10 Pastoral Conflicts and State-building in the Ethiopian Lowlands

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Abstract

This article draws attention to the central role played by the Ethiopian state in reconfiguring contemporary (agro-)pastoral conflicts in Ethiopia's semi-arid lowlands. Contrary to primordialist and environmental conflict theories of pastoralist violence, we shed light on the changing political rationality of inter-group conflicts by retracing the multiple impacts of state-building on pastoral land tenure and resource governance, peace-making and customary authorities, and competition over state resources. Based on an extensive comparative review of recent case studies, post-1991 administrative decentralisation is identified as a major driving force in struggles over resources between transhumant herders in Ethiopia's peripheral regions. Our analysis emphasises the politicisation of kinship relations and group identities and the transformation of conflict motives under the influence of the gradual incorporation of (agro-)pastoral groups into the Ethiopian nation-state. Ethnic federalism incites pastoralists to engage in parochial types of claim-making, to occupy territory on a more permanent basis, and to become involved in 'politics of difference' (Schlee 2003) with neighbouring groups.

Keywords: Violence; pastoralism; state-building; federalism; lowlands; Ethiopia.

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10.1 Introduction

With the federalisation of Ethiopia under the stewardship of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the fortunes of its pastoral communities have seized the attention of aid agencies, academics and politicians. The incumbent regime has vowed to 'decolonise' the country's 'backward' or 'emerging' regions where most of Ethiopia's transhumant herders and agro-pastoralists are found. Pastoralist interests have been institutionalised in the House of Peoples' Representatives in 2002 by dint of forming a Pastoralist Standing Affairs Committee that brings together all members of parliament from predominantly pastoralist constituencies (Lister 2004). Following the major droughts of 1995−1997 and 2000−2001, large-scale humanitarian aid and development programmes have been expanded to the eastern, southern and western lowlands, which cover 60% of the territory (Sandford and Yohannes Habtu 2000).

It is within this particular context that one has to situate the discussion about the causes, dynamics and peaceful transformation of pastoral conflicts in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The concomitant degradation and shrinkage of the natural resource base and the proliferation of armed confrontations have paved the way for a "disaster and emergency" discourse (Nori et al 2005, p 12) that associates pastoralism with uncontrolled violence. Numerous studies have reported the militarisation of pastoralist societies, an increase in the severity of resource conflicts, and the augmentation of casualties of warlike confrontations in Ethiopia (Farah 1997; Said 1997; Ayele Gebre Mariam 2001; Getachew Kassa 2001a; Dereje Feyissa 2003; Markakis 2003; Abdulahi 2005). Whether or not one endorses Unruh's statement that "violent confrontation has become more frequent" (Unruh 2005, p 230) in the Ethiopian lowlands, outbursts of pastoralist violence have challenged the federal and regional governments.

This article draws attention to the central role played by the Ethiopian state in reconfiguring contemporary pastoral conflicts. Based on a comprehensive review of recent publications on local resource conflicts and management in the Ethiopian lowlands we elaborate a conceptual perspective on the interrelations between statehood and pastoral conflicts. This analysis also draws on our recently concluded doctoral research on conflict and resource management in Ethiopia's Somali region (Hagmann 2006) and indigenous conceptions of violence among Karrayu pastoralists in the Upper and Middle Awash Valley (Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008). A number of authors have

argued that the state represents a major bone of contention for pastoralists in the Horn of Africa (Markakis 1994). However, to this day, established explanations of pastoral violence tend to propagate a depoliticised interpretation of inter-group conflicts, which are thought to be the product of primordial antagonisms and resource scarcity. In contrast, we argue that pastoral conflicts must be understood within the context of the historical and ongoing expansion of the Ethiopian state from Ethiopia's central highlands to the remoter parts of its peripheral lowlands.

Before expounding on the nexus between pastoral conflicts and state-building, a number of terminological and conceptual clarifications are required in addition to details concerning the scope of our argument. We use 'pastoralism', 'pastoralists' and 'pastoral' to refer to rural dwellers whose livelihood depends predominantly on transhumant livestock or agro-pastoral livestock production. Although marked by important socio-economic and political differences that defy sweeping generalisations, Ethiopia's pastoralists share three broad characteristics. These include a segmentary kinship structure "on the basis of moiety, clan, or lineage", the existence of "age- or generation-grade organisation[s]" and the eminent role played by religious and ritual "mediators, priests, or prophets" in managing public affairs (Abbink 1997, p 4). Across Ethiopia's regional states a great variety of interactions can be observed between different administrative levels from the *kilil* (regional state) to the *wereda* (district) and the *kebele* (village or sub-location) on the one hand, and pastoral groups' customary institutions and organised political interests on the other hand (Unruh 2005).

10.2 Pastoral land tenure and resource governance

Conflicts over pastoral economies' life-sustaining resources are embedded in the evolution of natural resource management practices and their wider political economy. In the past decade, the Ethiopian state has effectively contributed to the transformation of how pastoral groups relate to their natural environment. Since 1991 ethnic federalism and other public policies have produced more sedentary lifestyles based on more permanent and less flexible territorial boundaries. In many lowland areas the concomitant break-down of customary institutions and the inability of central and local governments to enforce communal property have led to de facto open-access tenure regimes. These open-access regimes promote violent confrontations triggered by multiple claims to the same resource pool.

