



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

Causes and trajectories of local conflict among pastoral peoples in Northeast Africa

Abbink, G.J.

Citation

Abbink, G. J. (2007). Causes and trajectories of local conflict among pastoral peoples in Northeast Africa. *Ethiopian Journal Of The Social Sciences And Humanities*, 5(1), 25-42. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/20674>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/20674>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Causes and Trajectories of Local Conflict Among Pastoral Peoples in Northeast Africa

Jon Abbink¹

ABSTRACT

Pastoralist (herding) societies in Africa are claimed to be prone to violence due to structural conditions of environmental vulnerability, scarcity of resources and decentralized socio-political organization. Their contacts with expanding state structures, and with neighbouring groups in different socio-economic conditions, are seen to add to instability, due to the underlying hegemonic project of national states, while major economic and demographic changes also play a role. This paper presents a comparative overview of general factors that come into play in the 'production of conflict' in and between pastoral societies, focusing on Northeast Africa. It is contended that while conflict was a regular feature of life in traditional pastoral societies, its nature and frequency have notably changed in the confrontation with state forces, whereby unresolved tensions between traditional and 'modern' judicial conflict regulation mechanisms play a role. External agencies approach these pastoral societies in conflict without paying proper attention to the larger political-economic context in which they operate and which constrains them in a political and ideological sense. Some case examples are adduced to make this point. These and other case studies reveal that structural instability in contemporary pastoral societies is usually not properly interpreted by outside agencies and is not easily 'resolved'. The paper concludes with a general model or checklist of conditions and factors of conflict production in pastoral societies.

KEYWORDS: pastoralism, conflict, Ethiopia, state policy, resource scarcity, culture and 'ethnic' difference, conflict mediation

Introduction

Conflicts in Africa are still widespread and headline-catching, as in Somalia, the Uganda-DR Congo border (LRA depredations), Sudan (Darfur), Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Ethiopia (Ogaden), reflecting the problematic basis of statehood, governance and economic (re)distribution, and in general indicative of the unresolved problems of developmental 'modernity' in a socio-political sense.

This paper focuses the discussion chiefly on causes of local conflict in pastoral herding societies in Northeast Africa, with key examples from Ethiopia, both on the level of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations. In the quest for 'solutions' or for better use of

¹ African Studies Centre, Leiden, & VU University, Amsterdam.

In: Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities 5(1), 2007, pp. 25-42.

mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms, it is relevant to understand the nature of the recurring conflicts in pastoral societies, both internally and, predominantly, in their relations with wider structures, notably state authorities and business enterprises.

These pastoral societies occupy large tracts of territory, often in border areas.² Among the causes for conflict are environmental factors, livelihood decline, certain cultural values/traditions, and state economic or other policies, which in various combinations impinge on dispute generation and conflict behaviour. Conflict prevention, resolution and mediation structures are now a favourite subject of international donor assistance programmes, and are useful to explore, but I will argue that the expectations and ideals of conflict resolution in Africa, are in general too optimistic because of the growing intractability of conflicts. Many of these conflicts, while locally rooted in long-term grievances and power struggles, tend to become enmeshed with state (trans)formation processes as well as national and globalized interests or ideologies that are hard to manage and tend to be imposed on local societies. In addition, the will and openness to mediation among many communities, even when induced to it by local elders or from above, e.g. by state agents, seems to be in decline. We see this in southern Somalia, Eritrea, and several parts of Ethiopia, when people pursue local, short-term interests and claim dominance. As an Ethiopian saying goes: "A king wanting reconciliation can use a peasant as mediator, but a peasant who does not want reconciliation can't even be reconciled by a king" (Solomon 1992: 60). The fact is indeed that such people refusing conciliation (including many pastoralists) now are quite common.

In the course of this paper I will focus on some examples of pastoral societies that demonstrate most of the features just mentioned, and are, in contrast to their traditional image, far from isolated or remote but in the midst of today's global struggles. Despite these wider aspects, I will contend that efforts at conflict analysis and of conflict management or *transformation* – which is often the most we can get – have to start in the local setting and must address the immediate problems of the communities concerned.

In anthropology and political studies there is a growing consensus on what factors are involved in the generation of conflict in pastoral herding societies in Africa (see the first column in the model in the Appendix), but not on the interactions between them and on the trigger sequences. E.g., in many cases, the scarcity of pasture or water sources in an area traditionally shared by at least two groups leads to tensions and fighting (the popular 'resource competition' theory, cf. Homer-Dixon 1999; Markakis 1998), but in documented other cases results in cooperation and agreements on regulated sharing (Adano, *et al.* 2009). So how is this explained? What are elements inducing pastoral groups - or clan or territorial groups *within* a pastoral society – to take the path of accommodation instead of conflict? An answer has to be sought in the interactive patterning of conflict situations in specific areas, paying attention to structural socio-economic conditions, available technology (including weaponry), cultural values (or repertoires), and state policies.

The socio-economic basis of pastoralist societies

² While this paper is partly based on field experiences in Southwestern Ethiopia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I draw mostly upon secondary sources and other document to make a more general argument. This is why views and quotes from members of these pastoral societies are omitted here.

