Causes of Inter-Ethnic conflict between Afar and Somali Communities: A Case Study of Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas in Zone Three, Afar Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities in the Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas of the Afar Regional State has been ongoing. This study examines the root cause such as historical, political, and socio-economic factors. Using qualitative methods, we gathered data from primary and secondary sources, with thematic analysis employed to identify key patterns. The findings reveal that relations between the Afar and Somali communities were generally peaceful before 1991, despite occasional confrontations over grazing rights and cattle raiding. However, the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991 led to increased competition and conflict. Key drivers of violence include competition over natural resources such as pasture, water, and land, politicization of ethnicity, territorial disputes, and the spread of small arms and light weapons. The study emphasizes the need for inclusive, culturally tolerant national dialogue to achieve lasting peace between the two communities.

Keywords: *Afar, Amibara, conflict; Mille, Somali*

1.   INTRODUCTION

Inter-ethnic conflict among Ethiopian pastoralists is not a recent phenomenon; it has persisted in various forms for ages. However, over the past decade, several factors have intensified and transformed these ethnic disputes (Tigist, 2014). Different pastoral communities have a long history of inter-ethnic violence, often pitting clans, tribes, and ethnic groups against one another. In the past, pastoral conflicts primarily utilized traditional weapons such as spears, bows, and arrows, resulting in less destructive encounters. However, the lethality of these intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts has dramatically increased due to the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons. Recent patterns of violent inter-ethnic conflict in pastoral areas suggest that these confrontations now involve extensive livestock raiding, the military occupation of adjacent ethnic groups' lands, and what has effectively devolved into warfare (Yaynshet, 2004).

Ethiopia serves as a compelling case study for understanding the dynamics of inter-ethnic conflict influenced by these factors. The country has experienced numerous intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts over time, characterized by varying intensity, scope, causes, and actors (Abrha, 2012). Numerous pastoral communities have a long history of inter-ethnic conflict, pitting different ethnic groups, tribes, and clans against one another. Examples of recurring inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia include the Guji-Burji conflict, the MedaWelabu-Kersa-Dula pastoralist conflict, and the Afar-Issa conflict (Asnake, 2013; Abrha, 2012; Bekele, 2010). The inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities is driven by factors such as the politicization of ethnicity, the practice of cattle raiding, intense competition for resources, and the gradual decline of the pastoral resource base due to state land confiscation for development (Bekele, 2010).

The Afar-Issa/Somali conflict is one of the longest-running inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, dating back to the nineteenth century (Yasin, 2010; Mu'uz, 2009; Mesfin, 2006; John, 2003). This conflict's complexity, involving numerous stakeholders, is well documented. Geographically, it spans over three hundred kilometers in the middle of the Awash basin and has a transnational dimension, with political actors from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia/Somaliland, and Djibouti participating (John, 2003). The conflict between the Afar and Somali communities is both frequent and enduring, with its causes, claims, and nature evolving over time. Initially, the sources of conflict were rooted in traditional cultural practices, such as the quest for recognition, the display of bravery, and competition over water and pasture, which were often resolved through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms (Yasin, 2010). However, following the adoption of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia in 1991, which divided the country into nine administrative states along ethnic lines, the nature of conflicts changed. The boundary disputes between the Afar and Somali communities became increasingly contentious. This situation has fostered enmity and confrontation between the two communities, leading to conflicts that have escalated in Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas of the Afar Region.

Since 1991, the face of inter-ethnic conflicts between the Afar and Somali communities has shifted from resource competition to territorial disputes and claims of self-governance. Both ethnic groups compete over territorial claims, land, and self-governance, as well as access to pasture and water, with livestock raiding remaining a significant cause of conflict. Each group strives to control or gain access to critical resources, reflecting a shift from cultural to territorial conflicts (Bekele, 2010; Yasin, 2010).

Several scholars have investigated inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia, identifying various factors contributing to these tensions. Abbink (2006) highlights that competition over scarce resources, such as water and grazing land, often triggers conflicts between pastoralist communities, including the Afar and Somali groups. He notes that historical grievances and territorial disputes exacerbate these tensions, complicating resolution efforts. Similarly, Markakis (2011) emphasizes the role of state policies and political marginalization in fueling ethnic conflicts in the Horn of Africa, arguing that the central government's uneven development policies and lack of effective conflict management strategies have intensified local grievances and rivalries, particularly in peripheral regions like Afar.