Over the decades, land tenure policies and state-led development programmes strongly undermined the communal land tenure traditions that characterised pastoral production (Abdulahi 2007). Past government interventions have decreased livestock mobility, promoting sedentarisation, mixed agro-pastoral production, and shorter migration routes of herds in the vicinity of water points. The 1955 Revised Constitution determined that pastoral territory, referred to as *zelan* land, was state property (Yacob Arsano 2000). Starting from the 1960s, consecutive livestock development programmes propagated modern input delivery systems such as veterinary services, water development stock routes, holding ground and marketing facilities (Taffesse Mesfin 2000). In the 1970s these interventions aimed to increase the number of perennial water sources by excavating ponds, dams and shallow wells, drilling boreholes, and building cisterns. The ensuing multiplication of water points weakened customary water and grazing management and triggered rangeland degradation in parts of today's Oromiya (Helland 2000) and Somali regions (Sugule and Walker 1998).

In terms of formal land tenure, "no fundamental differences" (Berhanu Nega et al 2003, p 109) exist between the former *Derg* and the current government, as the latter maintained state ownership of land, including the rangelands. Ethiopia's federal constitution determines that "Ethiopian pastoralists have the right to free land for grazing and cultivation as well as the right not to be displaced from their own lands" (FDRE 1995, Art. 40). Attempts to restore or enforce communal land-holding in the Ethiopian lowlands have been made in the framework of decentralised community-based natural resource management projects. In the 1990s, NGOs began implementing participatory forest management and land-use planning in pastoral areas in order to enhance land tenure security, promote capacity-building in local institutions, and minimise conflicts over the commons (Tache and Irwin 2003). Accelerated by droughts, economic destitution and more intensive patterns of livestock production, the individualisation of resource tenure is concomitant to the erosion of reciprocal grazing rights and a decrease in herd mobility.

An additional and critical dimension of the transformation of dryland resource governance emanates from ethnic federalism. While it is difficult for pastoralists to claim constitutionally enshrined land-use rights, the 'right to self-determination' has been broadly promoted and vulgarised by the EPRDF. The principle according to which political recognition depends on a group's ability to control and claim a distinct area of land encourages conflicts over spatially concentrated natural resources. Despite its name,

Ethiopia's ethnic-based decentralisation (*yaltemakele astedader*) relies on a territorially defined type of federalism, as territory, and not people, is the organising principle of politico-administrative units. As a result, since 1991 resource-based conflicts have become increasingly intertwined with a quest for territorial control for political purposes.

10.3 Co-optation of customary authorities and peace-making

Consecutive Ethiopian regimes have co-opted and partially incorporated customary authorities and their peace-making repertoires in order to uphold security and state interests at the local level. Over time, the formal recognition of selected clan leaders by the imperial and the current EPRDF regimes and – to a much lesser degree – by the *Derg* has multiplied titled elders who compete over the representation of their kin group vis-à-vis local government and aid agencies. After 1991, the regional states' embracement of customary authorities has been particularly visible in the realm of conflict resolution and efforts to maintain or re-establish peace, as ethnographic studies in the Upper and Middle Awash Valley (Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008) and Somali region (Hagmann 2006) demonstrate. Similarly, Kelemework Tafere (2006, p 69) documented how in the Afar region "the state seems to adopt a de facto policy of encouraging the Afar to settle disputes on their own". The selective state appropriation of local reconciliation mechanisms that fuse customary and religious elements both undermines and 'retraditionalises' customary authorities of pastoral groups.

The overwhelming majority of inter-personal and inter-group disputes – both violent and non-violent – in Ethiopia's lowland regions are arbitrated by elders. Customary conflict resolution is deeply embedded in social norms and rituals, and often involves the negotiation and payment of blood compensation. Recent studies have documented these peace-making mechanisms among the Afar (Getachew Kassa 2001b), the Boran (Bassi 2005), the Karrayyu (Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008), the Suri and Dizi (Abbink 2000), and the Somali (Hagmann 2007). With the exception of urban dwellers, pastoralists by and large prefer customary conflict resolution to the formal legal system when resolving disputes and grievances. Various authors have described the local administrations' inability to provide for "lasting solutions" to longstanding resource conflicts at the communal level (Ahmed Ali Gedi 2005, p 46). State officials often lack the necessary evidence to

file charges against the perpetrators, as large parts of the population turn to customary authorities and mechanisms for dispute settlement (Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008).

In cases of highly escalated and protracted conflicts that threaten the institutional architecture of or the power balance within regional states, the federal government – first through the Prime Minister's Office and later on through the Ministry of Federal Affairs – has established so-called 'joint peace committees'. The success of these committees, which exist even at the lowest administrative level and are composed of local government officials and elders, has been mixed at best (Abdulahi 2005; Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008). Overall, most government efforts to contain or resolve pastoral conflicts have been characterised by coercion, short-term approaches and limited spatial outreach. In his analysis of herder–farmer conflicts in the Dawa-Genale river basin, Ahmed Ali Gedi (2005, p 31) concluded that "government officials interfere in some disputes which take place in […] accessible areas, while they often neglect those disputes which take place in remote or distant pastoral areas".

