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

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9 Inter-Regional Conflicts: Benishangul-Gumuz Region

9.1 Introduction

Chapter 8 examined intra-federal boundary conflicts between the Somali region and its Oromo and Afar neighbours. Similarly, the making of the boundaries of the Benishangul-Gumuz region with its Amhara and Oromo neighbours impelled inter-ethnic and inter-regional conflicts. The region shares boundaries in the north and in the northeast with the Amhara region, in the south and southeast with the Oromia region and in the west with the Republic of the Sudan. The boundaries the BGNRS shares with both the Amhara and the Oromia regions remain poorly defined.

From among the five titular ethnic groups that constitute the region, the Gumuz inhabit a large swathe of territory (see map 9.1) and have a long history of interaction with both the Amhara and the Oromo. As a result, this chapter examines effects of federal restructuring on the relationships between the Gumuz and their Amhara and Oromo neighbours.

The formation of the BGNRS has indeed transformed relationships between the Gumuz and their neighbours. One important aspect in these relationships is the process of making inter-regional boundaries, which is fraught with friction and tension. This is particularly important for the emerging relationship between the BGNRS and Oromia regions. Regarding Gumuz-Amhara relations, the formation of the BGNRS appears to have effectively changed the frontier nature of their relationship. In spite of this, the presence of a large number of ethnic Amhara within the BGNRS region and their continuous migration to the latter influence their relationships.

9.2 Background to Gumuz Relations with Amhara and Oromo

The Gumuz inhabit a spiral shaped territory extending from the former Wollega province in the south to the northwestern (Metema and Qwara) parts of the former Gonder province (see map 9.1). Even if their settlement is contiguous, it is feasible to divide the Gumuz country into two; Metekel in the Blue Nile valley of northwest Ethiopia and Dedessa in the former Wollega province. The prevailing administrative division of the BGNRS region somehow follows this division. Hence, the parts of the former Metekel *awraja* inhabited by the Gumuz now constitute the new Metekel *zone*, while the Gumuz of the Dedessa valley organised into the newly created Khamashi *zone*.

Regarding Gumuz relationships with their neighbours, it is important to underscore that they have a long history of troubled relations with their dominant ethnic neighbours in both Ethiopia and the Sudan. They suffered military conquest and slave raiding (Abdussamad 1995; James 1986). Likewise, the relationship between the Gumuz and their Amhara neighbours was historically a typical frontier relationship[1] in which the latter campaigned for several centuries to bring the former under their control (see chapter 5).

Similarly, the relationships that developed between the Gumuz and their Oromo neighbours in the former Wollega province were asymmetrical, in which the latter took the upper hand (Ezkieal cited in Schlee 2003; Wallmark 1981). According to Edossa Tassisa, 'the Gumuz of Wollega faced slave raiding and subjugation by the Oromo. The Oromo also divided the Gumuz and their land among different Oromo clans. Hence, some of the Gumuz clans even began to be called by the names of Oromo clans' (cited in Berihun 2004: 271). Like the Gumuz of Metekel, the Gumuz in Wollega resisted the steady encroachment to their territory by highland farmers and excessive taxation by local Oromo chiefs. They rebelled under the leadership of Abba Tonie (Bambog Kili) during the 1950s (Ibid 272-3).

The formation of the BGNRS, which led to the re-examination of inter-ethnic relationships between the Gumuz and their ethnic neighbours, could be considered as a water shade. One important aspect of this change has been the forming of a regional boundary. The

prevalence of a wide gap in the boundary imaginations of the Gumuz and their Amhara and Oromo neighbours affected this process. For the Gumuz, their boundary with the latter is starkly clear, though not clearly defined. They believe that all the hot bamboo growing lowlands, which were their ancestral homelands, should be recognised as theirs and assigned to the newly established Benishangul-Gumuz region (Ibid 265).

***Map 9.1** Location of the Gumuz*

Source: James 1980

It is, however, difficult to translate this notion of boundary into intra-federal boundaries, as there are both Amhara and Oromo settlements on these territories. Additionally, the Amhara and Oromo do not acknowledge this Gumuz notion of boundary. Instead, partly due to their long history of frontier relationships with the latter, the former still

appear to consider Gumuz's territory as open for the expansion of subsistent peasant agriculture.

On top of these conflicting notions of boundary, the scattered and sparse character of Gumuz settlement presented them with numerous challenges. For instance, almost all of the Gumuz *woreda* of the Kamashi *zone* are inaccessible directly from the *zonal* capital, Kamashi. As a result, one has to travel through the Oromia region to reach several of these *woreda*. Moreover, there is no road that directly links the *zonal* capitals of the Gumuz – both Khamashi and Metekel with the regional capital (Assosa) without passing through the Oromia and the Amhara regions.