Dejene and Abdurahman (2002) focus on the socio-economic dimensions of inter-ethnic conflicts, highlighting how poverty, unemployment, and a lack of infrastructure development contribute to persistent tensions. Their study suggests that improving economic conditions and ensuring equitable access to resources could mitigate some root causes of these conflicts.

Additionally, Hussein (1998) explores the cultural and identity aspects of inter-ethnic conflicts, noting that deeply rooted cultural practices and the need for ethnic identity preservation often drive groups into conflict. He argues that any conflict resolution strategy must consider these cultural dimensions to be effective.

While substantial research has been conducted on inter-ethnic conflicts between the Afar and Somali communities in Ethiopia, there is a noticeable lack of recent studies post-2012 that address the evolving nature of these conflicts in specific areas like Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas in Zone Three of the Afar Region. Previous studies, such as those by Kassa (2001) have not provided a comprehensive, up-to-date analysis that considers new developments such as changes in local governance, demographic shifts, and the impact of climate change, which may have altered the conflict dynamics. Furthermore, these studies often generalize the conflict dynamics across broader areas without delving into the unique socio-economic and cultural factors specific to the mentioned woredas.

Most studies on inter-ethnic conflicts between the Afar and Somali people in Ethiopia were conducted before 2012, creating a gap in our understanding of the current situation. In the past decade, various factors that could affect relations between the two groups, such as political changes, environmental issues, and population dynamics, have not been thoroughly studied or documented. Consequently, our knowledge of these conflicts may not fully reflect the challenges and realities that the Afar and Somali communities face today, particularly in specific areas such as Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas.

Understanding the ongoing changes in inter-ethnic conflicts in the Afar and Somali Regions necessitates filling the information gap since the last comprehensive studies. Significant events may have altered the conflict dynamics, including changes in governance, infrastructure projects, and economic shifts. These developments impact resource distribution and inter-ethnic relations. By addressing this gap, the research aims to provide current data and insights that reflect the present situation, thereby enhancing academic knowledge in conflict management and supporting informed decision-making, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding efforts tailored to the regions' specific needs.

The findings of this study significantly contribute to the existing body of knowledge in conflict management and ethnic relations by providing a pioneering and detailed examination of inter-ethnic conflicts between the Afar and Somali communities in the Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas of Zone Three, Afar Region, Ethiopia. This study is the first comprehensive analysis of this topic since 2012, marking a groundbreaking contribution to conflict management. It offers novel perspectives on the unique historical, social, political, and economic forces that underlie these conflicts. By examining local dynamics that previous or broader studies may have overlooked, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the situation.

Moreover, the study explores the experiences and viewpoints of the communities involved in the conflict, shedding light on the human aspects, such as personal grievances, differences in identity, and resource-related disputes. By offering specific insights into the situation, this case study not only enhances the understanding of the issue but also provides practical information for policymakers, organizations, and researchers working toward conflict resolution and peacebuilding in similar cross-cultural settings.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1. Concepts and Definitions of Conflict and Inter-Ethnic Conflict

There is no universally accepted definition of conflict recognized by all scholars and societies, as various schools of thought offer differing perspectives on this social phenomenon. This diversity has led to considerable debate among experts. Societies around the world hold different views regarding conflicts; some interpret them through theological or spiritual lenses, while others perceive them as social phenomena arising from everyday social interactions. Consequently, the term "conflict" encompasses multiple definitions (Jeong, 2008; Abdella, 2002). However, several commonalities among the definitions can be identified.

According to Galtung (1996), a notable authority in peace and conflict studies, conflict is defined as an evolving process in which involved parties recognize irreconcilable goals, needs, or interests. Galtung (1996) emphasizes the structural and cultural facets of conflict, introducing the concept of "structural violence," which highlights how societal frameworks and institutions can adversely affect individuals by obstructing their ability to meet basic needs. He proposes a conflict triangle that includes attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions, suggesting that conflicts become apparent when these components interact negatively.

