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Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions

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Citation

Adegehe, A. K. (2009, June 11). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13839>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Inter-regional Conflicts: Somali Region

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined intra-regional conflicts within the Benishangul-Gumuz region. This and the next chapter (chapter 9) deal with inter-regional conflicts between the study regions and their neighbours. The federal restructuring carried out by dismantling the old unitary structure of the country led to territorial and boundary disputes. Unlike the older federations created by the union of independent units, which among other things have stable boundaries, creating a federation through federal restructuring leads to controversies and in some cases to violent conflicts. In the Ethiopian case, violent conflicts accompany the process of intra-federal boundary making.

Inter-regional boundaries that divide the Somali region from its neighbours (Oromia and Afar) are ill defined and there are violent conflicts along these borders. In some cases, resource conflicts involving Somali, Afar and Oromo clans transformed into more protracted boundary and territorial conflicts. As will be discussed in this chapter, inter-regional boundary making also led to the re-examination of ethnic identity.

This chapter examines two cases on the impact of ethnic regionalisation on inter-regional conflicts between the Somali region and its Oromo and Afar neighbours. First, it examines how the process of boundary making led to a territorial contest among three Afaan-Oromo¹ speaking clans in the border town of Moyale, Southern Ethiopia. Second, it considers how the ethnic regionalisation process affected the age-old Afar²-Issa conflict in northeast Ethiopia. Although the conflicts in both cases are not new, the federal restructuring process has transformed them into inter-regional boundary conflicts.

8.2 Background to Somali Relations with the Oromo and the Afar

The Somali, the Oromo and the Afar belong to the eastern Cushitic linguistic group of the Horn of Africa. They relate to each other in terms of language and culture. Sociologically, they are all organised in patriarchal clan structures. Both the Afar and the Somali practice Islam almost exclusively and are predominantly engaged in nomadic pastoralism. In contrast, the Oromo practice Islam, Christianity and traditional religion. Nevertheless, those Oromo clans who reside coterminous with the Afar and the Somali largely follow the Islamic faith and are predominantly engaged in pastoralism.³ While Islam could serve as an instrument of integration, pastoralism, which depends on the mobility of livestock, brings them into frequent resource conflicts.

There are both similarities and differences among the three groups and in their relationship with the Ethiopian State. The Somali and the Afar remained at both the geographic and political periphery for much of the 20th century. The Oromo, in contrast, played a key role in Ethiopian politics at least since the beginning of the 20th century (Clapham 1988: 217).

Under the new regional administrative structure, the Somali and the Oromia regions share a long boundary that stretches for more than 1000 kilometres from the Jijiga highlands in the northeast to the Ethio-Kenyan borderlands in the southeast. As neighbouring ethnic communities, the Somali and the Oromo have longstanding relationships. Both were key players in the 16th century major population movements in the Horn of Africa, which greatly contributed to the present distribution of ethnic groups (Baxter 1978: 284; Lewis 1966: 27). According to Herbert Lewis, interactions between the easternmost Oromo and the westernmost Somali began during the 1500s and 1600s as the Oromo were expanding to the north, northeast, and southeast (1966: 35). This means the two groups were competing for about 400 years in their borderlands for water, grazing and agricultural land (Lewis 1966; Turton 1975).

Because of their centuries old interactions, the Somali and the Oromo have several commonly shared socio-cultural values. For instance, some Oromo and Somali groups have been either Somalised or Oromised.⁴ In this respect, the ethnic identities of Garre and the Gabbra that today compete with the Borana for control of the Moyale town

were influenced by years of Oromo-Somali interactions in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya.⁵

The relationship between the Oromo and the Somali largely remained in the realm of culture and local alliance formation, until it began to change and became politicised because of the partition of the Horn of Africa at the beginning of the 20th century by different powers; state nationalism and ethnic politics

Since 1992, Ethiopia's policy of ethnic regionalisation also led to the emergence of inter-regional boundary conflicts between the Somali and the Oromo. The gravity of inter-regional boundary disputes between the two regions is such that both instituted regional bureaus responsible for border affairs. One important outcome of this process is the weakening of an overarching solidarity between the Oromo and the Somali through the Islamic faith against the political centre in Addis Ababa. This was quite a reversal from the situation during the 1970s. Indeed, the alliance between the two groups seemed so strong during the 1970s that I.M. Lewis came up with the idea of providing an ideological foundation for this partnership by promoting the cult of Sheik Hussein of Bale, which both the Somali and Muslim Oromo revere (1980: 412).

Even if menacing for the local communities, inter-regional boundary disputes that have plagued relationships between the Oromo and the Somali regions do not present a credible security threat to the federal government in Addis Ababa. Unwittingly or not, these conflicts contributed to forestall the development of a wider Oromo-Somali alliance against the political centre.

The Somali also share a long frontier with the Afar. It is the Issa clan of the Somali that predominantly interacts with the Afar. The Afar live in an ethnically and geographically well-defined region known as the Afar Triangle. Like their Somali neighbours, they are divided into clans and lineages (Kloos 1982: 22).⁶ The Issa clan whom the Afar border with belong to the Dir⁷ clan family of the Somali and live in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia (Lewis 2002b: 56). In Ethiopia, the Issa constitute the second largest Somali clan next to the Ogaden. In Djibouti, where the Afar comprises the second largest ethnic group, the Issa are dominant in terms of population size and politics (Ambroso 1994: 27). Like their Afar neighbours, the Issa are predominantly engaged in nomadic pastoralism. They are also involved in transport and cross border businesses (Markakis 2003a: 447).

Historically, relationships between the Afar and the Issa were mainly characterised by conflicts.⁸ There are few exceptions to this general trend. One of these instances happened during the 16th century Ahmed Gagn war against the Ethiopian (Abyssinian) Kingdom in which both the Afar and the Somali allied with the forces of Ahmed Gagn (Pastner 1979: 101). Like any neighbouring pastoralist groups whose livelihood depends on mobility of livestock, the two groups frequently clash over scarce and vital resources (Ali 1997; Flintan and Imeru 2002; Getachew 2001b). There are also cultural ethos that encourage inter-clan violence between the two groups (Thesiger 1935: 4-5).

Since the end of the 19th century, interventions by external players increased the complexity and intractability of the conflict between the Afar and the Issa. Indeed, the conflict between the two groups cannot be considered as mere localised conflicts between neighbouring pastoral groups over water and pasture. There is deep involvement of external actors ranging from national governments in the region to cross border traders. With this background, the next sections discuss the impact of federal restructuring on the relationship between the Somali and their Oromo and Afar neighbours.

8.3 Somali-Oromia Boundary Conflicts: Case of Moyale

Moyale, a border town between Ethiopia and Kenya, has strategic significance as a gateway to Kenya from southern Ethiopia. An asphalt road connects it to Addis Ababa. Before the reorganisation of local and regional governments in 1992, it was under the Borana administrative region and served as the capital of the Moyale *awraja*.

Like other towns in southern Ethiopia, the development of the Moyale town was associated with the expansion of the Ethiopian State at the end of the 19th century and the formation of administrative and military centres in newly conquered territories. Thus, the majority of the residents were in the service of the government and largely extracted from the northern and central parts of the country.

Since 1992, both the Oromia and the Somali regions claim the town and its surrounding areas. The conflicting claim over Moyale town between the two regions stems from the division that occurred among the three Afaan-Oromo speaking clans over their ethnic identity that is, the Borana, the Garre and the Gabbra.

8.3.1 Nature and evolution of the conflict

The Borana, Garre and Gabbra over the years developed complex relationships in the Borana⁹ region. All of the clans speak Afaan-Oromo. The Borana and the Gabbra clans also use the *gada*¹⁰ institution. Moreover, all of the clans are predominantly engaged in pastoralism. There are, however, differences in terms of ethnic identification. The Borana belong to the Oromo ethnic group, while the ethnic identity of the Garre and Gabbra remains controversial. Getachew Kassa, for instance, characterises the Garre as ‘partly Somali and partly Oromo’ (2003: 1). Similarly, E.R. Turton discusses the fluidity of the identity of the Garre between the Oromo and the Somali as many of them were bilingual and culturally mixed (1975: 536).