Furthermore, the Benishangul-Gumuz region remains politically fragile due to the lack of a well-developed inter-ethnic relationship among the five constituent ethnic groups of the region. In this respect, the northern part of the region (the Metekel *zone*) has stronger economic relations with the Amhara region than the southern part of the region. Similarly, the southern and western parts of the region (Kamashi and Assosa) have stronger economic relations with the Oromia region. More importantly, many of the Gumuz are bi-lingual, speaking Amharic (in Metekel) and Afaan-Oromo (in Kamashi and Assosa) in addition to their own language.

9.3 Inter-Regional Relations: Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara

The B-G region shares a common boundary stretching hundreds of kilometres with the Amhara region. In the pre-federal era, Amhara dominance over the Gumuz and other ethnic minorities characterised the relationship between the two groups. The formation of the B-G region has changed inter-ethnic relationship between the two groups in several ways.

Although the boundaries between the two regions have not been so far clearly marked, there are no major outstanding boundary issues in the relationships between the B.G and the Amhara regions.[2] In spite of this, when the B-G region was initially established in 1992 it was designated that it would border in the north with the Tigray regional State. This meant the political map of the B.G region was supposed to include the

Metema and Qwara *woreda* of the former Gonder province, which have some Gumuz inhabitants (see map 9.2). Based on this map, the 1996 Benishangul-Gumuz constitution indicated that the region shares a boundary in the north with Tigray (BGNRS 1996a). The interim legislative assembly of the BGNRS established in 1993, moreover, reserved some of its seats for the Gumuz of Metema and Qwara. However, this map was quietly changed because of a reported deal between the top leadership of the Amhara and the B-G regions. Accordingly, the B-G region dropped its claim over Metema and Qwara. Hence, presently, the region shares a boundary in the north with the Amhara region instead of Tigray. The decision that led to this boundary revision involved neither the two regional legislative assemblies nor the people directly affected. Federal provisional maps that show the boundaries of the nine regions reflect the revision (see map 1.1). In addition to this, the 2002-revised constitution of the BGNRS declares that the region now shares a boundary in the north with the Amhara region instead of Tigray (BGNRS 2002).

Map 9.2 Boundaries of the Benishangul-Gumuz region in 1992

Source: Nicol and Yacob 2000

The territorial dispute between the two regions over Metema and Qwara was probably resolved in this way because of the paucity of the Gumuz in the two *woreda* and the political upper hand of the Amhara region. This territorial readjustment also related indirectly with the controversial transfer of the lowland plains of Humera from the same Gonder (Amhara) province to Tigray. In other words, the assignment of Metema and Qwara to the B-G region appeared politically untenable in addition to the continuing controversy over Humera.

In order to understand the evolving relationships between the B-G and the Amhara regions, the following section briefly discusses how federal restructuring transformed inter-ethnic relations at a small frontier

town, Mentawuha. The section also discusses the impact of federal restructuring on the migration of Amhara peasants into Gumuz country.

9.3.1 Transformation in Gumuz-Amhara relations: Mentawuha and Mandura

Before ethnic regionalisation, relationships between the Amhara and the Gumuz were mainly a frontier type as has been discussed in chapter 5 of this thesis. This was changed remarkably after the introduction of ethnic federalism. The observations from Mentawuha demonstrated these changes.

Mentawuha is a small town that straddles the Amhara and the B-G regions. Established in 1960, it is located some 25 kilometres southwest of Chagni town and has an estimated population of 3000. The town's history marks the development of a typical frontier town between the Gumuz and the Amhara. The town was indeed established to facilitate the pacification of the Gumuz and to provide security to Chagni town, which used to be the capital of the frontier Metekel *awraja,* from the latter's incursions during the end of the 1950s. Berihun has noted:

> There were about four major mass rebellions between the 1950s and 1990s in Metekel alone. Similar violent conflicts were reported from Wollega. In case of Metekel, the earlier uprisings that occurred in 1950s and 1960s were the basis for the government to justify a concerted military campaign and disarming the Gumuz. The military interventions were concluded by establishing new and permanent administrative centers that were intended to oversee the Gumuz region. Among others the police and administrative centers at Dibate and Mentawuha, places located southwest of Chagni town, were conceived. People from Wollo had already begun migrating to Gojjam and other areas since the late 1940s and early 1950s (2004: 267-8).

The Mentawuha town and its agricultural settlements were established on a land earlier inhabited by the Gumuz. Before the settlers moved in, there was a military operation aimed at disarming the Gumuz. Initially, a private businessperson named Jibril Bilal leased the area and brought in and settled Amhara peasants from Wollo and Gonder at the beginning of the 1960s. Later, the lease status of the area changed and

the Amhara settlers began to pay land use taxes directly to the government.[3]