Abdella (2002), posits that conflict arises when parties encounter disagreements or interests that cannot coexist, resulting in tension or opposition. He identifies competition over scarce resources, power, and status as root causes of conflict. Communication breakdowns and misunderstandings also exacerbate disputes, suggesting that effective conflict resolution must address both substantive issues and relational aspects between conflicting parties. Similarly, Ho-Won Jeong (2008), defines conflict as a situation in which two or more parties perceive their interests, goals, or values as mutually exclusive, leading to contests for power, resources, or social recognition. Ho-Won Jeong (2008) considers the psychological, social, and structural dimensions that contribute to the emergence and escalation of conflict, advocating for holistic approaches to conflict resolution that address both immediate concerns and underlying systemic challenges.

For this study, conflict is defined as an unavoidable feature of social change, characterized by the pursuit of conflicting interests and goals by distinct groups. Inter-ethnic conflict specifically refers to confrontations between two or more ethnic groups over power, resources, identity, and social status. It encompasses situations in which individuals mobilize against others based on their ethnicity.

2.2. Theoretical Perspective of Conflict

Numerous theories attempt to explain the causes of inter-ethnic conflict, and no single theory can fully encapsulate the complexities of inter-ethnic relations and conflict (Muhabie, 2015). The multifaceted nature of conflict causes creates challenges in analyzing specific situations (Abdella, 2002). However, the inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali community groups can be understood through three primary theoretical perspectives such as the structural theory, the economic theory of conflict and the frustration-aggression theory.

2.3.   Structural Theory of Conflict

This theory aims to elucidate how tensions arising from competition for limited resources lead to inter-ethnic conflict. Its central claim is that inter-ethnic conflict results from the specific structural arrangements within communities (Oakland Institute, 2014). The theory asserts that conflicts between ethnic groups stem from inequities embedded in social structures. Competition for control of essential resources—such as water, grazing land, and farming areas—often generates tension, as both communities rely on these resources for their livelihoods. Ethno-political dynamics, where one ethnic group feels politically privileged over others, further exacerbate frustrations stemming from exclusion. Historical and economic factors also intensify these tensions, as processes of dominance and submission become entrenched. Additionally, weak state structures and poor governance hinder the resolution of existing disputes, prompting communities to resort to violence to achieve their goals, thereby fostering intolerance and impunity.

2.4.   Economic Theory of Conflict

This conflict theory explains the economic underpinnings of inter-ethnic conflict. Scarcity and political competition (for power, resources, or social value) are closely intertwined. People pursue power to achieve their goals, often financial in nature. Disputes arise when communities contest the government's distribution of resources or wealth, particularly over farmland, grazing areas, and water resources. Fear of scarcity or the actual deprivation of needs frequently motivates conflicts over resource control and political power. Therefore, during times of acute fear or the threat of scarcity, conflict becomes plausible. The looming specter of famine, deprivation, and mismanagement of limited resources can lead to fraud or corruption, just as the fear of poverty and hardship might. This theory enables the researcher to view conflict through the lens of scarce resources, particularly in the context of communal conflicts over grazing land and water in the study area.

2.5.   Frustration-Anger-Aggression Theory

According to the psychological Frustration-Anger-Aggression Theory, aggression often results from frustration, typically stemming from blocked goals or unmet needs. When individuals or groups perceive their goals as thwarted, they experience frustration. This frustration can lead to anger, which may subsequently manifest as aggression. When applied to the emotional and psychological dimensions of the Afar-Somali communities conflict, this theory elucidates the drivers of aggression. Historical injustices, economic hardships, and social exclusion can cultivate chronic frustration among members of the Afar and Somali communities. Such chronic frustration can escalate into expressions of anger and aggression towards perceived sources of frustration, often the opposing ethnic group. This study utilizes the Frustration-Anger-Aggression Theory to investigate how unmet needs, perceived injustices, and emotional responses contribute to the cycle of violence between the Afar and Somali communities.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper utilized a qualitative research approach to explore the causes of inter-ethnic conflicts between the Afar and Somali ethnic groups in the Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas of Zone Three in the Afar Region. A qualitative methodology was chosen for its capacity to provide detailed and deep insights into the complexities of social phenomena (Denzin, 2005).

This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of inter-ethnic conflicts by uncovering the underlying reasons and patterns through detailed insights into individual situations and personal experiences. Such an approach is crucial for analyzing the intricate social, cultural, and historical factors influencing these conflicts, which is essential for identifying their root causes and developing effective resolutions.