Pastoral land use in Africa is substantial and in many countries close to half the territory is semi-arid lowland occupied by pastoral peoples. Examples are Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya. The population density is still relatively low in these regions, but, like most African countries, is increasing fast. Average population growth in Ethiopia and Kenya, for instance, has been c. 2.6 to 3% annually, and pastoralists share in this figure.³ Pastoralists are rural people who depend for their main livelihood on the herding of livestock mostly for subsistence and for trading of animal products. Among many groups in southern Ethiopia the average herder family has about 30-50 heads of cattle. Crop cultivation is secondary and sometimes very limited, as they trade livestock or livestock products for food, etc. in local markets. Ecological conditions in pastoral areas are by definition precarious – seasonal pastures necessitating transhumance, i.e. much mobility and somewhat risky travelling; over-dependence on insecure rainfall, resulting in frequent drought; underdeveloped health or educational service structures; and remoteness from political and economic power centres. According to one popular paradigm, conflict in pastoral societies is closely tied to these competitive ecological-economic conditions of life in the semi-arid zone where these peoples live: environmental resource scarcity in, now universal, conditions of population growth and shrinking of pastoral areas would lead to conflict and violence between the competing groups – in short, 'resource competition breeds violence'. Another paradigm, inherited from colonial perceptions, is that pastoral peoples are culturally predisposed to militancy and violence, not only due to the harsh environment and the dangers they face on an almost daily basis (wild animals, enemies), but also due to their ideals of personal valour and of amassing livestock 'for its own sake' – this would then explain their incessant raiding. In addition, their 'egalitarian-democratic' society based on kinship and segmentary principles is often seen as stimulating their self-consciously defended identity as independent people in areas where the central state was long absent or at least quite weak in exercising authority. The Somalis are often mentioned as an example here.

While these two paradigms, which could be called respectively 'neo-Malthusian' and the 'primordialist', carry grains of truth – e.g., there is environmental degradation and dramatic population growth, and group identities more and more tend to be held as rigid and essentialized – they are only elements of a necessary but by far not sufficient explanation of the general and persistent causes of conflict in pastoral societies.

What certainly can be said is that pastoral societies are largely kin-ordered (lineages, clans, etc. providing the basis of social solidarity), committed to defence of their livestock herds, very mobile and versatile, marked by low levels of technology (except, as we will see, in weapons) and vulnerable to the vagaries of precarious natural conditions (Woldetsaie 2007), state authority (Hagmann & Alemmaya 2008), and competition from neighbouring groups in similar circumstances (cf. Meier, Bond & Bond 2007). In this sense, it seems clear – and must be recognized in intervention policy – that in pastoral societies the thresholds of

³ In 1974 Ethiopia had c. 27 million people; a generation later, in 2009, an estimated 80 mln – showing an unprecedented growth rate. The figures from the 2007 census (CSA 2008) show that the zones and *woredas* in all the pastoral areas of the country have seen a *doubling* of population in the last 20-30 years. In interviews, pastoralists themselves often mention that they see strong population growth that cannot be accommodated within their current production systems. See also Sahlu 2003.

disputes and violent action are higher, which among them is accepted as such, and is culturally encoded. This does not mean, as any one living in such a society for a longer period knows, that people in those groups are necessarily 'more violently predisposed'; it is mostly a question of the specific living conditions and power relations with their neighbours and the wider society having shaped them.

The primordialist and the neo-Malthusian approaches emphasize causality of one set of factors instead of in the *interaction* between natural and ecological conditions on the one hand and cultural repertoires and values – related to group identity – on the other. This interaction takes shape in the agency of local groups (in this case pastoralists) towards hegemonic state policies as well as unrelenting demographic growth, which reduces the ratio of people and livestock per unit of available land – a process that has been going on for many decades. The growing presence of the state is evident in most pastoral areas, trying to incorporate them politically and economically, although it is weak in the provision of services or in controlling the means of violence. This process has a great impact on local group relations and even on the pastoral economy (cf. Abbink 1997; Hagmann & Alemmaya 2008). One of the visible consequences is the gradual expansion of the economic presence of the state, through new markets, taxation, and administrative demands. This is even the case in post-1991 federal Ethiopia, where the official programme is local autonomy and decentralization of power, and that has led in effect to a strengthening of the state in all peripheral areas of the country, notably through processes of top-down cooptation. The policy package of the state includes sedentarization programs for pastoralists (and rangeland development), conversion of the communal grazing lands of pastoral groups (redefined as 'state land') into private holdings for both richer herd owners and outsiders (for commercial enterprises⁴) and given out in lease to foreign countries, with the state elite expecting to reap huge benefits⁵, as well as land alienation for other purposes. More than anything else, it is these processes that lead to a relative 'decline' or at least a weakening of pastoralism: not the problems of the pastoral mode of production itself.

Ethnic conflicts? Culture difference and values in conflict

Conflicts – certainly in pastoral societies – occur usually on a collective basis, not on an individual one. Individual violent disputes are usually labelled criminal or pathological. The many recent violent conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and other countries are often said to be tied to the ethnic differences between the groups. Conflicts are rapidly extended to the entire ethnic group, seen as an extended or metaphoric kinship group. This is the case even though an incident may have started between individuals of herding groups in a small local context. In the last eighteen years in ethno-federal Ethiopia, numerous violent clashes are described as being between such ethnic or territorial units that cherish a separate identity (Nuer-Anywa, Borana-Garri, Somali-Borana, Guji-Borana, Afar-Issa, Afar-Karrayu, Suri-Anywa, Suri-Dizi, Hamar-Borana, etc.; cf. Abbink 2006; Dereje 2006; Asnake 2009; Yasim 2008). Historically, these groups indeed often have different ritual and cultural traditions and

⁴ Cf. the study of Tekele *et al.* 1994.