The history of Amhara and Gumuz interaction in and around Mentawuha from 1960-1991 was characterised by frontier conflict in which the Amhara neighbours of the Gumuz wanted to assert their power over the latter. In almost all of the violent conflicts between the two groups, the central government stood with the Amhara. In addition to outright intervention in support of the Amhara, the government armed the settlers and disarmed the Gumuz. Nonetheless, the Gumuz fiercely resisted. For instance, in 1960 because of Gumuz attacks on the settlements, the settlers fled from Mentawuha. The response of the central government was harsh. It deployed the paramilitary police to take punitive measures against the Gumuz. Later, when Gumuz resistance was beyond the capacity of the paramilitary police, the government deployed the army. Such recurrent military operations further pushed the Gumuz to the fringes of the lowlands. During this period, the government also established the Mandura and Dibate *woreda*, which used to be sub-*woreda* (sub-districts) under Guanguwa to strengthen government control over the Gumuz.[4]

The restructuring of the country into an ethnic federation arguably served as a turning point in the relationship of the Gumuz and their Amhara neighbours in Mentawuha. In particular, it reversed the established policy of previous Ethiopian governments, the pacification of the Gumuz and transfer of highland peasants into their territory. More specifically, the emergence of the two regions, B-G and Amhara, led to the emergence of new forms of interaction that include conflict and cooperation.

Following the 1992 reorganisation of regional administration in the country, Mentawuha town became part of Guwanguwa *woreda* of the Amhara region, whereas the adjacent Gumuz villages were assigned to the Mandura *woreda* of the B-G region. During the initial transition period, there were conflicts between the two groups around Mentawuha. However, these conflicts ceased after elders of both groups conducted reconciliation. Subsequent to the reconciliation, most of the peasant associations inhabited by Amhara immigrants around Mentawuha joined the Amhara region (Wolde-Selassie 2004: 261). Thus, at present there are no boundary disputes between the Amhara residents of Mentawuha and the Gumuz. Indeed, officials of both the Guanguwa (Amhara) and the Mandura (B-G) *woreda* concur that the nearby Ca'rr mountain range

serves as a common boundary between the two regions.[5] Hence, relationships between the two communities are steadily improving. Evidence for this is in the peaceful interactions in markets and in the increasingly important sharecropping arrangement between Gumuz landowners and Amhara peasants.[6]

Despite improving relations between the two communities, the Amhara residents of Mentawuha express their anxiety about security. In a focus group discussion conducted in Mentawuha, Amhara elders unanimously underlined that they feel threatened by the armed Gumuz, while the government scrupulously disarmed them.[7]

The Amhara in Mentawuha remain bewildered by the complete change in the State's role in mediating the relationship between them and the Gumuz. In the past (the period before 1991), central and provincial authorities usually stood behind them. Moreover, the government provided them arms. Even if they seem to accept the present arrangement, they complain that while they are disarmed, the Gumuz with whom they had a long antagonistic relationship are armed.[8] They furthermore complain that because of the availability of weapons in the Gumuz community, if there are disputes between individuals coming from the two groups, the former will indiscriminately attack and kill their Amhara neighbours as a way of collective retaliation.

The Mentawuha Amhara residents, moreover, complain that both the Amhara and the Benishangul-Gumuz authorities have so far failed to maintain their security by enforcing law and order.[9] They also note that they do not have trust in the willingness and ability of the Gumuz regional authorities to disarm the Gumuz and bring those involved in inter-ethnic violence to the court of law.[10] Officials of the Mandura *woreda* of the BGNRS acknowledge some of these problems. However, they allege that inter-ethnic violence usually occurs between the two groups due to the use of forest resources by the Amhara of Mentawuha and because of disagreements over sharecropping. Regarding arms they concede that despite their best efforts to bring the problem under control, the Gumuz would buy weapons at a very expensive cost and arm themselves for cultural reasons.[11]

As demonstrated by this brief account of Mentawuha town, ethnic regionalisation has dramatically transformed the relationship between the Gumuz and the Amhara from a hostile frontier relationship into a complex set of relationships containing both conflict and cooperation. One of the most important examples of emerging peaceful interactions

between the two groups is the migration of Amhara peasants in large numbers to the Gumuz country to engage in sharecropping.

The new settlement of Amhara farmers in the BGNRS, however, contradicts the government's policy on resettlement. The EPRDF, which deeply criticised resettlement policies of the previous regime in a rather dramatic turnaround of policy, since the beginning of 2000, began to consider the transfer of peasants to the lowlands of the country as an important aspect of its strategy of ensuring food security (Feleke 2004: 211-12). In spite of this, the government in accordance with its ethnic policy only organises resettlement programmes within ethnic regions. In other words, the policy excludes cross-ethnic (inter-regional) resettlement of peasants. As a result, the current migration of Amhara peasants to the B-G region has been considered spontaneous and the settlers do not receive support from the government and international aid agencies. They, moreover, do not enjoy tenure security. Notwithstanding these, federal restructuring by normalising inter-ethnic relationships between the Gumuz and the Amhara has indirectly encouraged the migration of highland peasants to the B-G region.