Likewise, the ethnic identity of the Gabbra remains uncertain. Günther Schlee (1989: 5), for example, questions the practice of assigning the Gabbra as sub-units of the Borana-Oromo and suggests that these ‘so-called Oromo are more Somali than anything else.’ At the same time, he underlines that even if one accepts the Somaliod¹¹ origin of the Gabbra, it is their Borana-ness, that is, ‘their political association with the Boran and their use of the Boran language [Afaan-Oromo], that sets them apart from [other groups]...and establishes their separate identity...’ (1989: 137). In spite of this, both the Garre and the Gabbra use their Islamic religion as an important aspect of their ethnic marker and a vital factor that unites them with other Somali clans (Schlee 1998: 143).

The main cause of conflicts among the three clans in the past was competition over access to land resources such as water and pasture (Bassi 1997: 271). The three clans also developed such institutions as *negga-Borana* (peace of Borana) and *Tiriso*,¹² which provide stability for inter-clan relations and help manage resource conflicts (Obba 1996: 118-22). However, inter-clan relationships changed after the division of the region among the Ethiopians, the British and Italians at the beginning of the 20th century. Hence, the establishment of artificial boundaries and the divide and rule policies of each of these three powers adversely influenced relationships among the three groups (Bassi 1997: 26; Yacob 1997: 20).

The territorial dispute that emerged between Ethiopia and Somalia since the 1960s because of the latter’s aspiration of uniting all Somali

speaking territories under its jurisdiction adversely affected inter-clan relations. In other words, the inter-state conflict became an inter-clan conflict in the region whereby the Garre and the Borana respectively supported Somalia and Ethiopia.

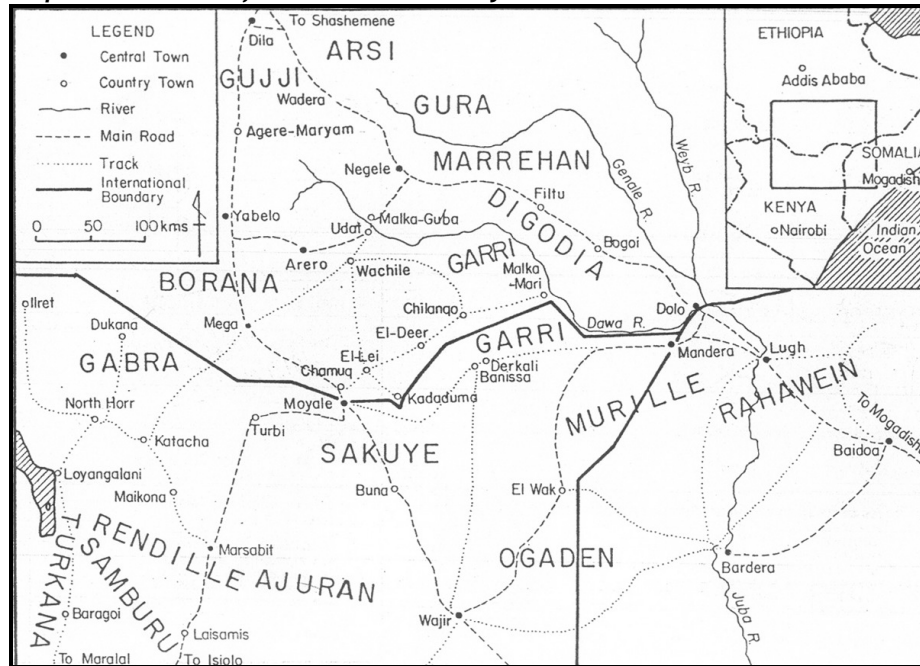
Moreover, when Somalia established the SALF in 1976 the Garre, the Gabbra and other Islamic Oromo clans joined the new movement, while the Borana remained aligned with the Ethiopian government (Gebru 1996: 210). Similarly, the three clans suffered divisions during the 1977-78 Ethio-Somalia war. The Garre and the Gabbra stood by the Somalia government, while the Borana who feared that any military success to Somalia would change the local balance of power in favour of their traditional foes firmly rallied behind Ethiopian defence lines (Yacob 1997: 20-1). Since 1992, the reconstitution of the country into an ethnic federation brought conflicting claims and counter-claims among the three groups. In this respect, all of the three Afaan-Oromo speaking clans have conflicting claims over Moyale town. Initially, when the regions formed in 1992, Moyale was put under the newly established Oromia region and served as the capital of the Oromia Moyale *woreda*.

Even after the EPRDF government decided in 1994 to transfer some territories earlier controlled by the Borana (Oromo) to the Somali region in the name of boundary making, Moyale's status under the jurisdiction of the Oromia region was affirmed and later acknowledged in a letter issued by former Prime Minister Tamrat Layne, to effect the aforementioned territorial changes (1994). However, the Garre whose political class sought to join the Somali region challenged this decision.

Because of the territorial dispute between the two regions, there is now a dual Oromo and Somali administration in Moyale town. The town also serves as the capital of two competing *woreda* – Oromia-Moyale and Somali-Moyale. Due to the presence of two competing *woreda* and municipal administrations within one town, there are dual authorities for almost all government activities at the district level. For instance, there are Oromia and Somali police stations, courts, public prosecutor, finance, education and other offices with overlapping and competing jurisdictions. More importantly, the town is divided into (ethnic) quarters – the eastern part of the town for the Garre (Somali) and the western part for the Borana (Oromo). The asphalt road that dissects the town serves as unofficial boundary. The continued standoff between the two regions led to the worsening of relationships among the three clans. As a result, there are frequent conflicts within the town.¹³ Indeed, as one informant sarcastically noted, 'there are three dysfunctional governments

in Moyale town that include the federal and the Somali and Oromia regional governments resulting in much confusion and uncertainty.¹⁴

Map 8.1 Location of three clans and Moyale



Source (Belete 1999)

Because of the lack of resolution to the Moyale dispute and the presence of competing administrative structures within one town, there are problems in maintaining law and order. As noted by both groups, the duality in administrative structure and the unofficial division within the town enable individuals who commit crime to evade prosecution by fleeing from one sector to the other.¹⁵ Additionally, as a result of the continued standoff, there is a low level of municipal services and construction activities in the town ceased for the last 12 years.

8.3.2 Federal restructuring and the Moyale dispute

The federal restructuring of the country has brought political significance to the question of whether a clan is Oromo or Somali (Schlee and Shongolo 1995: 8). More importantly, as the new ethnic regions have the rights of regional autonomy and secession, stakes are high in the process of marking inter-regional boundaries. Thus, the new line of division between the Oromia and the Somalia regions was considered enormously important for both the local actors in the zone of conflict and the new regional authorities as a way of consolidating the territorial and political identity of their ethnic regions. In other words, the conflict now has regional and ethnic dimension between the Oromia and the Somali regions. This is evident, for instance, in the following statements taken from a document by the Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFedA 2003a:3).

In both regions – Oromia and Somali – regional officials at all levels neither behave as part of the federal system nor take responsibility to protect the welfare of all Ethiopians particularly the lives and properties of peoples of the neighbouring regions. They rather consider themselves as “good” ethnic/ clan leaders and “defenders” of their ethnic territories.

The territorial dispute in Moyale led to the re-examination of the ethnic identity of some of the clans like the Garre and the Gabbra. The issue of marking the boundary of the two regions around Moyale became contentious because not only there were longstanding resource and territorial conflicts among the three clans but also due to the difficulty of dividing the three clans into clear-cut ethnic categories/regions. Indeed, all of the clans in the area had ambivalence about the way they relate to such wider ethnic categories as Oromo and Somali. Even the Borana, who not only speak Afaan-Oromo but also have a central symbolic place in the Oromo clan structure, began only recently to identify themselves as members of the wider Oromo ethnicity. The Garre and the Gabbra have always been ambivalent about their ethnic identity as they are Oromo ‘...by one set of criteria (language...) and Somali by another set of criteria [...religious affiliation] (Schlee and Shongolo 1995: 8). The heavy emphasis placed on ethnicity as a way of representation, citizenship and formation of local and regional administrative structures

in federal Ethiopia may be explained by re-examining the three groups' ethnic identity (Schlee 1998: 143).