The research design involved a case study approach focusing on the specific contexts of Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas in Zone Three of the Afar Region. This design was selected for its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of the dynamics and context of inter-ethnic conflict in these areas. With this methodology, the author can engage with and understand the complexities involved in the Afar-Somali communities conflict, making it particularly suitable for exploring the multi-layered and deeper nature of social issues affecting these two ethnic groups.

Data collection instruments for this study included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Semi-structured interview guides were developed prior to the fieldwork. These guides facilitated initial informal conversations with key informants, including community leaders, elders, and local government officials, to gather information on the causes of the conflict, the experiences of the communities, and potential conflict resolution mechanisms. Respondents were also invited to provide feedback on the data collection instruments. The semi-structured format allowed interviewers the flexibility to explore specific topics of interest, seek clarification for deeper understanding, and address emerging data during interviews.

To capture diverse community perspectives on the conflict, FGDs were conducted with members of both the Afar and Somali communities. FGDs effectively capture group interactions and discussions, offering valuable insights into community dynamics and collective perspectives. This approach also facilitates the identification of shared experiences and common themes within both ethnic groups. Additionally, document analysis provided contextual background information, allowing for the triangulation of data and enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings through the incorporation of government and local reports, historical sources, and other previous studies.

The data collected from interviews, FGDs, and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved coding the data to identify significant themes and patterns related to the causes of the conflict. Thematic analysis is a multi-stage process, beginning with familiarization with the data through repeated readings of interview transcripts, FGDs, and observational notes. Throughout the study, ethical considerations were paramount, ensuring the dignity and privacy of participants. Participants were fully informed about their rights, the purpose of the study, data collection procedures, and any associated risks. To protect participant privacy and ensure anonymity, all personal and sensitive information was stripped of identifiers during analysis. Given the sensitive nature of the conflict-related topics addressed in this study, additional measures were implemented, including integrated safeguarding protocols and clear communication regarding potential psychological or social risks faced by participants. The study adhered to ethical guidelines and procedures, ensuring a respectful approach that prioritized participants' rights and well-being.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The causes, nature, and patterns of inter-ethnic violence in Eastern Ethiopia are diverse and multidimensional. Various factors contribute to violent inter-ethnic conflict, and these factors often reinforce one another. Traditionally, inter-ethnic conflicts among pastoralists were relatively straightforward in their causes and manifestations, being localized both in terms of the protagonists and their overall impact. As such, these conflicts could often be resolved through community procedures. However, contemporary inter-ethnic conflicts are increasingly complex and multifactorial, involving a wider range of parties, some of whom may be situated far from the conflict zones. This complexity is evident in the inter-ethnic disputes between the Afar and Somali communities.

4.1. Territorial Claim and Self-Governance

The Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) came to power after the overthrow of the Derg, the ruling military junta, on May 28, 1991. Following this event, Ethiopia underwent a restructuring into new administrative units, resulting in the establishment of nine ethnically-based regions. Prior to this restructuring, the Afar and Somali communities coexisted within the same province (Mesfin, 2006), intermarrying and sharing resources over the years. However, the adoption of federalism along ethnic lines led to the division of these communities into separate regions, creating intra-boundaries and dividing commonly shared resources. The once mutually shared lands have become focal points of competition and conflict (Mu'uz, 2009).

Today, inter-ethnic conflict arises over administrative boundaries among regional states. In the case of the Afar and Issa/Somali, the establishment of ethnic-based regional boundaries from 1991 to 2000, particularly the formation of the Somali Regional State, has led to ongoing conflicts over resource control and access to the Awash River (Yasin, 2010). According to interviews with some Afar respondents, the border between Afar Zone Three and the Somali Shinile Zone remains unclear, with the Issa community claiming control over the settlements of Adaytu, Undufo, and Gedamaytu along the Djibouti main road. The occupation of these three settlements has become a contentious point between the two regional governments, which continue to negotiate border demarcation without reaching an agreement on designating the contested territories along the Djibouti road as a "special woreda" under the Afar Region.