According to informants at Genete-Mariam, the capital of the Mandura *woreda* of the B-G region, there are three types of Amhara migrants in the Mandura *woreda* and its surroundings. First, *mofer zemet* means 'one that migrates with his ploughs.' Amhara peasants engaged in *mofer zemet* do not permanently settle in the B-G region. They enter into sharecropping arrangement for a specific farming season. After collecting harvest, they return to their villages. This is mainly practiced in the border areas of the two regions. Second, *ye-Ikule ersha*, which means, 'sharecropping', involves the establishment of a sharecropping arrangement between Amhara farmers who would come to settle in the region and Gumuz landowners. Third, *tigegna,* which means 'dependent' – in this arrangement an Amhara migrant farmer, first settles in the region as a dependent of another Amhara peasant who secured farming land through a sharecropping arrangement.[12] After a while, such a migrant farmer with the help of family members and friends secures his own plot of farmland through a sharecropping arrangement or informal land purchase.

The present migration of Amhara peasants into the Gumuz country has led to the emergence of new modes of interactions. First, the sharecropping arrangement that recognises the right of the Gumuz over their land reflects changes in the relationships between the two groups

since 1991 and also mutually advantageous. The Gumuz who have relatively abundant fertile land and little experience in plough agriculture lease their land to the land hungry Amhara farmers who increasingly face shortage of farm land in the degraded and crowded highlands. Interestingly, recognition of the right of the Gumuz over their territory after the introduction of federalism in 1991 widely opened the fertile Gumuz country for Amhara peasants. In this respect, the Amhara are now engaged in farming deep in the interior of the Gumuz country, which before 1991 was not accessible to them.[13]

There is, however, a degree of uneasiness among Gumuz officials about the continuous migration of highland farmers into their region. They are particularly worried about the long-term political and demographic impacts of migrations. In this respect, the officials of the B-G seek to limit the migrations of Amhara peasants to their region. However, this remains difficult. Gumuz officials complain that their request for assistance from the Amhara region to send back the migrant farmers to their original place of domicile was not successful.[14] This indicates the significance of highland-lowland migration in the relationships between the two regions. It is difficult for the authorities of the two regions to stem the movement of Amhara peasants who increasingly face land shortages in their home region. The continuous migration of Amhara and other highland peasants to the Benishangul-Gumuz affect demographic balance and raises questions regarding representation and citizenship of the non-titular communities. This could eventually create controversy in the relationships between the two regions.

9.4 Inter-Regional Relations: Benishangul-Gumuz and Oromia

Lack of a mutually recognised boundary and the prevalence of mistrust between the political elite of the two regions affect relationships between the B-G and Oromia regions. In examining boundary disputes between the two regions, it is important to consider views of some Oromo nationalist organisations like the OLF about the territorial dimension of Oromia. OLF's notion of the territorial size of Oromia is larger than the one entertained by the EPRDF.

In the case of the B-G, the OLF was not enthusiastic about the formation of a separate region for the five ethnic groups with whom the Oromo have strong relationships. In fact, the Gumuz, Mao and Berta found in the Oromo dominated former Wollega province speak Afaan-Oromo and have strong socio-economic relationships with the Oromo.

Map 9.3 Oromia's boundary according to the OLF

Source: Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).[15]

Indeed, as John Young noted during the beginning of the 1990s, the OLF was promoting the idea of a 'Black Oromo' identity in the hope of bringing disparate ethnic groups presently found in the Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions into 'independent Oromia' (Young 1999: 326-8).

Presently, the Oromia region does not have such expansive territorial claim over the BGNRS. Nevertheless, there is a wide gap between the

two regions about the exact location of their common boundary. This particularly refers to the change to the map of the Oromia region regarding its boundary with the B-G and the Gambella regions.

Initially, upon their establishment as regions in 1992, the Benishangul-Gumuz region was declared to have a boundary with the Gambella region in the south (see map 9.2). However, the Oromia region contested this. Specifically, there was territorial dispute between the two regions over the Beggi town, which used to be one of the districts of the Assosa *awraja* of the former Wollega province. The BGNRS claimed Beggi on two grounds. First, the territory used to be under Sheik Khojele of Assosa (Atieb 1973; Rasheed 1995). Second, the earlier inhabitants of the area were the Mao and Komo ethnic groups assigned as constituent units of the new BGNRS. To resolve this dispute, the TGE organised a referendum in 1994. As the majority of voters decided in favour of joining the Oromia region, the administration of Beggi transferred to Oromia in 1994. This has definitely brought changes in the map of the BGNRS.

However, clarity about the exact changes that this decision brought to the size of the Benishangul-Gumuz region remains illusive. In provisional maps, issued after the Beggi referendum, the B-G no longer shares a boundary with the Gambella region (see map 1.1). In other words, the entire long strip of land between the B-G and Gambella regions now belongs to the Oromia region. As might be expected, the BGNRS rejects this change. Indeed, the 2002 B-G revised constitution still claims that the region shares a boundary with the Gambella region in the south (BGNRS 2002). Furthermore, officials of the B-G region interviewed in Assosa, underline that the territory, which appears to have merged with the Oromia region is well beyond the limits of the Beggi referendum and belongs to the Mao and Komo ethnic groups and *inter alia* to Benishangul-Gumuz. They also maintain that there was neither regional consultation nor consent to this major change of boundary.[16]

In addition to such controversies, widespread mixed Oromo\Gumuz settlements in the border areas of the two regions hinder the ongoing boundary-making exercise. This causes inter-ethnic conflicts over control of vital local resources such as farming land, forests and administrative structures.