⁵ See Paul Valley 2009.

languages or dialects, but shared much of the pastoral ways of life and their dealings with the natural environment. They also had well-established traditions of conflict regulation that were based on debate, mediation, compensation and ritual reconciliation via a ceremony of blessings and oaths and joint consumption of sacrificed animals. Cultural differences between pastoral groups were not a major cause for dispute or violence, as they shared much of the same challenges and values concerning male behaviour, gender relations, religious notions, rain rituals, etc. Some groups in conflict could even be considered part of the same people or linguistic community. The level of 'tolerance' toward violent action to redress perceived wrongs was higher among pastoral groups than among others, and although there were perhaps certain codes of fighting (see Musa 1998 for the Somali of the past), there was a perception that some problems were better solved with forceful and violent action than with talking and negotiation.

Among some ethnic groups, e.g., the Guji-Oromo (Tadesse 2009: 194), the Mäcca-Oromo (Bartels 1983: 229, 257), or the Bodi-Me'en (see Fukui 1979 for an influential study), there were or are ideals of specific violent performance and even cognitively rooted representations of violent action that had cultural value in the society. Having killed a large wild animal, e.g., lion or buffalo, or a human from another (ethnic) group enhanced the culturally required killer's status among peers, and was sometimes also required in order to qualify for marriage (the 'meritorious complex'; cf. Braukämper 2002). The discourse of boasting and 'achievement' in having killed others that is prevalent among sections of the young generation in many of these pastoral peoples (but not only them) should not be underestimated. Among others, for the Nuer or the Karimojong (cf. Simonse 2005: 251) it has been argued that the raids on neighbouring groups were deemed necessary to accumulate sufficient livestock for the young (male) generation to be independent and to marry (high bride-wealth). While these ideals are variable and can undergo change, they were at some point quite influential as motivational dispositions towards violent behaviour and not easy to prevent. Generational opposition or tension would then under certain conditions be an independent cause for violent behaviour.

The differences between pastoral peoples and sedentary agriculturalists were significant and visible, often expressed in mutually antagonistic images (of the other's inferiority or backwardness). Ideals on personhood and performance also diverged strongly, as did patterns of leadership and authority (cf. Abbink 2004 on Suri and Dizi conflict). While mediation structures also existed between them (e.g. for dealing with cases of cattle damaging field crops) and disputes were resolved via new agreements and compensation was paid, these structures in many cases are on the decline, or have come under pressure by interfering outside forces in recent decades. Notably in the inter-ethnic, as opposed to the intra-ethnic, domain they have lost force. The Sudanese region of Darfur is the most evident example of this (cf. Flint & De Waal 2005, p. 58; Daly 2007, p. 266), but as ethnographic studies and NGO research reports have suggested (see e.g. Wairagu 2007: 45, Yohannes *et al.* 2005; Abbink 2000), also in Kenya and Ethiopia such structures were neglected or lost status, either because of changing local power balances and new linkages to wider outside networks, or due to misguided state appropriation of local mediation and biased intervention (cf. Ayalew 2001: 181, 183).

Hence, while these mediation structures still exist (or at least the idea that they should be used), and indeed are often cherished by local societies, there is a development toward their devaluation. This points to the fact that more than cultural or ethnic differences *per se* being the cause of growing violent conflict, it is often the interference of the centralizing state that in itself is a major disturbing factor. In its efforts to establish political hegemony and economic advantage, it subverts autonomy and customary dispute resolution procedures, co-opting them and introducing bribes and bias in the local system, and the state also tends to appropriate pastoral land resources without proper alternatives or compensation.⁶ This process is accompanied by a discourse of difference and cultural denigration that is still prevalent, and which inevitably leads to new grievances, disputes, and often violence. Even if there would be real material issues at the base of growing conflicts, such as shrinking pastures, land grabs, closing of access routes, state repression and population or livestock growth exceeding the carrying capacity of the traditionally exploited areas of a group,⁷ leading to 'resource competition' (cf. Getachew 2001: 96-97), it depends on the traditions of conciliation and on judicial state policy whether conflict behaviour takes root or not. In addition, new formations of power and bureaucracy may simply preclude the effective recourse to customary, local-level conflict resolution mechanisms, as the ideological economic and judicial dependence of rural populations on the state structures is growing.

In Ethiopia there is the special case that the political system since 1991 is structured along ethnic lines⁸, with many regions and districts led by a dominant ethnic elite; and when disputes arise on borders, wells or other matters, the local administration takes the side of 'its own group', whatever the judicial merits of the case. These thoroughly 'ethnicized' political arenas breed instability and a politics of 'trench warfare'. The model has led to the rapid escalation of local conflicts along reconstructed ethnic lines, which were then subsequently declared 'the cause' of the conflict.

As one example I briefly discuss here the recent Borana-Garri conflict. Here we see that economic, political, environmental and 'cultural' factors merge, leading to notions of ethnic identity defining the contours of the dispute.

In February 2009 deadly clashes occurred between the Borana Oromo and the Garri pastoral groups, whereby c. 300 people were killed and 70,000 fled their

⁶ The latest threat in southern Ethiopia is the plan to build a huge dam, Gilgel III, in the Omo River, of which the future effects on local pastoral peoples (not consulted) seem grave. See Greste 2009. Another new development endangering the indigenous basis of agrarian and pastoral economies is the giving out of large tracts of land, notably in Ethiopia, to foreign concessionaries or countries, not intending to produce for the local market but for their own, i.e., overseas. This development will have a major impact on Ethiopian rural society, e.g., implying severance of the bond of the local people with the land, alienation from their social and cultural 'capital', and, at the most, employment of a part of them as low paid wage labourers. The agricultural demonstration effect of the foreign producers on Ethiopian rural producers will be minimal, because they will not have a 'development' role. For a study, see Cotula, *et al.*, 2009.