Lack of clear demarcation has fueled inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali ethnic groups, aligning with the economic theory of conflict. An elder from the Somali community, Shukeri, stated,

> *"The main cause of interethnic conflict is related to the claim over the contesting territories of Adaytukebele in Mille Woreda, Undufokebele in Gewane Woreda, and Gedamaytukebele in Amibara Woreda. Both communities historically inhabited these areas together until the EPRDF government came to power. After 1991, the adoption of ethnic-based federal state structures exacerbated land-use conflicts, as the Somali community claims these towns as their historical homeland, while the Afar community asserts these towns are traditionally theirs."*

The rationale behind the establishment of federalism in Ethiopia was to foster healthy relationships within a multicultural and multi-ethnic society. Unfortunately, it has failed to achieve its intended objectives, resulting in increased ethnic clashes (Mesfin, 2006). Data gathered from other respondents indicate that the territorial claims over Adaytukebele in

Mille Woreda, Undufokebele in Gewane Woreda, and Gedamaytukebele in Amibara Woreda are primary drivers of the conflict. The mixed settlement of people from the border areas of Afar and Somalia has created adminstrative boundary demarcation issue. Consequently, the absence of clearly defined adminstrative borders contributed to the outbreak of violent inter-ethnic conflict in 2014.

Colonel EphremLema, an Eastern Command and Security Officer with the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), noted,

> *"Both Afar and Somali communities of the regions assert historical claims to land and territorial boundaries, yet neither party agrees on the border. They have created contradictory borders, with the Somali community not recognizing the administrative boundaries designated by the Afar. This disagreement over land demarcation exacerbates the rivalry between the two groups, creating competition even among woreda officials and regions. Thus, the lack of clearly defined boundaries is a significant factor in this inter-ethnic conflict."*

According to data collected from many Somali respondents, the towns of Adaytu, Gedamaytu, and Qundafoo were historically Somali land, taken during the Derg regime. They argue that this land should be returned to the Somali people. Conversely, Afar interviewees assert that the contested towns were traditionally used for grazing their camels and are part of Afar's historical territory. "Before the recent settlement, this land was our property. We will never relinquish our land to the Somali regional government," stated one Afar respondent.

Overall, both interviews and literature indicate that the contested territorial boundary is a major cause of conflict in the study area. The absence of clearly demarcated borders between Adaytukebele in Mille Woreda, Undufokebele in Gewane Woreda, and Gedamaytukebele in Amibara Woreda has contributed significantly to tensions between the two ethnic groups. Both communities believe that disputes are inevitable unless clear boundary demarcation is established, particularly concerning the boundaries between the two Zone Three Afar regions, and specifically within the Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas.

4.2. Competition for Socio-economic Resources

In addition to the previously mentioned factors of territorial claims and self-governance, economic factors significantly contribute to the inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities in Adaytukebele in Mille Woreda, Undufokebele in Gewane Woreda, and Gedamaytukebele in Amibara Woreda. According to Mu'uz (2009), the root cause of conflict between these two eastern pastoralists in Ethiopia lies in competition for scarce resources. The scarcity of vital resources such as water and grazing land has led to prolonged clashes between the two ethnic groups, exemplifying the economic theory of conflict. Both communities depend on livestock rearing, prompting them to seek grazing land and water for their herds. Their seasonal migrations often lead to confrontations with local populations.

Mohammed Ahmed, an elder from the Afar community residing in UndufoKebele, elaborated:

> *"The inter-ethnic conflict is also fueled by competition over land resources, including forests and farmland. The eastern Ethiopian region is particularly vulnerable to environmental scarcity and insufficient rainfall. Consequently, due to this environmental scarcity, the Afar and Somali communities vie for control*

over grazing land, water, and farmland resources, culminating in violent conflict
in 2014" (INKI4 and NKI2, Gewane, April 28, 2022).

Most respondents indicated that the inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities in Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas primarily stems from resource struggles. The livelihoods of these communities are heavily reliant on land for agriculture, as well as for water and pasture for livestock (Asnake, 2013). This scarcity of land is exacerbated by environmental degradation and population pressure, especially in the aforementioned woredas. Thus, conflict over natural resources is virtually inevitable.

Both pastoral groups lead mobile lifestyles dependent on seasonal rainfall. As they search for pasture, water, and land, they inevitably clash with neighboring communities. The Afar are particularly known for their large herds of camels, while the Somali community relies on camels, goats, and cattle as primary economic resources. This overlap in resource needs intensifies competition between the two ethnic groups for grazing land, water sources, and limited agricultural land along their shared borders (Yasin, 2010).