The continued migration of highland Oromo peasants to the fertile lowlands of B-G has also emerged as a source of disagreement between the two regions. Indeed, one of the chief complaints of B-G officials about their relationships with the Oromia region has been the alleged

refusal of Oromo migrant farmers who would come and settle in the new region to recognise their authority. According to B-G officials, recognition of their authority by migrant Oromo farmers finds expression mainly in their willingness to pay the rather small amount of land-use tax to the region's local officials.[17] B-G officials complain that Oromo migrant peasants who came to their region conspicuously refuse to pay taxes to the region. They reportedly instead pay taxes to the local administrations of the Oromia region crossing the poorly defined inter-regional boundary. BGNRS officials particularly resent the alleged willingness of Oromo regional and local officials not only to collect taxes from Oromo migrant farmers but also their establishment of new *kebele* under their jurisdiction for the migrant Oromo farmers on B-G's soil. Officials in Assosa consider this as an implicit attempt to expand the territory of the Oromia region at their expense. Disgruntled B-G officials sarcastically characterise this alleged Oromo practice as the 'migration of Oromia administrative structures' along with its peasants.[18]

B-G officials furthermore complain that local and regional Oromo officials, in addition to their implicit encouragement of spontaneous Oromo settlement within their region have also been carrying out a large-scale resettlement programme of Oromo peasants on contested territories between the two regions since 2003. This particularly refers to the resettlement of Oromo farmers from Western Hararge in the border areas of the two regions in the Dedessa valley. B-G officials view this as an attempt by the Oromia region to encroach into the fertile farming lands of the Belo Jeganfoy *woreda* of the B-G region. Regional and local Oromo officials, however, dismiss these complaints as groundless and underscore that the Oromia region neither engages in expanding its administrative structures by colluding with Oromo peasants nor undertakes resettlement programmes on the territories of the B-G region.[19]

For more than 15 years, territorial disputes between the B-G and the Oromia region somehow remained non-violent. However, this has recently changed. Presently, there are tensions and occasional violent flare-ups between the Gumuz and their Oromo neighbours. For instance, in May 2007 in a land dispute between neighbouring Oromo and Gumuz communities in Yaso some lives were lost. Similarly, there was widespread violence in May 2008 in several localities along the contested boundary between the Oromia and the B-G regions. Reportedly, because of an attack by Gumuz militia on some of the

contested territories in the east Wollega *zone*, many lives were lost and hundreds of houses destroyed.

What follows is a discussion of the impacts of federal restructuring on inter-ethnic relationships between the Gumuz and the Oromo by investigating the experiences of two localities along the boundaries of the B-G and Oromia regions.

9.4.1 Boundary and resource conflicts: Darro-Dimitu and Tolle localities

The Darro-Dimitu and Tolle localities are located along the poorly defined borders of the two regions. Both localities saw territorial and resource contests between the Gumuz and their Oromo neighbours after ethnic regionalisation. Darro-Dimitu is located on the newly constructed 42-kilometre gravel road that connects the capital of the B-G Kamashi *zone* with the Gimbi-Assosa road. The locality is in the border area between the Boji-Birmeji (Oromia) and the Khamashi (B-G) *woreda*. In contrast, the Tolle area is located near the Dedessa military camp and is on the Nekemte-Gimbi road, which is undergoing upgrade to an asphalt road. This locality straddles between the Gimbi (Oromia) and Belo Jeganfoy (B-G) *woreda*. Both localities are lowland areas, covered by dense vegetation. While the Oromo and the Gumuz live in mixed villages in both localities, there are more Oromo villagers than Gumuz. The two communities have strong socio-economic ties. For instance, the Gumuz in both Darro-Dimtu and Tolle speak Afaan-Oromo.

The dispute between the Oromo and the Gumuz neighbours *inter alia* their ethnic regions in the Darro-Dimtu locality is over boundaries. The main contention being to which region the Darro-Dimtu *kebele,* presently under the Oromia region should be assigned. In contrast, the main source of the dispute in the Tolle locality is over the use of a locally vital sand resource used for construction. These disputes provide important insights about the problem of intra-federal boundary making. They also show how the issue of boundary negatively influences inter-ethnic relationships at the local level at times tearing apart social, cultural and economic bonds created between different ethnic groups over a long period. As with other communities locked in territorial disputes, the Gumuz and the Oromo in these areas provide conflicting narratives

about which of the ethnic groups has the right to control the contested areas.