⁷ The decline of 'carrying capacity' is shown by the persistent out migration of (impoverished) members of these societies or of those who have lost rights of access to land and cattle, and their search for wage labour or other sources of livelihood elsewhere.

⁸ Constitutionally, sovereignty lies not in the Ethiopian people, but in the 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of Ethiopia (Constitution, Art. 8.1).

homes. According to a BBC news message⁹, it was apparently triggered by the construction of a new borehole. The Borana live in the Oromiya Regional State; the Garri, a less numerous pastoral group of mixed Somali and Oromo origins, live along and across the border of this State with the Somali Regional State (of Ethiopia).

This was not the first conflict between them, and a clash in 2000 with many people killed and displaced,¹⁰ had apparently not been followed by an effective peace or reconciliation agreement. While in the past these two groups were not good friends either, such numbers of victims and such a level of destruction and expulsion were not known before.

The Garri this time attacked Borana settlements at night, killed every one they met, destroyed and burnt the villages and cattle camps, and raided thousands of livestock. The past two years rainfall had been very bad, and lack of water and pasture were creating hardship among the two peoples. The new water borehole had just been constructed by the Oromiya regional government for the Borana, and there was none for the Garri (who are in another state). In their attack, the Garri also destroyed the drilling rig. Much of the raided cattle was brought across the border to Kenya and sold there, impossible to retrieve.

One Borana witness of the attack said:

"They came on foot, without vehicles, but they had bombs and missile launchers, and at that time we didn't have guns, only sticks to defend ourselves"

"They didn't want us to live well, and water is very important to us, so they attacked our water source."¹¹

One local Borana politician was quoted as saying: "The Somalis [meaning the Garri, JA] are problematic people"

"They are always pushing us. It's as if I give you a place to pitch your tent and the following morning you are telling me to leave; the Borana are not accepting that."

In the absence of effective trans-ethnic mediation or compensation mechanisms, the conflict saw no solution yet and Borana swore to take revenge. In this respect, the Borana were reported to be stockpiling weapons, and in response, the Garri did the same. Government forces are for the time being stationed between the two groups, but no effective peace procedures are yet in place.

Several familiar elements are evident here: traditional tension between two ethnolinguistically different groups (cultural difference), hardship due to drought (ecology), the new, ill-defined regional border dividing previously shared, 'open' pasture lands of two groups (politics), government policy of drilling wells in one place, but not in another

⁹ E. Blunt, 'Water pipe sparks Ethiopian conflict', BBC news, 12 March 2009 (online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7929104.stm>, accessed 17-03-2009).

¹⁰ In 2000 there was a violent clash between the two groups, then with c. 140 people massacred, including women and children, and hundreds displaced (see Abdurahman Ane 2006: 5).

¹¹ See preceding footnote.

(politics), a high number of victims in a few days due to the use of large quantities of modern automatic rifles (new arms technology¹², differentially introduced among, or accessible to, the local groups), and the possible commercialization of raiding, as the cattle were partly sold in distant markets, to outsiders (economics). In short, opportunity structures for conflict are more prevalent, due to different positioning of the groups vis-à-vis the state, and due to durable, structurally entrenched disputes about: (access to) material resources, political and legal power, access to economic opportunities (including markets), and about the relative socio-culture ranking of groups within a context that gets more pervasive. Group identity, solidified with a politicized appeal to 'ethnicity' (*behêreseb* identity), is marshalled to draw the lines, even if factual cultural differences were quite limited.

Types and patterns of conflict

In the type of societies under discussion, conflicts are of a specific, historically well-attested kind. They often follow similar lines or cycles. Three types of conflict can be distinguished, without suggesting that the lines and oppositions are always clear or follow neat 'ethnic lines'

a) Within pastoral groups.

Conflicts between pastoral peoples have often a long history and show elements of 'balanced exchange' (negative reciprocity), characterized by repetitive violent incidents (raids, attacks) but also corrective mechanisms of peace-making. Some affinities between conflicting groups are mutually recognized, based on similarities in their way of life and their customs, e.g., their socio-cultural focus on cattle or camels and certain ritual-religious beliefs. But despite occasional cooperative agreements in times of unexpected adversity affecting them both, different pastoral peoples usually vie for pasture, livestock (raids in times of local drought, meant to replenish lost herds) and water sources. Nevertheless, conquest and driving out others was rare, let alone massive killing. In Africa this picture is changing, however, since the late 1980s, when pastoral groups occasionally started to push out others due to their larger numbers, better armaments, or selective state support (again, Darfur's pastoral-nomadic groups are a good example). As noted, in all societies, certainly in Northeast Africa, customary dispute or conflict resolution procedures seem to be under pressure, so that the state is more and more expected, or reluctantly called in, 'to restore order' – and often after it had positioned itself as a player bent to establish hegemony and pursue its own interests.

A clear tendency nowadays is that conflict starts not so much along communal/ethnic lines but more along generational and individual lines: not the ethnic groups as a whole battle another or have a strategy of expansion, but some individuals or social strata within a group – such as a young generation or age group – perpetrate the violence. However, in its turn it leads to the gradual mobilization of larger units of the same people. Some pastoral peoples have, however, due to population increase and regional migrations, divided into sections that combat one another as if they were separate 'ethnic' groups. The Karimojong of Uganda, for instance, a society flooded by automatic weapons, seem now to be irretrievably split into three antagonistic groups: the Matheniko, Pian and Bokora (Simonse 2005: 250), who raid and kill each other and do neither appeal to compensation procedures nor reconcile.

b) Between pastoral groups and sedentary farming populations.