Documented evidence reveals that inter-ethnic conflicts frequently arise from competition over grazing land and water resources, especially during the dry season when rainfall is scarce, leading to prolonged droughts and inadequate water for livestock. During these drought conditions, conflicts between the two groups tend to escalate. An elder noted that competition for resources has become a deeply ingrained tradition, complicating conflict resolution. These findings align with previous studies by Tigist (2014), Mu'uz (2009), Kebede (2005), and which highlight that struggles over natural resources are fundamental causes of inter-clan conflicts among these communities. Therefore, the ongoing clashes over limited water sources and grazing land exemplify the economic theory of conflict, illustrating how resource scarcity intensifies tensions between the Afar and Somali community groups.

4.3.   The Existence of Interest Groups

Data gathered from interviews indicate that the existence of interest groups significantly contributes to the conflict between the Afar and Somali communities. Various interest groups have exacerbated tensions in Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas, leading to the escalation of conflict. According to respondents, political actors, particularly from the other ethnicgroups, have aggravated hostilities between the Afar and Somali communities. This reflects a shift in the conflict's dimensions and complexities. As SebsibeAlemu, a lecturer at Addis Ababa University, stated:

"This conflict is exacerbated by various interest groups competing for political power. The presence of both Afar and Somali regional states special forces, as well as business and political entrepreneurs, has contributed to the escalation of tensions. These groups engage in political manipulation, resource exploitation, and media manipulation, exacerbating land disputes and involvement in weapon trafficking" (AcKI-1, Addis Ababa, June 20, 2022).

Both interviews and literature highlight that the conflict between different ethnic clans in Afar and Somali communities evolves due to the interests of various groups, which serve as triggering factors. For instance, the actions of interest groups pursuing their agendas in the region have a profound impact on the dynamics of the conflict. Both Afar and Somali regional

states militants often employ political tactics to strengthen their territorial claims while excluding other ethnic groups (Mesfin, 2006).

4.4.   Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment has emerged as a major driver of ethnic hostility between the Afar and Somali communities in Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas from 2014 to 2021. Insecurity has led to the formation of vigilante groups, which can easily transform into criminal gangs due to adverse economic conditions and youth unemployment. These groups may resort to extortion for survival. The combination of poverty and idleness among youth makes them vulnerable to recruitment as mercenaries or participants in criminal activities, contributing to the overall insecurity in Ethiopia (Asnake, 2013).

Many key informants and FGD participants confirmed that unemployment, especially among the youth, is a primary cause of conflict between the two groups. High unemployment rates and low literacy levels contribute to a cycle of conflict. Respondents highlighted that unfair employment practices are significant contributors to inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities in Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas. During FGDs, many unemployed youths noted that, despite their qualifications, they remain jobless due to ethnic favoritism in hiring practices. They lack clan representation in government, limiting their job opportunities and access to resources, thereby exacerbating tensions between the communities.

Participants from both sides indicated that when mobilized for violence, youths were often promised payment for their involvement. Many also took advantage of looting during chaotic situations to enrich themselves. This dynamic illustrates how youth unemployment negatively impacts both communities. Beyond engaging in raids, unemployed youth serve as a ready force exploited by politicians during political transitions. They are often used in campaigns and directed against perceived adversaries, all while political elites benefit from their actions. These motivations aim to create wealth and maintain status within society, contributing to the continuation of inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities during 2018-2019.

The interviews result and previous studies indicate that the conflict-affected communities are pastoralists reliant on livestock. A large population of unemployed youth serves as a readily available force (morans) for cattle raids and battles. Many youths are uneducated due to high school dropout rates, leaving them with ample time to tend to their livestock instead of pursuing education. Respondents argue that unemployment is a root cause of conflict. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Muhabie (2015), which suggests that the lack of employment opportunities drives youth to engage in illegal activities as a means of survival.