The formation of the ethnic regions thus required these groups to take on either their Oromo or Somali identity. This means applying principles of ethnic self-determination, which constitutes the key ethos of Ethiopian ethnic federation, brought a huge challenge to ethnic communities with dual Oromo and Somali identities. In this situation, the question of which group belongs to such wider ethnic categories as Oromo or Somali is not only a question of scholarly enquiry but also an instrument of inclusion and exclusion (Schlee and Shongolo 1995: 8).

The response of the Garre and the Gabbra to the new demand, choosing their ethnicity as either Oromo or Somali, was varied. While the Garre ethnic entrepreneurs decided to take on a Somali identity, the Gabbra remained divided. The former seemed to realise that they had to negotiate which ethnic identity to take on after the collapse of Somalia and the change of the military regime in Ethiopia at the beginning of the 1990s. At the beginning of the transitional period, when the OLF was the second most important political force in the country next to the TPLF/EPRDF, the Garre and their associates reinvented their political front from SALF to Oromo Abbo Liberation Front (OALF). The Borana were suspicious of this move as they saw more of a similarity between the two in terms of ethnic symbols and clan constituency (Bassi 1997: 36; Ibrahim 2005: 49).

In addition to the re-branding of the SALF into an Oromo organisation at the early days of the TGE, the traditional leader of the Garre, Haji Mohammed Hassen Gebaba, sought to take the office of the OLF representative of the Moyale *woreda*. OLF officials then based in Addis Ababa seemed to accept the wish of the Garre leader to represent them, as they were then promoting wider Oromo nationalism on the basis of Afaan-Oromo. The Borana elders saw this as a skilful machination of the Garre, intended to bolster their territorial claim against them by taking advantage of the power vacuum created after the downfall of the Derg (Ibid 11).

However, Garre overtures to Oromo ethnicity ended when the politics of post-1991 Ethiopia began to take shape and after the formation of the ethnic regions, which included a separate region for the Somali. More importantly, the withdrawal of the OLF from the transitional government and its resumption of armed insurgency caused

a dramatic shift in the relationship of the three clans with the Ethiopian State. The Borana, traditionally considered allies of the Ethiopian government became a suspect in the eyes of the EPRDF. In contrast, the Garre and other Somali clans became allies of Addis Ababa in its anti-insurgency activities against the OLF. This dramatic change of policy bewildered and alienated the Borana while at the same time tilted the balance of power in favour of the Garre.¹⁶

The other key factor that seemed to give an additional incentive for the Garre to demand their inclusion into the Somali region was the large influx of Garre and other Somali clansmen to the Moyale town and its surroundings as 'returnees' through controversial refugee repatriation programmes during the 1990s (Bassi 1997). With these important changes, there appeared to be little incentive for the Garre to emphasise their Oromo identity. Thus, their ethnic entrepreneurs chose to join the Somali region. This decision transformed inter-clan conflicts between the Borana and the Garre into a boundary conflict between the newly created Oromia and Somali regions. Soon after their decision to join the Somali region, the Garre laid claim over territories either jointly used by them and the Borana or considered traditional turf of the latter. These included two of the nine famous Borana permanent water wells, the El Leh and El Gof and the border town of Moyale. When the EPRDF government decided on the boundary between the Somali and the Oromia regions in the former Borana administrative region in 1994, it assigned Gof and Leh to the Garre (Tamrat 1994).

In contrast, the question of either joining the Somali or the Oromo regions has been internally divisive for the Gabbra and brought them more conflicts with the Borana. The position of the Gabbra vacillates between the two regions. The Gabbra within Borana dominated areas like Yabello, Arero and Supra identify with the Borana. They nevertheless quietly demand the establishment of a Gabbra special-*woreda*¹⁷ within the Borana zone of the Oromia region. However, this demand is distasteful to the Borana, who fear that if the Gabbra have a special-*woreda*, they would claim Somali identity like the Garre and cause further territorial loss.¹⁸

The Gabbra who identify themselves with the Somali demand the assignment of Moyale and its surroundings to the Somali region. They also attach much importance to those points such as religion (Islam), styles of dress, way of constructing houses and others that make their clan distinct from the Borana, but bring them closer to the Garre and other Somali clans.¹⁹

In 1992, a major conflict between the Gabbra and the Borana occurred after the former rallied behind the OALF. This conflict cost hundreds of lives and displaced thousands of Gabbra. Some of the Gabbra displaced by this conflict fled to the north and found refuge with the Guji, an Oromo clan that has a history of conflict with the Borana. They were settled at a place called Finchwa. Nevertheless, a conflict arose between them and their Guji hosts in 2005 that led to their displacement yet again. The cause for this violence appears to have been suspicion among the Guji that if the Gabbra remain on their territory, they would demand their own administrative structures. Hundreds of Gabbra displaced from Finchwa are now in Surpa, between Ageremariam and Yabello on the main asphalt road that connects Addis Ababa and Moyale. The displaced Gabbra live in plastic makeshift houses. As there is still potential for violence, the government deployed the Federal Police in Surpa and its surroundings as observed in March 2007.

Since 1991, internal divisions and vacillation between Oromia and Somali mark Gabbra's response to the need to negotiate its ethnic identity within Ethiopia's federal structure. For instance, after the 1992 violence, the Gabbra with the help of the Oromia region reinstituted a *gada* institution, weakened over the years by Gabbra adherence to Islam.²⁰ Hassan Kella, one of the prominent leaders of the Gabbra, was elected *Abba Gada* (head of the *gada*) and later became a member of the Oromia regional council (Ibrahim 2005: 49).

After the reinstitution of the *gada*, when the idea of joining the Somali region apparently got the upper hand among some of their ethnic entrepreneurs, the Gabbra in the Moyale area reinstituted a traditional administrative institution called *Teliya*. This institution emphasises Islam and resembles Somali traditional clan administration. In a surprising move, Hassan Kella, installed earlier as the *Abba Gada* of the Gabbra, became head of the *Teliya*.²¹

Hassan's position change accompanied his change of allegiance from Oromo to Somali ethnicity. He presently advocates Gabbra identification with the Somali and the assignment of Moyale town to the Somali region. When asked why he changed his allegiance, Hassan stated that 'he was involved in the restoration of the *gada* and became member of the Oromia regional council in order to provide security for his people.' He alleged that these actions had not brought security to the Gabbra.

Consequently, he switched allegiance from the Oromo to the Somali region. He furthermore defended his position by saying:²²

All the Gabbra in terms of ancestry (genealogy) are Somali. The way we build houses is more similar with the Somali than the Borana. We keep camels like our Somali brothers, while the Borana were traditionally engaged in the husbandry of cattle. We worship one God (Allah) like the Somali, while the Borana do not worship in one God. We share more similarities with the Somali clans than the Borana. As a result, the Gabbra are no Oromo but Somali.

Another high profile Gabbra politician, Shenu Godana, also switched his loyalty from the Oromia to the Somali region. Shenu served as member of the federal parliament representing the OPDO and the Moyale *woreda* for ten years (1995-2005) in Addis Ababa. After his tenure at the federal parliament, he became head of the Borana *zone's* Bureau of Popular Organisation and Mobilisation. Nevertheless, when the Oromia region sacked him from his position, he switched his allegiance to the Somali. Consequently, the Somali region gave him a position within the Somali Moyale *woreda* administration. He now promotes the idea that the Gabbra are all Somali and should be under the administration of the Somali region. He defends his switching of identity as follows.²³

Initially, when the EPRDF controlled the country (1991-2), the Gabbra, the Garre and the Borana rallied behind different Oromo ethnic movements. When ethnic and clan division occurred, the Garre joined the Somali; some Gabbra also joined the Somali. I and some other Gabbra leaders, however, joined the Oromo. The reason for our decision to join the Oromia region was to safeguard the interest of our people who live in the midst of the Borana in such areas as Yabello, Arero, Negele and others. We were afraid that if all of the Gabbra leaders join the Somali, the Borana would attack our clan. My decision to leave the OPDO (Oromia) and join the SPDP (Somali) was because of my realisation that I could not provide security to the Gabbra who live in the midst of the Borana. I felt that the officials of the Borana *zone* were directly and indirectly involved in Borana violence against the Gabbra. When I voiced my opposition about the handling of the conflict between the Borana and the Gabbra to the zonal authorities, I was removed from my position. I then went to the Somali region and was given a position within the Moyale Somali *woreda*.