¹² See, for instance, Mkutu 2003 and 2007; also Mirzeler & Young 2000 for the Karimojong case.

In many conflicts between pastoral groups and sedentary-agricultural peoples, notions of moral community and affinity are often not extended to the opponent. The conflicts are more tenacious and irreconcilable. Apart from historical enmity due to past campaigns of violent state formation by large pastoralist peoples (e.g., the Fulani states in West Africa) and recurring structural oppositions between ways of life and livelihood systems, there are often additional cultural differences, such as language, traditions of origin, authority structures, prestige ranking, religious tradition, and life-cycle rituals. These can lead to engrained cultural perceptions of 'difference' that are actively cherished as 'good' or 'bad' and, despite overlapping zones of similarity and shared activities, are still socially reproduced on both sides.

In many cases, violent conflict now typically takes the form of raids by pastoralists on sedentary peasant cultivators and their fields or villages, who are vulnerable.¹³ In this pattern of conflict, exploited by the Sudanese state elite, has led to the devastation of an entire region and its systems of livelihood (cf. Daly 2007). These raids, for a variety of reasons, make many victims, and the meagre possessions of the cultivators (a few heads of livestock, clothing, or money) are taken and often leave them destitute. Retaliation is usually impossible, because the peasants are less well-armed and more under the control of the government. In pre-state conditions, there was often a delicate, negotiated (contractual) balance between these two kinds of groups, with rights and duties as well as some ritual complementarity clearly defined. These notions are now largely eroded, and conflict between sedentary farmers and pastoral groups tends to evolve into cyclical local warfare. Economic relations, not to speak of inter-marriages, are then declining steeply. The Darfur situation is a prime example (cf. Prunier 2005, Daly 2007). Ethnic stereotypes gain the upper hand and become a factor in enemy images and further conflict behaviour.

c) Between the state and local groups.

In many African countries the state is weak and dysfunctional, not providing services or effective legal redress to citizens, but it is still expanding its administrative and military presence in many formerly outlying areas. The aims are political and economic: stabilization of border areas, controlling of insurgent activities, and opening up land for external investment or resource extraction¹⁴ and taking a share of profits and taxes. The development of game parks for tourism is also one example; having recently created problems and controversy, e.g. in southern Ethiopia (cf. the experiences with the EU funded National Parks project, 1994-1998, and the African Parks Foundation, 2004-2008). Local people in marginal pastoral areas are seldom consulted, and are confronted with state enclosures, hunting bans

¹³ During my fieldwork period among the Suri agro-pastoralists in Southern Ethiopia in the 1990s, many such raids were carried out on Dizi villages. Markakis (2004: 26) mentions a raid of the Pokot on the Marakwet in northern Kenya, where 50 Marakwet were killed. The list of such conflicts is long. The Darfur war is marked by a consistent and organized pattern of destructive attacks of pastoralists (or former pastoralists), augmented by state-supported militias of bandits and robbers, on the sedentary farming populations in central Darfur.

¹⁴ One example among many is the campaign of the state authorities in Niger against the Tuareg in the north because it wants to mine the uranium found in their area. See e.g., the 'BBC news message: Niger's Tuareg rebels demand share of uranium cash', 23 July 2009, accessed 10 August 2009 at: (<http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL20182175>)

and prohibitions on mobility. When clashes occur between two pastoral groups or a pastoral group and a farmer group, the government often comes in too late and lets the conflict rage on before efforts at mediation or settlement are attempted. A state-sponsored peace ceremony or agreement is often incomplete and does hardly set about to solve the underlying long-term problems, because for addressing them political reform and costly policies for development are needed.

Many of the problems between groups relate the heritage of colonial borders, across which pastoral groups move to exploit traditional seasonal pasture land, although they are formally not allowed to do so any longer as nominal citizens of another country. Long-term ecological and political developments or decisions have had economic consequences that induce people to take action or to resist, sometimes in violent ways. But there is also the persistent view by outsiders that pastoralists live in quite different spaces, far from 'civilization'.

Common forms of violent action among pastoral populations as well as sedentary farming people (although the latter more often as victims) are:

- * livestock raiding
- * attack on villages
- * targeted or random killings
- * ambushes to rob people
- * attacking traders or travellers going to the markets, and
- * abductions.

When disputes arise, the impulse among the contending parties nowadays is often not to send a delegation and ask for discussion and negotiation through established channels, but to 'create facts' by acts of violence, to intimidate, eliminate or to chase out people from disputed areas by one of the means or tactics just mentioned (see also the model in the Appendix). This leads to spirals of violence that are not easily broken, not even by customary ritual leaders or religious figures. A neglected issue of attention here is the *nature* of the violence perpetrated in contemporary conflicts: 'new' forms of abuse and cruelty in fighting often create deep psychological scars and implacable hatred among people. Conflicts in addition often lead to damaging livelihood prospects, as fields cannot be safely cultivated, with food scarcity the result, and livestock cannot optimally access essential grazing areas, leading to their weakening and often death.

The impact of state policies and trans-border linkages of pastoralist conflicts

While no one doubts that the modern state, also in developing countries, has a prime role to play in de-escalating conflicts, maintain justice, and invest in service provision and 'development', there are conditions that make all this difficult. For example, a problem for state authorities is to effectively counter-act long-term ecological and economic changes in the pastoral areas: there is climate change, less rainfall, demographic expansion, and periodic livestock disease. There are trans-border conflicts or civil wars impacting on neighbouring groups, including the rapid spread of modern arms, often procured in one country and used in another. The impact of the southern Somalia conflicts on Ethio-Somali border areas is one example; the expansion of the Nuer in the Ethio-Sudanese border area (Gambela), threatening the Anywa people, another.