In the past decade, government-sponsored conflict resolution in Ethiopia's pastoral areas has effectively commercialised peace-making. In many cases, elders of pastoral communities who engage in mediation and reconciliation are paid either by the government or by NGOs. Conflict resolution thereby became a lucrative activity for customary leaders who implement local government agendas in return for per diems, *khat* and other personal benefits. Many NGOs working in Ethiopia's pastoral areas assume that conflicts arise from resource competition and thus regard training in conflict management as a strategy to prevent an outbreak of violence.

10.4 Political economy of ethno-national claims-making

The Ethiopian government has rationalised ethnic federalism as a political project that accommodates ethno-linguistic diversity by generalising 'the right to self-determination' on all administrative scales (Turton 2006). As a result, many of the previously marginalised pastoral groups were for the first time ever recognised as 'nations and nationalities' within the Ethiopian polity, obtaining self-government at the regional, zonal and district levels. This process of 'matching' ethno-linguistic groups with administrative units proved highly conflictual. On the one hand, pastoralists' reliance on mobil-

ity and flexible resource tenure in accordance with seasonal variations contradict the idea of permanent territorial occupation. On the other hand, ethnic federalism postulates a primordial concept of unchanging and bounded group identities, which does not take into account the historical flux, constructedness, and flexibility of group identities (Aalen 2006).

Pastoralists mostly interpreted ethnically defined administration as the exclusive rule by a dominant group within a given home territory. Demographically bigger and more powerful groups had much better chances of achieving this goal than smaller and minority clans. In the Somali regional state and elsewhere the right of self-determination to be enjoyed by ethnic groups was "taken as the rights of clans" (Asnake Kefale 2006, p 5). Historical animosities over grazing resources and water points were revived by administrative decentralisation as pastoralists sought to expand the boundaries of their *kebele* and district to claim sole possession of disputed localities. Changing the names of areas where strategic rangelands, water wells and settlements were concentrated in order to legitimise their incorporation into one's home territory became another strategy of ethnic claims-making (Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008). Although important inter-ethnic tensions persisted through the 1990s, particularly at the boundary between the Oromiya, Afar and Somali regional states, prolonged confrontations mostly involved individual clan lineages and not entire ethnic groups. Since access to political representation depends on the ability to control administrative units, genealogical groups struggled to establish their own districts in order to 'gain a better political position' within their zone and their larger clan family (Ayele Gebre Mariam 2005).

A major incentive for pastoralists to identify with pre-defined ethnic collectivities and to adopt expansionist political tactics to the detriment of neighbouring groups was the extension of fiscal and administrative resources from regional capitals to districts. Particularly for the small educated elite who qualified for civil service, employment in a regional, zonal or district office became a lucrative source of income. Local and regional administrations provided important opportunities to appropriate petty cash in the form of both regular salaries and irregular funds. Concomitantly with the 'trickling down' of public resources into Ethiopia's pastoral areas, neo-patrimonial relations between state representatives and pastoral groups expanded (Hagmann 2005). These networks, linking rural constituencies to urban gatekeepers, determined the allocation of state resources and assured the politicians popular support on election day.

10.5 Conclusion

In this article we have argued that contemporary conflicts in Ethiopia's lowland regions must be viewed within the context of the current state-building process in the semi-arid periphery, which strongly shapes the rationality of inter-group conflicts by both integrating and excluding pastoral communities. Although violence between herders and agro-pastoralists is perpetrated in 'non-state spheres' (Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008), it is directly related to the state, which mediates resource governance, peace-making and group identity. Administrative decentralisation has reconfigured pastoralists' relation to their territory, interactions between customary authorities and government officials, and relations between competing ethnic or clan groups. Since 1991 ethnic federalism has permitted local groups to establish and appropriate administrative and political spoils at local and regional levels. These processes are partly in continuity with previous interactions between the Ethiopian state and pastoral communities, which have shaped pastoralists' attitudes towards state institutions. In this sense, post-1991 decentralisation has accelerated a historically unfolding state-building process and its transformative impacts on pastoral life-worlds, politics and resource management.

As pastoral societies are incorporated into wider political and economic systems, the rationale of conflicts and violence is changing. Without completely losing its ritual and customary referents, collective violence in the pastoral areas is 'modernised' as its connections with modern state politics and capitalist modes of production intensify. The term 'pastoral conflict' seems increasingly inappropriate to grasp the current logics of violence, as it embodies a nostalgic connotation of herders and conflict. Contemporary disputes in the Ethiopian lowlands are sparked by competition over urban real estate, electoral campaigns or contested access to public budgets as much as by competition over wells and pastures. Consequently, there is a need to consider the changing logics of resource conflicts in the semi-arid parts of the Horn of Africa as the 'same' groups fight – from a historical perspective – over increasingly diversified natural, political and economic resources.

Endnotes

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