In addition to these high profile cases, allegiance switching by Gabbra local and regional officials appears to be a recurrent phenomenon in the Moyale *woreda*. For instance, in March 2007, the top local news in the Moyale town was the defection of two members of the Moyale Oromia *woreda* cabinet to the Somali region.

The unresolved dispute over the status of Moyale town could explain why the Somali region provides positions to the Gabbra. Indeed, if the dispute is going to be resolved through a local referendum, prominent Gabbra appointed by the Somali region could mobilise their clansmen in favour of the Somali region. One Oromo official of the Borana *zone* complains that 'Whenever Gabbra officials in the Oromia region are sacked from their positions either because of lack of competence or of alleged criminal activities, they flee to the Somali region and the Somali region gives them political appointments.'²⁴ Individuals who are involved in such activities despite their claim of 'providing security to their people' appear largely motivated by personal gain. Indeed, the salaries and other benefits that accompany political offices at local and regional levels are valuable economic resources, which entice the Gabbra ethnic entrepreneurs to switch their allegiance from the Oromo to the Somali.

The reorganisation of the country into an ethnic federation also affected Garre and Borana relations. It brought them different challenges and opportunities. For the former, the formation of the Somali region gave them the opportunity to identify themselves as Somali and join that region with whatever territory they managed to seize from the latter. It also gave them new allies from the Somali region. The newly established Oromia region on its part emerged as the major player in the territorial dispute among the three clans representing the Borana Oromo.

Indeed, the Moyale dispute has major political significance for Oromo nationalism. As the Borana maintain some of the key pristine elements of Oromo identity such as the *gada* and its associated rituals, they are considered the eldest son of all the Oromo clans and receive seniority in Oromo rituals (Mohammed 1990: 6). Therefore, the Moyale dispute is an important issue for the Oromia region. The Oromia regional officials could not afford to see the assignment of Moyale town to the Somali, as this could undermine the confidence of the typically suspicious Oromo public about their steadfastness in protecting 'Oromo interest.' In fact, in spite of the widely held view among the Borana that the OPDO is powerless regarding the territorial conflict between

themselves and the Garre (Ibrahim 2005: 46-7), Oromia regional officials are still reluctant to see any decision that would transfer the Moyale town to the Somali region. Accordingly, Junedin Saddo ex-president of the Oromia region and presently federal cabinet minister underscored that the issue of Moyale is a 'make or break' for the Oromia region and its 'vanguard' party, the OPDO. Hence, he cannot compromise on it (Muhdin 2004: 3).

The dispute between the Borana (Oromo) and the Garre (Somali) over Moyale town has been festering for close to 16 years now. The federal government attempted to resolve the conflict through both political and legal instruments without success. The most frequently used instruments in this regard include the organisation of the 'peace, development and democracy conference',²⁵ interposition of the army between rival groups and joint peace committees (JPC).²⁶ Despite the contribution of these efforts to de-escalate conflicts, they have not led to significant results.

The main impediment regarding the resolution of the Moyale dispute relates to the immense polarity that prevails among the parties to the conflict. The federal constitution provides that when regions fail to resolve territorial disputes through negotiation, the federal government should organise a referendum to enable people at the local/*kebele* level to decide democratically, which region they would like to join. While the Somali region seems to accept the principle of holding a referendum, the Borana oppose it vigorously. They argue that holding a referendum would only endorse the unjust expansion of the Garre and other Somali clans on Borana territory.²⁷

The HoF, which is responsible for resolving inter-regional conflicts, instructed the NEBE in 2004 to hold a referendum in 463 *kebele* along the contested borders of the Oromia and the Somali regions including Moyale. The referendum could not, however, take place in Moyale. According to the NEBE, this was because of disagreements between the two regions on a number of issues such as election of public observers, registration of displaced people and mutual suspicion (2004: 6). Local Oromo and Somali officials, however, blamed each other for the cancellation of the referendum. One Oromia official alleges that the referendum was 'cancelled because of the fact that the Garre brought thousands of people from other areas including Kenya and Somalia so that they could prevail over the Borana and secure the ownership of the town.'²⁸

In contrast, officials of the Moyale Somali *woreda* allege that the pressure from Oromo officials at the regional level, who feared holding the referendum as planned, meant Oromia would lose Moyale, botched the referendum.²⁹ After the failure of the referendum, the federal government once again let the problem fester. Still, it deployed federal police to deter violence. As the situation remains tense, a minor incident could trigger violence.

8.4 Somali-Afar Boundary Conflict: Case of the Afar-Issa Conflict

The inter-regional boundary between the Somali and the Afar regions remains poorly defined and extremely tense. A single minor incident involving clansmen from the Somali or the Afar could trigger major violence. The security situation is so fragile that paramilitary units of the federal police and the army patrol in those areas where there are frequent clashes between the two rival groups.

The Afar-Issa conflict was initially a resource conflict between two neighbouring pastoral clans over water and pasture. However, the conflict intertwines with other broader regional conflicts since the division of the region at the beginning of the 20th century by external powers that include the French, British, Italians and Ethiopians. The intervention of foreign powers irreversibly changed the relationships between the two groups. In this respect, the external powers sought to use a divide and rule strategy by magnifying historical animosities that prevailed between the Afar and the Issa to further their interests.

The Awash valley on which the two rival groups clash over for water and pasture also attracted new resource users, irrigated commercial farms and sugar plantations since the 1960s. The introduction of new users is believed to exacerbate the conflict among the traditional users by reducing the amount of available resources (Ali 1997).

The top-down federal restructuring of Ethiopia, which resulted in the formation of the Afar and the Somali regions in 1992, transformed the Afar-Issa conflict in several respects. It most

importantly changed the conflict into a boundary conflict in which the two ethnic regions directly and indirectly participate.

8.4.1 Nature and evolution of the conflict

The Afar and the Issa, like many other neighbouring ethnic groups locked in territorial conflicts, have conflicting narratives about the nature of their relationships and territorial ownership. In this respect, the Afar bitterly recall that they were progressively displaced by Issa expansion in such areas as Meisso, Afdem, Erer and even Dire Dawa, over the past six decades (Seyoum et al. 1999). In contrast, the views of the Issa on territorial expansion differ. While some Issa reject Afar claims of continued Issa expansion (Ibid), others acknowledge the continuous westward expansion of the Issa into Afar territories, which pushed the latter to the other side of the Awash River (Michaelson 2000: 12).