In many pastoralist areas, state authorities have given up the semblance of exercising consensual authority, and 'rule' by force and violence (Darfur, northern Uganda, the Ogaden, northeast Kenya), although claims to sovereign power over the areas are not given up. As noted above, in other areas inhabited by pastoral peoples, state authority and its policing functions are gradually expanding in symbolic and material form (offices, police stations, etc.), although they are neither very efficient nor fair.

Incorporation of the marginal pastoral areas is thus often part of a state (re)building process, whereby cooptation and control are seen as essential. This policy from above has political and economic consequences, e.g. overall disempowerment of local people in their own areas, resented by pastoralists for politico-economic and cultural reasons. Trans-border economic activities – e.g., transhumance or livestock trade – are often also hindered by the state authorities, with the intent to control them and collect taxes, but the effect is to reduce the potential economic local benefits, to disturb customary patterns of exchange, and introduce an often arbitrary 'legality' of certain economic practices. In addition, land expropriations for external investment are often made without consultation of local people, let alone compensation. The cultural hegemony of state policy and its civilizational narratives or ideology leads in many cases to predictable depreciation of local traditions. A prime example is the state prohibition, some years back, of ceremonial stick duelling – deemed 'violent' – among the Suri people in southwest Ethiopia, or the interference of the Ethiopian state in Borana-Oromo rituals such as the *gumi gaayyo*, a big initiation and generation-set ceremony held every eight years (The last one was in 2004). The authorities then descend on the Borana ceremonial meeting place with a host of officials and media people seemingly to 'annex' this event, intending to determine much of the proceedings and to advise on 'policy outcomes'. This seems to show a lack of respect for an important local cultural tradition and incorrectly puts political demands on it.

At the same time, the state authorities have great difficulty or reluctance in investing in educational, medical, infrastructural and other facilities in the pastoral areas, or to put acceptable political mechanisms in place that prevent conflict or effectively allow mediation in cases of emerging disputes. There is much scope for taking the pastoral areas more seriously in this respect, all the more so because pastoral people link up with their ethnic or regional brethren across national borders (Somali, Afar, Gabbra, Maasai, etc.).

In their dealings with pastoralists, state authorities would also do better to recognize the relative autonomy of pastoral peoples, both politically and economically. Sedentary rain-fed agriculture will not be possible in the pastoral areas and in general livestock herding is more viable there than other agrarian pursuits. This means for example that the usual plans for the 'sedentarization' of pastoralist people should be modified. The state should also, perhaps with NGO assistance, institute conflict warning systems and establish a working local justice system that utilizes *both* the appeals to local customary mechanisms of dispute resolution as well as to a modern court system. If these things are in place, then the rationality of appealing to them, instead of grabbing the gun, is more evident. Donor countries have provided funding for such initiatives, but they have not been effectively used or monitored.

In sum, the state authorities might be called upon to recognize the specificity of pastoral problems and their wider impact on sedentary populations, and enhance the political representation of pastoralists in over-arching structures (cf. Lister 2004) so that they can build

local alliances and become partners in developing policies more towards compromise and cooperation with their sedentary neighbours. In Ethiopia, this is partly happening on the regional and zonal levels, where pastoral representatives are gradually more visible and allowed to air their views. Developing policies on the ground, however, also requires recognizing the useful practical role of local (and up to a point, international) NGOs.¹⁵

'Traditional' conflict management procedures: prospects and realities

A start to conflict management, or rather transformation of conflict into manageable structures, is to depart from the immediate concern of the parties in a specific conflict: what are the casualties and the damage, how do they discursively frame their problems and opposition to others in a historical perspective, and trying to weigh who tells what version of the disputes and why. The trajectory of conflict can be analysed in event sequences and against the background of contextual factors, like (see the model in the Appendix) the long-term conditions of inequality, marginalization, environmental stress (Meier, Bond & Bond 2007), and problematic state policies of hegemony and incorporation. The third step is to reconstruct the 'trigger events', or the immediate agency of those involved, and address them concretely. Here decision-theory is needed: who initiates/decides on violent action, who joins and why?

In view of the precarious long-term political-ecological conditions of pastoral and agro-pastoral groups in Africa, it is impossible to expect that they will *not* be in conflict in the foreseeable future. But the puzzle or the cause for worry is the pressure on the mediation structures, of procedures of agreement-reaching and of shared action that could maintain or restore (some of) the common economic activities (e.g., sharing wells, dry season pastures, use of stretches of bush or forest) that the groups customarily resorted to, and to a large extent still do (cf. Desalegn *et al.* 2005; Lemma 2008; Ahmed & Yared 2008). Here the modern states in the Horn of Africa have mostly failed, either in 'early warning' and policing or in taking the problems and emerging violent conflicts of these groups seriously – probably because the latter were seen as located in 'marginal', ill-served areas, of no direct political significance to the state. As the persistent Ogaden conflict in southeast Ethiopia (a new round of violent confrontations started in 2007, and is still going on) has shown, this was a great miscalculation: pastoral groups are more and more involved in trans-border resistance movements, criminal activities (commercial cattle rustling), and perhaps also in radical-militant (if not terrorist) activities: see the Ogaden National Liberation Front's (ethnic Somalis) attack in April 2007 on an oil exploration site in Ethiopia, killing 74 people in cold blood; activities of Somalis in the Kenya and Ethiopia frontier areas (cf. Osambia 2000); the Darfur-Chad rebel and criminal movements; or the Kanmojong disturbances in northeast Uganda (Simonse 2005).