For the Gumuz, they believe that the hot lowlands constitute their ancestral territories and should be under the jurisdiction of the BGNRS.[20] Accordingly, the Gumuz in Darro Dimitu argue that the Oromo who came to the area recently to earn their livelihood through farming should not be involved in the administration of the *kebele*. In line with this, Gumuz informants argue that as indigenous people to the area they should administer the Darro-Dimtu *kebele* and its surroundings.[21] Hence, Gumuz regional and local officials seek to strengthen their claim over the locality by emphasising the principle of ethnic self-administration. For instance, a regional Gumuz official insists that in accordance with the spirit of the federal constitution, which guarantees self-administration for 'nations' and 'nationalities' within their own geographic location, the Gumuz should be allowed to administer the contested *kebele* as it is found within their geographical location.[22] Such argument by the Gumuz relate with their notion of the highland-lowland divide as a natural boundary between the Gumuz and the Oromo.

In contrast, Oromo local informants argue that the assignment of Darro-Dimtu and its surroundings to the Oromia region was just as the majority of the residents are Oromo. They, moreover, underscore that the contested *kebele* was under the Oromo dominated former Wollega province. Accordingly, Oromo informants in Darro-Dimtu claim:[23]

> This locality before the formation of the regions was under the Boji-Birmeji *woreda*. The Gumuz and the Oromo lived together in this locality for many generations. We used to pay tax to the Boji-Birmeji *woreda*, which was under the former Wollega province. During the Haile Selassie reign, there were both Oromo and Gumuz *balabat* who used to collect taxes. When the military regime established *kebele* in 1975 after nationalising land, the Darro-Dimtu *kebele* was established containing both Gumuz and Oromo. Disputes regarding land ownership only emerged after the formation of the two regions (Oromia and B-G) in 1992/1993.[24]

Both Oromo elders and officials reiterate that Gumuz officials in the Kamashi *zone,* not people at the grassroots level spurred the territorial dispute in Darro-Dimtu. According to one Oromo official of the west Wollega *zone,* 'the main problem which triggers territorial conflict between the Gumuz and the Oromo is the mistaken view held by some

Gumuz officials that all the bamboo growing lowland territories along the borders of the B-G and the Oromia regions naturally belong to them. This denies the fact that many ethnic Oromo for several generations lived on these territories.'[25] The territorial dispute between the two communities took a new dimension in 2006 when Gumuz officials of the Kamashi *woreda* established an elementary school and a new Gumuz *kebele* within the Oromia Darro-Dimtu *kebele*. They justified this as a legitimate decision that would enable them to exercise self-administration and let their children study their language and history.

The establishment of a Gumuz *kebele* within the area that in the past was administered by a single Oromo *kebele* has led to the emergence of dual administrations with no clearly defined jurisdictions. This in turn is affecting relationships between the Oromo and the Gumuz. There are jurisdictional conflicts that at times lead to tensions between the two communities. The formation of the Gumuz *kebele* has also led to the emergence of intra-Gumuz tension. There is thus division between those Gumuz who advocate the retention of the *kebele* within the Oromia region and those who support transfer to the B-G region. In this respect, a Gumuz elder who was serving in the Darro Dimtu *kebele* during the research visit (March 2007) commented:[26]

> There is intense pressure on Gumuz elders of Darro-Dimtu by the Kamashi *woreda* officials to support the assignment of the *kebele* to the BGNRS. The Kamashi *woreda* provides rifles in the name of organising local militia for influential Gumuz individuals in our *kebele* so that they would support their objective. These officials on several occasions lobbied me to change my allegiance from the Oromia region to the BGNRS and work for the assignment of the *kebele* to the BGNRS. Even if I belong to the Gumuz ethnic group, I refused to accept this because of the fact that both the Gumuz and the Oromo have been living together in this *kebele* for many generations and share both language and religion.

The parties to the dispute not only disagree in their narrative about the past but also differ on how to revolve the territorial dispute. Oromo officials and informants prefer the use of referendum obviously, because there are more Oromo in the contested territories than Gumuz. The Gumuz, on the other hand, advocate for the resolution of the dispute through a political decision by the federal government that considers the history and geography of the area.

Similarly, the Gumuz and the Oromo in the Tolle locality have conflicting narratives about which of the ethnic groups have the legitimate right to control the areas from where the local people extract and sell sand for construction purposes. According to Oromo informants, there were no permanent settlements in the Tolle-Sene locality before the 1950s because of the area's inhospitality and malaria infestation. They, furthermore, state that the locality had a reputation as a den of outlaws and bandits because of its inaccessibility. The same informants claim that permanent agricultural settlements in the area came about during the 1950s after the Nekemte-Gimbi gravel road was constructed.[27]

Before the beginning of permanent settlements during the 1950s, there were contacts between the Gumuz in the interior parts of the Dedessa valley and the Oromo in the nearby highlands. These interactions, according to informants from both groups were mainly commercial in which Oromo traders would bring the Gumuz such items as beans, salt and other commodities, while the latter sell cotton to the former.[28]