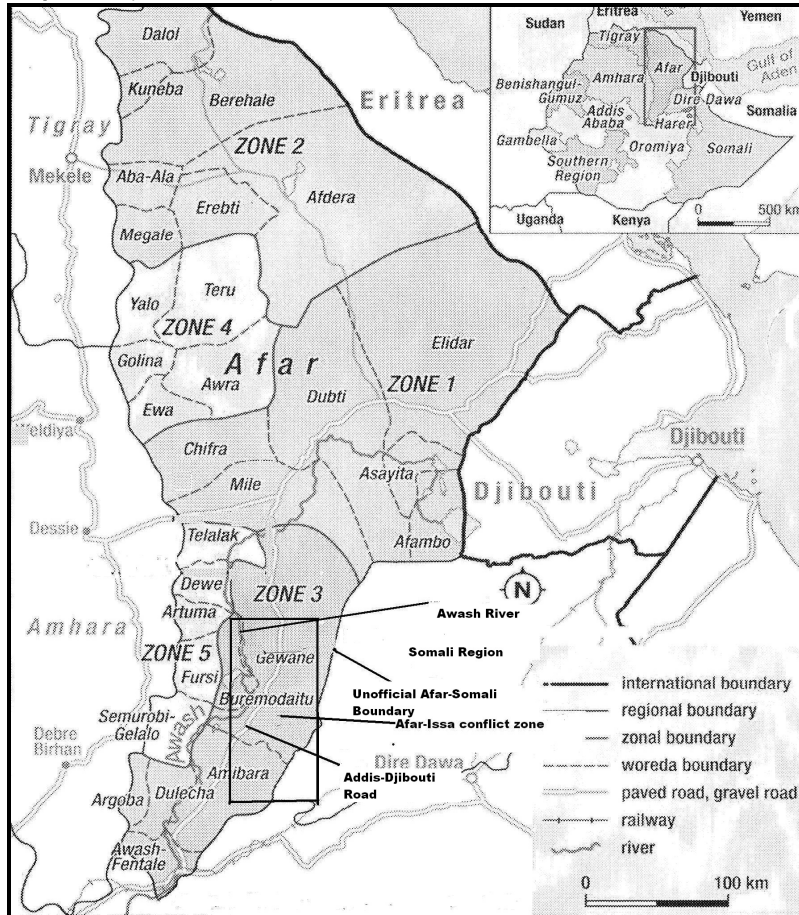
The two groups also have conflicting views about the causes of the conflict. In this respect, the Issa and Somali regional officials emphasise the resource aspects of the conflict. For instance, a study paper on the Afar and Issa conflict by the Somali region states that ‘because of the nature of nomadic pastoralism on which the livelihoods of both groups depends, Afar and Somali pastoralists cross each other’s territories in search of water and pasture. The competition to have access to these vital resources, therefore, leads to conflicts’ (SNRS 2004b: 3). Putting resource competition at the heart of the Afar-Issa conflict is not limited to the Issa-Somali narrative. Some scholars and government officials consider the conflict from a perspective of resource conflict between two pastoral communities. In this respect, John Markakis not only disapproves of the labelling of the conflict as ethnic, but also concludes that the Afar-Issa conflict is a localised resource conflict (2003a).

Afar officials and opinion-makers, however, have an opposite view of the conflict. For them, the problem is neither a localised conflict nor a conflict over water and pasture. It is rather part of explicit or implicit attempt territorial expansion by the Somali dominated neighbouring countries of Ethiopia – Somalia and Djibouti. An Afar expert who works in the regional Bureau of Border Affairs says:³⁰

In our view, the conflict is not a localised conflict between Afar and Issa. It is rather an element of a broader territorial conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia. The Somali in order to cover their real intention characterise the conflict as a “resource conflict”. The main objective of the Issa is, however, to control the Awash River from its upper to lower courses and Ethiopia’s strategic link to the sea that traverses the Afar country.

The Afar-Issa conflict passed through several phases since the beginning of the 20th century. The division of the Horn of Africa by colonial powers and Ethiopia’s expansion at the turn of the century not only brought new actors, but also affected inter-clan relationships of the Afar and the Issa in several ways.

The construction of the railway that connected the former French colony of Djibouti with Addis Ababa (1897-1917) contributed to the changing of Afar and Issa clan boundaries. Thus, many Issa employed by the construction company settled permanently in several of the small towns that emerged along the rail tracks in Afar country (Markakis 2003a: 447).

Map 8.2 Afar-Issa conflict zone

Source: Adopted from Ali (2008)

The 1935 Italian invasion and subsequent occupation of the country (1935-1941) adversely influenced Afar-Issa relations. The Italians not only recruited Somali native soldiers and supported the Issa by providing arms and training, but also severely punished the Afar because of their alliance with the Ethiopians. More importantly, the Issa who sided with the Italians began to have access to the Allighedi plains³¹ with Italian support (Ibid).

In the immediate post-war period, the Issa successfully expanded into traditional Afar territories. In 1947 as a result of a violent conflict between the two groups, the Afar were evicted from Erer, Aydora, Asbuli and Butiji localities in the former Adal, Issa and Gurgura

awraja. During this period, the Afar also had to vacate the eastern side of the railway. Following this, the Haile Selassie government in 1948 decreed that the Erer River should serve as a geographic divide between the Afar and the Issa. To maintain this boundary, the government deployed hundreds of troops until 1963. The troop pullout in 1963 precipitated the outbreak of violence anew, leading to further Issa expansion into Afar territories (Seyoum et al. 1999: 15-16).

The 1970s saw such radical changes in Ethiopia as the overthrow of the Haile Selassie government and the emergence of a Marxist military regime, the Derg. Unprecedented levels of intra and inter-state conflict in the Horn of Africa characterised the post-1974 era, with Ethiopia at the epicentre.³² The conflict situation of the Horn of Africa led to the entanglement of the Afar-Issa conflict with broader international and regional conflicts.³³ In this regard, the 1977-8 Ethio-Somalia war was of particular importance.

According to John Markakis, one of the divisions of the Somalia-backed WSLF was mainly composed of the Issa and was initially prepared to annex Djibouti. After Mogadishu dropped that plan, this division served in the Ethio-Somalia war in the Awash valley (1987: 446-7). After the war, the Issa managed to penetrate deep into the Awash valley and establish new Issa settlements on the highway that links Addis Ababa to the Assab/Djibouti ports. The most notable settlement in this regard was Gedamaitu, established in 1982.

In addition to territorial conflicts between Ethiopia and Somalia, the geopolitical significance of northeast Ethiopia contributed immensely to the intractability of the conflict between the two groups. Indeed, Ethiopia's desire to ensure safe access to the sea influenced its policy towards the conflict. Thus, ever since the emergence of the Issa as the ruling ethnic group of Djibouti, Addis Ababa sought to foster good relationships and at times kept a blind eye on the expansion of the Issa into Afar territories (Gilkes 1999: 20-1).

In other instances, Ethiopian regimes employed draconian measures against the Issa due to geopolitical and security calculations. For instance, the Derg in 1987 intervened in order to check Issa expansion because of the fear that the Afar-Issa conflict would jeopardise the strategic highway. Accordingly, the government

decided to use the highway as a point of reference regarding the ethnic frontier between the two rival groups. The Issa who were then located to the east of the highway were told not to come nearer than 40 kilometres to the highway. However, they were allowed to graze their livestock on the first 10 kilometres of the restricted zone without carrying firearms. The Afar, on the other hand, could graze their livestock at a distance of 10 kilometres to the east crossing the highway also without carrying firearms. The remaining 20 kilometres were supposed to be a buffer zone and both the Afar and the Issa were not allowed to cross. The military regime also dismantled the Gedamaitu town that emerged as an important transit point for contraband trade.³⁴ After EPRDF's takeover in 1991, the government ceased to enforce the above measures. Consequently, the 40 km restricted zone disintegrated, the Issa reconstituted the Gedamaitu town and further encroached into Afar territories.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the geopolitical aspect of the Afar-Issa conflict intensified because of Eritrea's independence and the antagonism that emerged in the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea after their 1998-2000 brutal war. The beginning of the 1990s also saw the emergence of two Afar insurgent movements both in Djibouti and Ethiopia. In the case of Djibouti, the Afar disenchanted by their marginalisation established the Front for Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD) in 1991 (Agyeman-Duah 1997: 7; Schraeder 1993: 211). Whereas in Ethiopia, the Afar displeased by the further international division of their territory after Eritrea's independence established the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front (ARDUF), popularly known as *Ugougoumou* (revolution). This movement sought the formation of a 'pan-Afar' independent country through armed struggle (Tronvoll 1999: 1050). The reactions of Ethiopia and Eritrea to these movements were initially almost unanimous. They provided support to the beleaguered Djiboutian government against FRUD (Gilkes 1999) and coordinated their anti-insurgency activities against the ARDUF (Ruth 2000: 665). Their security cooperation abruptly ended when the two countries began their destructive border war in 1998.³⁵

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea that made former almost completely dependent on Djibouti for port services further complicated the Afar-Issa conflict. As a result, the main interest of Addis Ababa today regarding the Afar-Issa conflict is the maintenance of security on the strategic highway that links the country with

Djibouti. The government at the same time does not wish to upset the Issa political class, which controls Djibouti and thereby almost follows a policy of neglect to the simmering conflict between the two rival groups.