Phase one of a policy towards conflict resolution is to study (remnants of) traditional mechanisms of mediation and examine how they could be revived or given new leases of life, perhaps with new externally provided incentives. Externally imposed top-down measures, like the massive use of force, have a temporary clamp-down effect but rarely a beneficial long-term impact. Phase two might be a bringing together of local pastoral groups or peoples

¹⁵ In Ethiopia this is now a big problem because of a new law (of 2009) severely restricting if not crippling the activities and mandates of NGOs in the country.

in arenas of discussion. In fact, this kind of development is occurring in southern Ethiopia in the past five years, where some NGOs have successfully stimulated pastoralists to take the initiative in a series of meetings, where issues of conflict and peace-making could at least be discussed (see AEPDA 2008; IRIN 2009), and in some instances have led to a mitigation of specific local conflicts.

Conclusion: towards the acceptance and management of structural instability

As was noted at the start of this paper, expectations of conflict resolution in areas of conflict, notably in marginal pastoral areas, are in general too high-strung. Underlying ecological-economic, political and cultural problems are long-term and persistent, and local political culture in developing countries in Africa is largely authoritarian and state-centred, not geared to the effective flow and use of local traditions or initiatives. Cycles of conflict are often the result. It is sensible to start with the recognition that in pastoral areas the relations among pastoral groups themselves, as well as between pastoral people and cultivators or state agents, are structurally unstable. Mirzeler & Young (2000: 426) even have talked about the Karimojong as a situation with 'a stable form of disorder'. But sometimes new rules of access to resources and balances of power can emerge from persistent violent conflict (cf. Unruh 2005).

The role of the state can of course be important in contributing to conflict management (cf. Yohannes *et al.* 2004: 34-35). But it must be seen as one partner, and must rather provide the wider normative and institutional framework for developing solutions, but not prescribe them with armed force and administrative rigour from above. Policies that tie in with local views and initiatives, find socio-cultural resonance, and appeal to trans-group cooperation in areas of common interest (e.g., common property management) are to be stimulated. As said, there are also initiatives from within pastoral peoples themselves to at least start addressing problems. This was evident in December 2007 in the large meeting of representatives of 17 pastoral peoples in the Sudan-Ethiopia border area, held in Kanganen, southern Ethiopia.¹⁶ Only by patiently building on the results of such meetings can any headway be made in addressing conflict and its underlying causes, as well as in reflecting on the revival or adaptive reconstruction of (customary) dispute resolutions acceptable to all.

¹⁶ See IRIN news message, 'Ethiopia: healing the scars of conflict', 17 December 2007 (online: www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=75843). See also the report of AEPDA 2008, cited above.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to the participants at the Workshop on traditional conflict resolution, at the Bonn Centre for Conversion (Bonn, 27 March 2009), for their critical comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers of EJSSH for their careful reading of the text and their criticism and valuable suggestions, urging me to improve this paper.

References

- Abbink, Jon. 1997. "The shrinking cultural and political space of East African pastoral societies." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 6(1): 1-17.
- Abbink, Jon. 2004. "Ritual and political forms of violent practice among the Suri of Southern Ethiopia." In T. Young, ed. *Readings in African Politics*, Oxford: James Currey, pp. 80-89.
- Abbink, Jon. 2006. "Ethnicity and conflict generation in Ethiopia: some problems and prospects of ethno-regional federalism." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24(3): 389-414.
- Abdurrahman Ame. 2006. "Cross-border livestock trade, small arms and conflict in pastoral areas of the Horn of Africa: case study from Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya." Paper for the Eleventh Biennial Conference of the IASPC (*International Association for the Study of Common Property*). (online: www.indiana.edu/~iascp/bali/papers/Ame_Abdurahman.pdf).
- Adano, Wario R., Karen Witsenburg & Ton Dietz. "Scarcity of natural resources and pastoral conflicts in northern Kenya: an inquiry." *Horn of Africa Bulletin* 21(1): 1-5.
- AEPDA (Atowoykisi Ekisil Pastoralist Development Association). 2008. *The Peace Generation. Reporting from the South Omo Pastoralist Gathering, Nyangatom woreda, Kangaten, Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: UN OCHA Pastoralist Communication Initiative.
- Ahmed Mohammed Bouh & Yared Mammo. 2008. "Indigenous conflict management and resolution mechanisms on rangelands in Somali regional state, Ethiopia." *Nomadic Peoples* 12(1): 109-121.
- Asnake Kefale. 2009. *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study of the Somali and Bentshangul-Gumuz Regions*. Leiden: University of Leiden (PhD thesis).
- Ayalew Gebre. 2001. *Pastoralism under Pressure. Land Alienation and Pastoralist Transformations among the Karrayu, Eastern Ethiopia, 1941 to the Present*. Maastricht: Shaker Publishing (Dissertation, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague).
- Bartels, L. 1983. *Oromo Religion*. Berlin: D. Reimer Verlag.
- Braukämper, U. 2002. "The mentorious complex: a German approach to Ethiopian anthropology" In Baye Yimam, et al., eds, *Ethiopian Studies at the End of the Second Millennium*, Addis Ababa. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies. vol. 2, pp. 706-72.
- Cotula, L., et al. 2009. *Land Grab or Development Opportunity? Agricultural Investment and International Land Deals in Africa*. Rome -London: FAO - IIED - IFAD.
- Daly, M.W., 2007. *Darfur's Sorrow. A History of Destruction and Genocide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dereje Feyissa. 2006. "Ethnic federalism and conflicting political projects: the case of Anywaa Nuer relations in the Gambela regional state." In S. Uhlir, et al., eds, *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg 2003*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. pp. 953-960.
- Desalegn Chemed Edossa, Mukand Singh Babel, Ashim Das Gupta & Seleshi Bekele Awulachew. 2005. "Indigenous systems of conflict resolution in Oromia, Ethiopia", Paper for the international workshop on 'African Water Laws: Plural Legislative Frameworks for Rural Water Management in Africa', 26-28 January 2005, Johannesburg.
- Fukui, Katsuyoshi. 1979. "Cattle colour symbolism and inter-tribal homicide among the Bodi." In: K. Fukui & D. Turton, eds. *Warfare among East African Herders*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, pp. 147-178.
- Getachew, Kassa Negussie. 2001. *Among the Pastoral Afar in Ethiopia. Tradition, Continuity and Social Change*. Utrecht: International Books.
- Greste, Peter. 2009. "The dam that divides Ethiopians". BBC news message. 26 March 2009 (accessed 20 June 2009 at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7959814.stm>).
- Hagmann, Tobias and Alemmaya Mulugeta. 2008. "Pastoral conflicts and state-building the Ethiopian lowlands." *Afrika Spektrum* 43 (1): 19-37.
- Homer-Dixon, Thomas. 1999. *Environment, Scarcity and Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- IRIN. 2009. "Ethiopia: giving peace a chance in South Omo". UN OCHA IRIN news service message. 21 May 2009.