4.5.   Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons

The unrestrained spread of small arms and light weapons, coupled with the deliberate arming of individuals without regard for communal security, serves as a significant trigger for inter-ethnic conflict in many pastoralist areas of the Horn of Africa (Mkutu, 2005). Pastoralist communities today represent a substantial market for illicit firearms sourced from local and neighboring countries, including Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea. The widespread availability and circulation of small arms and light weapons have exacerbated long-standing violent disputes and contributed to societal collapse among pastoralist and other social groups competing for

resources and power. This situation is also evident among the B-Gumuz communities within the research area, where carrying firearms has become a prevalent practice (Admasu, 2016; Bantayehu, 2016; Muhabie, 2015; Mu'uz, 2009). Since 1980, the prevalence of small arms has been linked to an increase in interethnic conflict and warfare across sub-Saharan Africa (Yasin, 2002).

Field reports indicate that easy access to small arms has intensified inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities. The proximity of the region to the borders of Djibouti and Somalia facilitates the use of firearms among conflict perpetrators. One respondent noted that the availability of light weapons exacerbates mistrust and heightens tensions between neighboring ethnic groups. The presence of firearms, combined with high poverty levels, has escalated incidents of cattle rustling and increased fatalities in disputes over pasture and water resources. FGDs result revealed that both adults and youth in the region are keen to obtain firearms for several reasons:

> *"The possession of small arms and automatic and semi-automatic rifles is perceived as essential for claiming contested territory and asserting dominance over rival ethnic groups. Additionally, owning a weapon is viewed as a symbol of power, prosperity, and manhood, as well as a means of self-defense" (FGD-2, Addis Ababa, February 8, 2022)".*

In pastoral cultures, owning small arms and light weapons is regarded as a valuable asset. Consequently, both the Afar and Issa communities possess automatic rifles, such as Kalashnikovs, which they acquire through local arms dealers or from demobilized soldiers of the Derg government. The proliferation of automatic weapons has contributed to a rise in interethnic conflict. This assertion supports Homer-Dixon's (1994) claim that local conflicts can have global roots. In the context of the Afar-Issa conflict, the widespread manufacture and distribution of small arms and light weapons act as a catalyst, exacerbating local intergroup tensions. Key informants from both the Afar and Somali communities highlighted the impact of militia training and the proliferation of small arms on creating security dilemmas:

> *"The presence of Somali militia training and the proliferation of small arms among the Afar community have instigated insecurity between the two communities. Both groups harbor fears of one another, leading to a major attrition of their historical mutual trust. The spread of firearms among the Afar community instills fear in the Somali community, while the training of Somali militias creates apprehension among the Afar" (AKI-5, Addis Ababa, September 11, 2022)".*

According to Semir (2019), efforts by some groups to enhance their security can inadvertently create insecurity for others. Intense competition can lead to violent conflicts, with no guarantees that peaceful resolutions will hold long-term. Moreover, the accumulation of small arms and light weapons has fundamentally undermined social order, leading to a decline in traditional authority and disrupting cultural institutions that historically ensured community peace and tranquility. The presence of various firearms, including AK-47 and G3 rifles, as well as an assortment of crude weapons among youths in the study area, is concerning. These findings aligned with Helen's (2018) study, which posits that communities under weak institutional governance struggle with scarce natural resources, particularly in ethnically divided political contexts. In scenarios where access to weapons is limited to certain groups, violence becomes the norm.

4.6.   Politicization of Ethnicity and Ethnic Mobilizations

In the inter-ethnic conflict between the Afar and Somali communities, ethnicity serves as a powerful basis for group mobilization, providing a fertile ground for local elites to compete along ethnic lines. Politicians often incite their communities against one another to gain political and economic advantages for themselves and their groups. Many respondents acknowledged that political incitement remains common in both regions and is a major catalyst for inter-ethnic conflict (Asnake, 2013).

According to respondents, manipulation of ethnic identity has been a primary driver of the conflict between Afar and Somali communities. Numerous conflict entrepreneurs, including local leaders, national politicians, and educated elites, exploit ethnic divisions for personal gain. In various instances of violent inter-ethnic conflict, elites have exacerbated tensions by manipulating ethnic differences, transforming interpersonal disputes into ethnic conflicts. Thus, the politicization of ethnicity involves preserving ethnic identities and utilizing them for political conflict (Mesfin, 2006). One focus group participant noted:

"Elite politicians and community leaders have exploited ethnic differences, perpetuating the conflict between the Afar and Somali communities in Mille, Gewane, and Amibara Woredas. Politicians seeking political positions have rallied their ethnic groups against others, fueling conflicts for their own benefit by encouraging their ethnic group members to distinguish themselves from others. This stems from the belief that political, social, and economic benefits are best allocated by ethnic affiliations" (FGD-2, Addis Ababa, February 8, 2022)."