8.4.2 Federal restructuring and the Afar and Issa conflict

The Afar-Issa conflict is a protracted territorial conflict that has been going on for many decades before the country adopted a federal structure. However, ethnic regionalisation has transformed the conflict into intra-federal boundary conflict by bringing in new actors. At the beginning of the transitional period, there was a feeling among the Afar elite that previous Ethiopian governments deliberately inflamed their conflict with the Issa to undermine local resistance. And Afar and Somali politicians within the new government could amicably resolve the conflict.³⁶ This enthusiasm did not last long and the conflict continued after the formation of the regions with increased intensity and geographic expanse (Getachew 2001b: 30).

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Issa not only reconstituted Gedamaitu, which was earlier dismantled by the Derg, but also crossed the Awash River for the first time and established new towns such as Adaitu, Undofo and Ambule on the Djibouti-Addis Ababa highway. This highway has emerged as a *de facto* boundary between the Afar and the Somali regions (see map 8.2). The eastern side of the highway is now increasingly inaccessible to the Afar.

The continued Afar-Issa conflict has almost made the drawing of inter-regional boundaries between the two regions impossible. In fact, in a situation where there is an active territorial expansion between neighbouring ethnic groups, creating ethno-regional boundaries acceptable to both parties, is difficult, if not impossible. With or without a boundary, the emergence of the Afar and the Somali regions has transformed the Afar-Issa conflict into inter-regional conflict. This means the two regions now participate in this otherwise old and protracted conflict as both parties to the conflict and agents of conflict management.

In spite of the fact that the ethnic regions have been given central importance by the federal constitution regarding the resolution of

boundary conflicts, the two regions have so far failed to produce an arrangement that would help amicably resolve their territorial conflicts. On the contrary, there is a widely held view in the federal government that such conflicts have been exacerbated by what federal officials like to call 'rent seeking' and 'narrow-nationalist' attitudes of regional and local officials. For instance, the federal government accuses regional officials of partaking directly and indirectly in violent boundary conflicts (MoFedA 2002a, 2003a).

In the case of the Afar-Issa conflict, the federal government accused regional and local officials of lacking the good will to resolve the problem amicably and appearing as good defenders of ethnic interests instead of trying to find a long lasting solution that caters for the needs of both ethnic groups (Ibid). Indeed, the new ethnic regions either directly or indirectly participate in the conflict. For instance, the Afar region provided logistical support to Afar fighters in one of their violent encounters with the Issa (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003b: 19). Similarly, Afar officials accuse their Somali counterparts of providing support to the Issa. They particularly note that the support the SNRS provides to the Issa grew tremendously after some prominent Issa politicians began to play important roles in the politics of the Somali region.³⁷

Additionally, both the federal and the regional governments underscore that local and regional officials get involved in the conflict (SNRS 2004a: 11). Hence, in a joint document prepared by the two regions under the supervision of the MoFedA, Somali and Afar officials conceded that the conflict has been exacerbated by mutual suspicion, the tendency to resolve conflicts through violence and regional officials providing shelter to criminals in the name of clan/ethnic solidarity (SNRS and ANRS 2003: 5).

Because of all these, the animosity between the two groups has been aggravated. For example, they do not live together in the small towns that emerged on the contested highway. Consequently, the contested towns, Adaitu, Undofo and Gedamaitu are off limits to the Afar. Similarly, the Issa cannot venture into nearby Afar towns such as Gewane, Awash and others. This is a new trend, according to a report by the Somali region on the Afar-Issa conflict that emerged after the formation of the regions in 1992 (SNRS 2004b: 10).

The other important aspect of the Afar-Issa territorial conflict is the desire to control the Addis Ababa-Djibouti highway that serves as a trading route for the thriving contraband trade. The dramatic expansion

of contraband trade during the 1990s was precipitated by the weakening of the boundaries of the countries of the Horn of Africa and the emergence of Somalia after its collapse as a haven for cross border smugglers (Markakis 2003a: 448). In this context, Gedamaitu, one of the contested towns between the Afar and the Issa, emerged as an inland enter port for the transit and distribution of smuggled contraband goods to the Ethiopian hinterland.

The Afar oppose Issa's control of the trading routes. They feel that the flourishing of business in these otherwise pocket territories within their region is just a precursor to Issa expansion (Flintan and Imeru 2002: 278). Hence, they seek to ensure the highway that traverses the region remains within their geographic jurisdiction. To this end, one of the tactics used to forestall the further expansion of the Issa is the establishment of new Afar towns and settlements along the contested highway. This tactic is meant to leave no doubt regarding Afar ownership of these territories. However, the Issa fiercely oppose such moves. In fact, the Somali region blames the decision by the Afar region to establish new settlements on the highway as one of the key factors exacerbating conflict between the two groups (SNRS 2004b: 8). For example, the decision of the Afar region to move the capital of the Bure-Mudaytu *woreda* to the highway at Gelalau in March 2002 caused a fierce skirmish between the two groups in which several lives were lost (Markakis 2003a; SNRS 2004b).

In tandem with their narrative about the source of the conflict, the Afar and the Issa provide opposing views about the way to resolve their territorial disputes. The former's argument hinges on the history of settlements in the Awash valley. They argue that as the latter continue to dislodge them from their ancestral lands and establish new settlements in which they constitute local majorities, holding a referendum to decide on the fate of the contested territories would be an injustice. Accordingly, an official within the Afar region notes that 'deciding the boundary problem through a referendum, which is based on size of voters, is not only unjust but also legitimises violent acquisition of land.'³⁸ Furthermore, the Afar argue that the Issa pocket settlements recently created on the Djibouti-Addis Ababa highway should either be removed or brought under their jurisdiction.

In contrast, the Somali argue that boundaries between the Afar and the Somali region are not international and the people at the

kebele level should have the opportunity to decide to which region they wish to join. In this respect, the SNRS has reported:

Afar claim of ownership of some of the territories in which the Issa are presently found such as Adaitu, Gedamaitu, Undofo and others is based on the claim that the Afar used to inhabit these territories in the past. Nevertheless, the issue of territory should not be considered by looking at history, what should be considered rather is the *status quo*. The present settlement patterns and also the fact that both the Afar and the Issa are peoples of one country that inter-regional boundaries should not be a barrier for the two communities from using the scarce natural resource that are found in their localities (SNRS 2004b: 7).

The EPRDF government, which literally allowed the problem to fester, only began to be seriously engaged in the Afar-Issa conflict after the breakout of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998. Even then, its main motive was to secure the country's strategic link to the sea. As the war made Ethiopia completely dependent on the port services of Djibouti, where the Issa are dominant, the government was extremely careful not to antagonise the Issa. Hence, the federal government shied away from tackling the core problem of the conflict, territorial dispute between the two groups.

Thus it initiated a dual approach consisting of the use of traditional and governmental institutions of conflict management in 1998 (Michaelson 2000: 4). With respect to the use of traditional conflict management instruments, the elders of the Afar and the Issa, at the urging of the government agreed to adopt payment of blood money, 53 head of cattle for each inter-clan killing (Ibid).

The other aspect of conflict management constituted the establishment of several ad-hoc governmental institutions (Ibid; SNRS 2004b: 11). First, the establishment of a purportedly neutral police force excluding members of the two rival clans. This force, among other things had a mandate to supervise the border areas where inter-clan conflicts are recurrent. Second, a special court was established. The court was responsible to try individuals for inter-ethnic (Afar-Issa) crimes such as killings, livestock looting and raiding. Third, the government organised a Joint Peace Committee (JPC) composed of officials of the two regions both at local and regional levels (Michaelson 2000: 5; SNRS 2004b: 11). The JPCs were composed of Afar and Somali officials and

representatives of the federal government, usually commanders of troops deployed in the conflict zone.

This arrangement was somehow successful in freezing outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence at least during the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000). Through the arrangement, both the Afar and the Issa returned looted animals and handed over individuals who were engaged in inter-ethnic violence to the authorities. More importantly, members of the Afar and the Issa clans began cultivating good relations.³⁹ However, this brief détente came to an abrupt end in 2002 with the killing of a prominent Afar politician, Ninia Tahiro allegedly by Issa clansmen. After the killing, many lives were lost because of inter-ethnic violence in Gewane, Gedamaitu and Undofo. A few months later, another bloody conflict occurred on the highway at Galgalu between the two groups when the Afar region was constructing the capital of the Bure-Mudaytu *woreda*.