Even if both Oromo and Gumuz informants concur about the nature of their interaction and the unwelcoming situation of the Tolle-Sene locality before the 1950s, they disagree about the exact period when the Oromo began to settle in the presently contested locality. According to Oromo informants, Oromo farmers began to settle in the Tolle-Sene locality in large numbers in the late 1950s. The majority of the farmers reportedly came from the surrounding highland *woreda* of the former Wollega province in order to escape tenancy.[29]

In contrast to the above Oromo narrative, some Gumuz informants note that the Oromo were in the highlands beyond mount Aba-Sena on the edge of the Dedessa valley before their settlement at the Tolle-Sene locality. The same informants maintain the Oromo came and settled in this locality after the takeover of power by the military in 1974.[30] The Gumuz apparently use this narrative to strengthen their present territorial claim over the contested *kebele* than to narrate the history of their interactions with the Oromo in Tolle and its surroundings. That is why some Gumuz informants in the same locality contradicted the above narrative and talked about the flourishing of cordial relationships between the two communities and the development of such traditional inter-ethnic institutions as *Abelij*[31] before the collapse of the Haile Selassie government in 1974.

The relationship between the Gumuz and the Oromo in this locality has changed since the restructuring of the Ethiopian State into an ethnic federation. In this regard, one Oromo informant in the locality commented:[32]

> When it was decided that administrative boundaries should be made on the basis of nations and nationalities, our *kebele* was divided between the Gumuz and the Oromo. The Oromo retained the old Tolle *kebele* and the Tolle elementary school began to teach in Afaan-Oromo, while the BGNRS established a new *kebele* called Sene. A new elementary school was also established for the Gumuz. Since this division, there are disputes about territory.

The ethnic regionalisation of the country since 1992 spurred territorial and resource disputes between the Gumuz and the Oromo in the Tolle area particularly over the locally vital sand resource. Extracting sand for commercial purposes according to local informants began during the reign of the military regime (1974-1991). For instance, residents of Tolle generated income by selling sand during the construction of the Dedessa military training camp at the beginning of the 1980s. After the 1991 change of military regime, private businesspersons secured a licence to extract the sand resources from the West Wollega *zone* of the Oromia region in 1992/3. When the Oromia regional government changed its policy on extraction of building materials in 2002, it revoked the licence from the private entrepreneurs and allowed the local people to establish a mining cooperative. Accordingly, the Oromo residents of the Tolle *kebele* established a sand mining cooperative in 2002. Indeed, the only major employer next to farming in this locality is sand extraction.

However, the Gumuz challenged the Tolle cooperative's sole right to the extraction and sale of sand at a time when the price of the commodity was increasing because of the construction boom in the country. To make things more complicated, in 2006 the Belo-Jeganfoy *woreda* of the BGNRS issued a licence for some Gumuz residents to extract sand from the same area used by the Oromo of Tolle for several years. The latter considered this move a critical challenge to their livelihood. In contrast, Gumuz informants contend that they have the right to exploit sand resources as the sand is extracted from a land inhabited by the Gumuz and is part of their region. Gumuz informants in the area note:

> When a new policy that encourages local people to benefit from the extraction of building materials was enacted, we [the Gumuz] were not able to secure a licence, as the Mining and Energy Bureau of the BGNRS did not have *woreda* branches. As a result, we were not able to benefit from the resource. The Oromo had to cross our farmlands to extract the sand. When we realised the economic benefit of the sand, we simply demanded to extract the resource on our own land. Now that we have secured a licence from the Belo Jeganfoy *woreda* of the BGNRS, we can extract the sand.[33]

Oromo informants not only reject the Gumuz claim that they extract sand from land inhabited by the latter but also underscore that the latter's settlement on the routes to the sand extraction sites were recently constructed. This disagreement created inter-ethnic tensions.

9.5 Conclusion

The making of boundaries between the Benishangul-Gumuz region and its neighbours has not been about mere municipal or intra-national boundaries that do not generally have political significance (Newman 2003: 128). Indeed, as Moreno and McEwen state, 'where territorial units coincide with sub-state national, linguistic or cultural boundaries, their political significance is likely to be significant (2005: 16).

In the Ethiopian context as well, drawing the boundaries of the new ethnic regions has been an important aspect of constructing ethnic-wide solidarity and nationalism. For example, it contributed to the strengthening of the territorial image of ethnic homelands at regional levels (Newman 2003: 128). Additionally, Newman noted that boundary making has its 'own internal dynamics creating new realities, and affecting the lives of people and groups who reside within proximity to the boundary or are obliged to transverse the boundary at one stage or another in their lives' (Ibid: 123). In some cases where there are mixed villages in which both the Oromo and the Gumuz live, the process of making intra-federal boundaries entailed tensions and conflicts. In contrast, the same process has a positive impact in normalising inter-ethnic relationships between the Oromo and the Amhara that in the past were mainly characterised by frontier conflicts.

