Peace Committee has been successful in many respects. To this effect, the elders have been playing pivotal role in preventing violence and containing conflicts at the contested border areas.

*Woreda* Peace committee members have maintained good working relations with *Woreda* Security and Administration Department. Appreciating the capacity building training that they obtained at Hawassa, they have been actively working to promote peace values and settle conflicts at community levels. Furthermore,

communities through Peace Committees are increasingly being contacted by the local governments on how to approach a given conflict situation at the community levels. In short, there has been a visible coordination between the two institutions in managing peace and security at the grass-root level. Especially, the formations of Peace Committees at *Woreda* and *Kebele* levels have strengthened the joint-task between the local governments and indigenous institutions.

### ACHIEVEMENTS AND DRAWBACKS OF THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Understanding the insecurity situations in the border areas between the conflicting parties, Mareko and Silte, conflict management intervention was carried out to address the underlying sources of the problem. The conflict management process, however, was mainly targeted to address some of the underlying issues. The intervention mechanism, border demarcation, has been able to endanger relative peace and stability in the border area.

Looking at the pre- and post-demarcation situations in a comparative perspective, the past two years of the post-demarcation have indicated the improved conditions of the community that are manifested in increased participation in the local development activities. Particularly, the community started to use improved agricultural tools, inputs and other social service provisions. However, prior to this the communities were uncooperative and apathetic to local development issues brought by the government bodies. This happened due to the lack of responsiveness to the community's quest for border demarcations by the local government. The response of the communities to discharge their inner frustration in this way demonstrates the actual extent of dismay and dissatisfaction to the local government. For that reason, the area was lagging behind other areas. From the above discussion, it can be inferred that the demarcation process has properly addressed to the interest of communities.

No matter how the communities demanded for the border demarcation for one or another reasons, the management process has not significantly disrupted the long established bonds and interdependence. Yet, this time some Siltie communities have voted to come to Mareko and vice- versa. With this interesting fact, both still support each other when they face difficulty, for instance, in supplying agricultural inputs such as fertilizer as it was before.

In addition, the demarcation process has brought less impact to the societal relations and on the reciprocal interdependence. In reality, these issues transcended the borders to maintain the bonds between the communities. Yet, they equally share the existing local institutions like *Idir*, graveyards, and attend each others' marriage ceremonies. Above all, there is no differentiation and ostracization despite whoever voted to whichever side for the demarcation. But there is a decline in daily contacts and interactions due to the separation of the two communities into different *Kebeles* than before.

Furthermore, local governments of Silte and Mareko have maintained cordial cooperation to maintain the cross-border peace and security issues particularly in crime prevention and extradition in relation to thefts and criminal acts by availing police institution in the area. They are also jointly working to restore social harmony and normalize the social interactions between the communities. Based on the common consensus between both zones and *Woredas*, both communities have continued to share public institutions such as health posts, schools, markets and places of worship.

The existence of Peace Committee at border *Kebeles* on both sides of communities has been very instrumental in peace building efforts since they advocate and teach peace value and also serve as early warning mechanism in relation to peace and security matters. Thus, they remain the main local peace actors at the grass-root level.

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