Thus, the conflict management mechanism instituted by the federal government in a top-down fashion disintegrated after bringing stability for only a few years. With the signing of a cease-fire between Ethiopia and Eritrea in December 2000, the federal government also seemed less enthusiastic about conflict management between the two rival groups. The major limitation of the 1998 conflict management initiative by the federal government was its heavy emphasis on temporary solutions and the decision to place the issue of territory, which is at the heart of problem on the back burner (Michaelson 2000: 11).

The federal government again showed interest in finding resolution to boundary conflicts between the regions after it established MoFedA in 2001. In 2003, the MoFedA brought together the two regions and persuaded them to sign the following commitments. First, to undertake detailed studies on the disputed areas and present their recommendations of how best the conflict between the two regions could be resolved. Second, both parties reportedly agreed to resolve their territorial claims through implementation of constitutional principles (referendum), if they fail to resolve the conflicts through negotiation.⁴⁰ The federal government also instructed the two regions to make their detailed studies free from 'rent-seeking attitudes' and to keep the results confidential (SNRS and ANRS 2003: 19).

In response, both regions submitted their reports to MoFedA. According to officials of the Afar region, since submitting their report in November 2004, they have not received any reply from MoFedA. The

Afar report is still confidential and thus inaccessible to both researchers and the public. However, I was fortunate to receive a briefing on the report from Afar officials in Semera. According to the briefing, the report documented the history of Issa expansion with maps and archives, explaining how the Issa expansion linked with foreign interests, the 'Greater Somalia' agenda and alleged Djiboutian hidden aspiration for territorial expansion.⁴¹ The Afar report reiterates the dominant Afar narrative about their loss of territory due to Issa expansion. It also underscores the impracticability of using a referendum to provide a just and lasting solution. In contrast, the Somali region's report, I gained access, emphasises the need to resolve territorial questions based on facts on the ground (that is, settlements on the contested territories) in order to provide stability and the opportunity for those in the contested border areas to decide freely and democratically which region they wish to join (SNRS 2004b: 17).

Currently, there are no efforts by either the federal or the concerned regional governments to provide a lasting solution to the problem. The main interest of the federal government is still maintaining stability in this strategically important part of the country. Thus, there is a strong presence of federal police troops on the highway and in and around the contested towns. However, there is no effective regional/federal administration in the contested towns. Despite the two groups' inability to find resolution to the conflict, major skirmishes are avoided because of the presence of federal security forces in the zone of conflict. There is, however, tension and a minor incident involving Issa and Afar clansmen, may trigger major violence.

The federal government seems faced with a critical dilemma about the boundary conflict between the Afar and the Somali regions. The immense polarity that exists, not only between the narratives of the two groups about the root causes of the conflict, but also about the means to resolve the conflict provides little room for the federal government to manoeuvre a compromise. More importantly, the federal government appears tied by the federal constitution and its own policy pronouncements, which heavily emphasise the rights of people in the contested territories to choose freely to which region they would like to join through a plebiscite, if neighbouring regions fail to resolve territorial disputes through negotiation (MoFedA 2003a: 4).

The principle that territorial disputes between ethnic regions should be resolved based on existing population settlement patterns and the will of the concerned communities, as expressed through a referendum is

important to stop recurrent historical claims and counter-claims on a given territory. However, these principles have limitations where there is active territorial expansion by one of the conflict parties. Holding a referendum to decide the fate of contested territories in such a situation could unwittingly benefit the ethnic group engaged in territorial expansion. This explains the dilemma the federal government faces. If it sanctions holding a referendum in such contested territories as Adaitu, Undofo and Gedamaitu, the Afar would certainly consider the decision biased and pro Issa/Somali. Similarly, if the federal government decides to assign the contested territories based on the historical argument, the Somali would certainly view such a decision as pro-Afar.

The attitudes of the two regions regarding the role of the federal government also complicate the task of finding a solution to the conflict. The dominant theme in the Afar discourse on the role of the Ethiopian State in the Afar-Issa conflict, at least since the 1940s, is about its impartiality and neglect. This means the Afar do not view the federal government as a fair mediator as one Afar informant commented.

This government (EPRDF) like its predecessors is mainly motivated by geopolitical calculations. It does not want to disappoint the Issa in Djibouti who today control Ethiopia's access to the sea. That is why it has decided to follow a blind eye policy regarding the armed expansion of the Issa within Ethiopia.⁴²

Exasperated Afar officials seem to have lost hope of regaining their lost territories and are now quietly demanding the delineation of whatever boundary by the federal government and its protection in order to forestall further Issa expansion.⁴³ One of the experts within the Afar Border Affairs Bureau says, 'whatever the outcome we need a boundary now. As We cannot live intermixed with the Issa and their expansion is continuing. We need the federal government to draw a boundary and to defend the integrity of our region.'⁴⁴

In contrast, the Somali region advocates for the resolution of the boundary conflict through a referendum and emphasises the need to work out an arrangement that enables both the Afar and the Issa to use the available scarce resources jointly – notably the Awash River (SNRS 2004b: 16).

8.5 Conclusion

The political, economic and security impacts of African state boundaries have been examined by several scholars. However, there is little attention paid to the impacts of intra-national political boundaries on inter-ethnic relations and conflicts. This stems partly from the belief that intra-state boundaries are just lines of geographic jurisdictions of administrative units within a single country and hence do not have political significance (Stewart 1990: 101). Such an approach, as demonstrated in this chapter, does not grasp the situation where federal restructuring leads to an ethnic federation (Ethiopia). In ethnic federations created through devolution, unlike the older federations (e.g. Switzerland and the United States) where the constituent members predate the federal union with defined borders, making boundaries of the new sub-units is prone to violent conflicts.

The federal restructuring of Ethiopia, as has been discussed in this chapter, intertwined ethnicity, territory and boundary. There is a rigorous ethnicisation of territory explained by the heavy emphasis put on matching politico-administrative boundaries with ethnic boundaries. The constitution and other legislations recognise this principle. However, the process has been problematic and violent. As demonstrated in this chapter, matching ethnic and intra-federal boundaries foment sub-state nationalism (Mbembe 2000: 267). In fact, as noted by Alexander Murphy, when ethnic regionalisation tends to make territories 'spatial surrogates of large-scale, potentially self-conscious cultural communities, most territorial conflicts become community conflicts as well' (1995: 93). Murphy's observation has some validity for Ethiopian ethnic federalism where territorial/resource conflicts between neighbouring communities become inter-ethnic and inter-regional conflicts. This has adverse implications on the management of territorial conflicts.

The heavy emphasis on ethnicity as the key instrument for the territorial organisation of the federation not only reinforces territorial claims and counter-claims by rival/competing ethnic groups, but also fails to appreciate the difficulty of putting all people/s of the country into predefined ethnic categories. The culture of shifting ethnic identity of the Gabbra and the Garre between the Oromo and the Somali is a case in point. The new demand placed on these ethnic communities to be either Oromo or Somali not only tears apart their communalities, but also makes conflicts between them and their neighbours protracted.

The emergence of the ethnic regions with incipient nationalism has so far complicated the task of finding an amicable solution to the conflict. On the one hand, the process of creating intra-federal borders gave opportunities for those groups who do have a history of territorial expansion (e.g. Issa) to legitimise whatever territory they seized from their neighbours. On the other hand, those ethnic communities who lost (or are still losing) territory because of their neighbours armed expansion seek boundary making to ensure the restoration of their lost territories. This polarity in the expectations of the different actors makes the task of boundary making not only contentious but conflict provoking. The forthcoming chapter discusses how inter-regional boundary making affects inter-ethnic relationships between the Benishangul-Gumuz region and its Amhara and Oromo neighbours.

Notes

¹ Afaan-Oromo means Oromo language.

² The Afar are also known as 'Adal' and 'Danakil.' They, however, call themselves Afar and their country Cafar-barrow, literally the Afar land. (Getachew 2001a: 33).

³ The only major exception in this regard could be the Borana Oromo who practice traditional religion.