In sum, competing notions of boundary and highland-lowland migrations complicated the on-going process of boundary-making between the Benishangul-Gumuz region and its neighbours. First, the Gumuz who have been historically at the margins of the Ethiopian State seek to use the creation of intra-federal boundaries to redeem lost ancestral territories. They, therefore, seek to transform their images of ethnic homeland (bamboo growing hot lowlands) into the geographic jurisdiction of their autonomous region. The neighbouring regions (or ethnic groups) do not accept this Gumuz conception of ethnic territory. As a result, there are tensions and occasional violent outbursts in the relationships between the Gumuz and their neighbours, particularly the Oromo.

Second, highland-lowland migration remains one of the key aspects of inter-regional relationships between the BGNRS and its neighbours. In fact, ethnic regionalisation has several paradoxical implications on the migration of highland peasants into Gumuz country. For instance, the normalisation of relationships between the Gumuz and the Amhara opened the door for the migration of the latter into the former's territory in large numbers. However, this has implications on intra-regional demographic balance and citizenship. While Gumuz peasants who benefited by renting their land to the incoming Amhara peasants are enthusiastic about the new situation, Gumuz politicians fear the impacts of the continuous migration on demography and politics. They seek to curb the influx of highland farmers to their region. In contrast, there are controversies between the Benishangul-Gumuz and the Oromia regions about the migration of Oromo peasants. The Gumuz consider the settlement of Oromo peasants on contested territories as expansion. In contrast, local Oromo officials contend that the peasants only settled on Oromo territory. This disparity of position partly contributes to the prevailing insecurity and tension in the border areas of the two regions.

Two important aspects of autonomy conflicts (intra- and inter-regional conflicts) were examined in the previous chapters. The next chapter deals with centre-regional relationships. In particular, it discusses the different instruments through which the political centre – the federal government and the dominant party controls the new ethnically constituted regions. Asymmetrical centre-regional relations influence autonomy conflicts and their management.

Notes

[1] As outlined by Kopytoff, a frontier relationship between two neighbouring groups would emerge when the group that has the numerical, political and economic upper hand (the core group) feels that it is surrounded by large tracts of land politically and physically 'open,' for its expansion and inhabited by people who are thought to be 'inferior' (cited in Triulzi 1994: 236).

[2] Personal Interview: High-level regional official of the BGNRS, 24 April 2005.

[3] Focus Group Discussion: Long-time Amhara residents of Mentawuha, 9 May 2007.

[4] Focus Group Discussion: Elders and retired officials of the former Metekel Awraja, Chagni 10 May 2007.

[5] Focus Group Discussion: Mandura *woreda* (B-G) cabinet members, Mandura, 10 May 2007.

[6] Focus Group Discussion: Long-time Amhara residents of Mentawuha, 9 May 2007.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Focus Group Discussion: Oromo elders and Kebele officials, Darro-Dimtu, 27 April 2007.

[9] Focus Group Discussion: Long-time Amhara residents of Mentawuha, 9 May 2007.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Focus Group Discussion: Mandura *woreda* (B-G) cabinet members, Mandura, 10 May 2007.

[12] Focus Group Discussion: Mandura *woreda* (B-G) cabinet members, Mandura, 10 May 2007.

[13] Focus Group Discussion: Long-time Amhara residents of Mentawuha, 9 May 2007.

[14] Focus Group Discussion: Mandura *woreda* (B-G) cabinet members, Mandura, 10 May 2007.

[15] OLF, Location of Oromia, available at [http://www.oromoliberationfront.org/ OromiaBriefs.htm]

[16] Personal Interview: High-level official, B-G region, Asossa, 24 April 2005.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Personal Interview: West Wollega zonal official, Dembi-Dollo, 25 April 2007.

[20] Focus Group Discussion: Gumuz elders of Sene *kebele*, 4 May 2007.

[21] Focus Group Discussion: Gumuz elders of Darro Dimtu *kebele*, 27 April 2007.

[22] Personal Interview: High-level official of the Khamashi zone, Nejo, 26 April 2007.

[23] Focus Group Discussion: Oromo elders and *kebele* officials, Darro Dimtu, 27 April 2007.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Personal Interview: Security official in the West Wollega zone, Gimbi, 20 April 2007.

[26] Focus Group Discussion: Oromo elders and *kebele* officials, Darro Dimtu, 27 April 2007.

[27] Focus Group Discussion: Oromo elders and *kebele* officials, Tolle, 2 May 2007.

[28]Focus Group Discussion: Gumuz elders and officials of the Sene *kebele*, 4 May 2007.

[29] Focus Group Discussion: Oromo elders and *kebele* officials, Tolle, 2 May 2007.

[30] Focus Group Discussion: Gumuz elders and officials of the Sene *kebele*, 4 May 2007.

[31] According to Assefa Tolera, *Abelij* 'is a form of a kinship-like bond established between families when either of the two becomes a God-mother/father of a daughter or a son of the other' (1999: 70).

[32] Focus Group Discussion: Oromo elders and *kebele* officials, Tolle, 2 May 2007.

[33] Focus Group Discussion: Gumuz elders and officials of the Sene *kebele*, 4 May 2007.