- Lemna Yiflashewa Betru. 2008. *Kommunale Selbstverwaltung als Beitrag zur Ent-Ethnisierung ethnischer Konflikte in Äthiopien*. Hamburg: Verlag Kovac.
- Lister, Sarah. 2004. *The processes and dynamics of pastoralist representation in Ethiopia*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (IDS Working Paper 220).
- Markakis, John. 1998. *Resource Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.
- Markakis, John. 2004. *Pastoralism on the Margin*. London: Minority Rights Group International (Minority Rights Group Report).
- Meier, Patrick, Doug Bond & Joe Bond. 2007. "Environmental influences on pastoral conflict in the Horn of Africa". *Political Geography* 26: 716-735.
- Mkutu, Kennedy Agade. 2003. *Pastoral conflict and small arms: the Kenya-Uganda border region*. London: SaferWorld.
- Mkutu, Kennedy Agade. 2007. "Small arms and light weapons among pastoral groups in the Kenya-Uganda border area." *African Affairs* 106(422): 47-70.
- Mustafa Mirzeler and Crawford Young. 2000. "Pastoral politics in the northeast periphery in Uganda: AK47 as change agent." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 38(3): 407-430.
- Musa Yusuf Hussein, ed. 1998. *Spared from the Spear, Traditional Somali Behaviour in Warfare*. Nairobi: International Committee of the Red Cross.
- Osamba, Josiah O. 2000. "The sociology of insecurity: cattle rustling and banditry in Northwest Kenya." *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 1(2): 11-38.
- Prunier, G. 2005. *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Sahlu Kidane. 2003. "Population, development, and environment in Ethiopia". Washington, DC, ESCP Report, Issue 10: 43-51.
- Simonse, Simon. 2005. "Warriors, hooligans and mercenaries: failed statehood and the violence of young male pastoralists in the Horn of Africa." In J. Abbink & I. van Kessel, eds. *Vanguard or Vandals. Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*, Leiden – Boston: Brill, pp. 242-266.
- Solomon Gebre. 1992. "Conflict resolution in traditional Amhara society." *Sociology-Ethnology Bulletin* (Addis Ababa) 1(2): 55-60.
- Tadesse Berisso. 2009. "Guji-Oromo and their neighbours: state policies and local factors". In G. Schlee & E.E. Watson, eds, *Changing Identifications and Alliances in Northeast Africa, vol. 1: Ethiopia and Kenya*, pp. 191-199. New York - Oxford: Berghahn.

- Tekele Tilahun, et al. 1994. "From communal grazing to privatized enclosures: a case study of changing land tenure in Region 5." In Dessalegn Rahmato, ed., *Land Tenure and Land Policy in Ethiopia after the Derg*. Addis Ababa: Institute of Development Research, Addis Ababa University, pp. 264-277.
- Unruh, Jon D. 2005. "Changing conflict resolution institutions in the Ethiopian pastoral commons: the role of armed confrontation in rule-making." *GeoJournal* 64(3): 225-237.
- Vallely, Paul. 2009. "Wish you weren't here: the devastating effects of the new colonialists". *The Independent*, 9 August 2009.
- Wairagu, Francis K. 2007. "Raids and battles involving Turkana pastoralists." In P. Goldsmith, ed., *Fighting for Inclusion. Conflicts among Pastoralists in Eastern Africa and the Horn*. Nairobi: DPMF, pp. 34-54.
- Woldetsaie Kahsay. 2003. "Pastoralism in Eritrea: herder responses to climatic stress." *African Geographical Review* 22: 15-28.
- Yasin Mohammed Yasin. 2008. "The regional dynamics of the Afar and Issa-Somali conflict in the Horn of Africa." In Wolbert Smidt & Kinfe Abraham, eds, *Discussing Conflict in Ethiopia: Conflict Management and Resolution*. Münster - Zürich: Lit Verlag, pp. 23-28.
- Yohannes Gebre-Michael, Kassaye Hadgu & Zerihun Ambaye. 2005. *Addressing pastoralist conflict in Ethiopia: the case of the Kuraz and Hamer Subdistricts of South Omo Zone*. Nairobi - Addis Ababa - London: Africa Peace Forum- EPRDA - SaferWorld.

APPENDIX: Sketch of a generative mode of violent conflict (in pastoral societies)