⁴ This refers to the assimilation of some Somali and Oromo clans by their neighbours through a long period of interaction. Because of the assimilation, some of the concerned clans could adopt a new Oromo or Somali identity – or maintain a dual identity of both the Somali and the Oromo. For instance, the Garre clan in the Borana region uses the Oromo language, but due to its Islamic religion and genealogy identifies itself with the Somali (Farah 1996: 124).

⁵ The Borana and Gabbra are in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. The majority of them are found within Ethiopia. The Garre, on the other hand, are found within Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya. In terms of language, all of the clans predominantly speak Afaan Oromo, while the Garre of central Somalia speak a Garre dialect known as Garre Koffar (Belete 1999: 30).

⁶ The Afar, according to Wilfred Thesiger, are divided into two major groups, the 'Asaeimara and the Adaeimara and these in turn are divided into about six great tribes, which again are indefinitely subdivided. Both sections are hostile to

each other, but sometimes temporarily united against their hereditary foes the Itu and Kareyu [Oromo], the Issa Somali' (1935: 2).

⁷ According to I.M. Lewis, 'the Dir family, generally recognised as the oldest Somali stock, have been greatly dispersed and so reduced that only three main tribes survive. These are the Esa, Gadabursi and Bimal' (1994: 25).

⁸ François Piguet for instance characterises the Issa as '...the real enemies of the Afar. They challenge them more than any other surrounding ethnic group. The Issa are well armed and rarely hide their intention of eventually gaining access not only to the rangelands but also to the Awash riverbank and other tributary rivers crossing the rangelands. Since the Issa are known for their illicit trade (gun running and contraband merchandise) they consider the Addis Ababa highway as vital to their strategic interest' (2001: 9).

⁹ In this chapter, the Borana region refers to the area, which the Borana in the past maintained their dominance extending '...roughly from the Chew Bahir in the west to Dolo in the east and from Ageremariam in the north to Moyale in the south (Belete 1999: 1).

¹⁰ The Borana are the only Oromo clan who maintained the traditional Oromo administration system known as *Gada*. The *Gada* could be described as egalitarian socio-political organisation based on age-groups (see Asmarom 1973).

¹¹ Günther Schlee who studied the history of ethnic interaction in the Borana region suggested that present day southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya (Borana region) was, before the expansion and establishment of Borana hegemony in the 16th century, populated by clans who had 'Proto-Somali and Rendille (PRS) identity.' Though this identity changed due to the dominance of the Borana, it was retained in camel-centred symbolic and ritual forms. (1989: 32-3)

¹² *Negga-Borana* refers to the maintenance of peace within Borana and in Borana relations with other clans through the observance of a communal moral order, which is based on Borana *adda seera* (law and custom) (Obba 1996: 118-19). On the other hand, *Tiriso*, which means 'adoption,' refers to the central instrument that the Borana used to maintain patron-client relationships with subordinate clans (Belete 1999; Getachew 1996; Schlee 1989). Even if *tiriso* relationship is an outcome of the dominance of the Borana, it provided a framework for peace and stability in the region (Schlee and Shongolo 1995: 14).

¹³ Personal Interview: Ex-police officer and presently an Oromia Kebele Official, 15 March 2007.

¹⁴ Personal Interview: Long-time resident of Moyale and a trader from the Burji ethnic group, 26 March 2007.

¹⁵ Personal Interview: Official of Moyale Oromia *woreda* council, 25 March 2007.

¹⁶ Simply stated, the EPRDF seemed to have cooperated well with such clans as the Gabbra and the Garre at the same time alienating the Borana (Lister 2004: 24).

¹⁷ Special *woreda* refers to a district established to provide autonomy to minority ethnic groups – who because of their small population size cannot have their own *woreda* council.

¹⁸ Personal Interview: Official Moyale *woreda* (Oromia) official, Educational Bureau, 22 March 2007.

¹⁹ Focus Group Discussion: Elders of the Gabbra Clan, Harro Beke Kebele, Moyale *woreda*, 20 March 2007.

²⁰ Personal Interview: Official, Borana Zone, Border's Affair Bureau, Yabello, 20 March 2007.

²¹ Focus Group Discussion: Moyale (Somali) *woreda* cabinet members, 23 March 2007.

²² Focus Group Discussion: Gabbra elders, Moyale, 24 March 2007.

²³ Personal Interview: Gabbra official, former member of the federal parliament, Moyale, 27 March 2007.

²⁴ Personal Interview: Acting Administrator, Borana zone, Yabello, 20 March 2007.

²⁵ 'Peace, Democracy and Development Conferences' are usually organized by agencies of the federal government such as the former Office for Regional Affairs (ORA) at the Prime Minister's Office and presently the Ministry of Federal Affairs. Such conferences, though not formally constituted and used to make decisions on controversial issues (For more discussion see chapter 10).

²⁶ Joint Peace Committees are usually composed of officials of conflicting administrative organs (usually at the *woreda* level) and representatives of the army deployed in the affected areas.

²⁷ Focus Group Discussion: Borana elders, Moyale, 24 March 2007.

²⁸ Personal Interview: Official in Oromia Moyale *woreda*, 22 March 2007.

²⁹ Focus Group Discussion: Moyale (Somali) *woreda* cabinet members, 23 March 2007.

³⁰ Personal Interview: Expert, Afar region, Borders' Affairs Bureau, Semera, 29 June 2007.

³¹ The Allighedi plain is a key wet season grazing plain and is ‘...used by all clans with less marked boundary. Although Allighedi plain is the most common destination because of its rich resources, it has always been an area of contention among the Afar, Issa (Somali), and Ittu Oromos.’ (Ame 2004: 13)

³² These conflicts include the 1977-78 Ethio-Somalia war (inter-state) and several intra-state conflicts within Ethiopia between the central government and rebel forces ranging from the Eritrean war of secession to the insurgency of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

³³ According to one Afar informant, ‘Since the independence of Somalia in 1960 and its declaration of the Greater Somalia Outlook, the Afar-Issa conflict became part and parcel of Ethio-Somalia territorial conflict. Ethiopian governments, however, for a long time consider the conflict as a tribal conflict over water and pasture.’ Personal Interview: Expert, Afar region, Borders’ Affairs Bureau, Semera, 29 June 2007.

³⁴ Personal Interview, Former Afar government official, Semera, 30 June 2007.

³⁵ Ethio-Eritrea security coordination and united position against ARDUF severed abruptly due to their 1998-2000 full-scale war. When the two countries began to implement a proxy warfare strategy using each other’s rebel movements, the Ethiopian government provided support to ARDUF, albeit briefly (Abbink 2003: 415). Presently the activity of ARDUF is limited as the majority of its leaders including Mohammuda Ga’as agreed to deal with the Ethiopian government, which led to their appointment at regional and federal levels. In contrast, the Eritrean government is presently supporting one faction of ARDUF. This faction made it to the headlines of international news in 2007 when it abducted western diplomats and their Ethiopian aides in the Afar country near the Eritrean border. Eventually, all of the hostages were freed. These geopolitical maneuvers in several ways bolstered the position of the Issa in their conflict with the Afar.

³⁶ Personal Interview: Deputy president of the Afar region, Semera, 29 June 2007.

³⁷ The Issa are the second largest Somali clan within the Somali region. During the period 2003-2005, Issa clansmen Abdi Jibril and Mohamoud Drir respectively served as president of the Somali region and head of the EPRDF affiliated Somali People’s Democratic Party (SPDP).

³⁸ Personal Interview: High Afar regional official, Semera, 29 June 2007.

³⁹ Focus Group Discussion: Afar elders, Gewane Town, 30 June 2007.

⁴⁰ However, it is doubtful that the Afar regional officials would agree to hold a referendum, as they would certainly lose the contested localities because of the extreme Issa majority and Afar minority.

⁴¹ Personal Interview: High Afar regional official, Semera, 29 June 2007.

⁴² Personal Interview: Former Afar official, Semera, 30 June 2007.

⁴³ Personal Interview: Expert, Afar region, Borders' Affairs Bureau, Semera, 29 June 2007.

⁴⁴ Personal Interview: High Afar regional official, Afar region, Semera, 26 June 2007.