Moreover, the interviewees results indicated that Somalis have mobilized due to a history of discrimination and oppression during their interactions with the Afar. Similarly, Afar local elites encourage their community members to protect and preserve their ancestral lands. From the Somali community side, the interviewees results noted that Afar elites have mobilized their ethnic group members by portraying themselves as defenders of their land and heritage against perceived encroachments. Consequently, both Afar and Somali elites exploit ethnic sentiments to further their agendas, resulting in violent conflict from 2018 to 2022.

Besides, the interviews results indicate that both social media and mainstream media have played a considerable roles in exacerbating tensions between both communities. Political elites and other agents employ various ideologies to propagate hate speech, inflaming tensions and deepening divisions through biased reporting and the dissemination of rumors across both traditional and social media platforms. Ethnic entrepreneurs exploit social media to amplify hostility and division, particularly among youth, who are often more susceptible to biased information and, subsequently, more likely to engage in violent inter-ethnic conflicts.

Overall, these narratives illustrate how the elites from both communities instigate conflict to further their agendas for political and economic dominance. Communities are effectively utilized as proxies in the pursuit of these agendas, leading to an expansionist approach adopted by both ethnic groups, while elite strategies focus on consolidating power and control over resources in the Afar and Somali regions.

4.7. Absence of Effective Policing and Security Measures

According to interview results, a weak government presence is a fundamental cause of conflict between the Afar and Somali pastoralists in Ethiopia. Both federal and local governments have struggled to establish control over the disputed Woredas of Amibara, Gewane, and Mille, particularly in areas where violence has erupted. Many regions in Eastern Ethiopia are remote, lacking adequate government institutions, which have led residents to self-govern, often resulting in decisions that escalate violence. Some of the Somali interviewees noted that since 2018, the government security presence in the region has been minimal. Only a few military personnel are stationed at garrisons, and they are often reluctant to patrol towns after dark due to poor equipment that leaves them outgunned by local militias (Asnake, 2013).

The inadequate governmental response has allowed conflicts to escalate and persist. Commander Mohamed Ahmed, the Security Office Head, remarked:

> *"The government has been slow and inadequate in responding to the conflicts between the Afar and Somali communities. This delayed response has allowed conflict to escalate, and state authorities have sometimes exacerbated insecurity rather than promoting peace. Consequently, inter-ethnic conflict between Afar and Somali communities has continued throughout 2018–2019" (SKI-2, Dire Dawa, February 8, 2022)".*

Lack of effective policing and security measures has led to various issues, such as unresolved disputes and vendettas, prompting individuals to seek revenge. A local government official described this cycle of violence by stating, "Crime is like the start of an electric chain; when one ring blows, it begins." The aggrieved community reacts, causing violence to spiral out of control. One distinguished community elder expressed that without intervention, disputes over resources and territories could escalate into violent, deadly conflicts. Without authorities to enforce peace, even minor disagreements can result in bloodshed. Another elder from the Afar community added, "There is no single policeman to patrol our areas. Those who steal our cattle or attack our people go unreported, meaning we must take matters into our own hands." A Somali community elder, who requested anonymity for security reasons, concurred, stating, "Insecurity prevails because we cannot move freely within our camps. Bandits operate with impunity, knowing that law enforcement is absent."

4.8. Absence of Good Governance

Good governance is defined as the institutional capacity to develop and implement sound policies that mobilize citizens to enhance their quality of life (IFAD, 1999). When the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991, its primary objective was to empower ethnic groups and decentralize authority as a remedy for historical grievances. However, barriers to effective governance have emerged at multiple levels due to capacity limitations faced by leaders and public officials across various administrative tiers. Regional and municipal government officials often lack the necessary knowledge and skills to implement good governance effectively. Consequently, they frequently prioritize the ruling party's political agenda over addressing community needs and development goals.

As Mohammed Ahmed stated:

> *"The lack of competent governance is the fundamental cause of the continuous inter-ethnic animosity between Afar and Somali communities in Adaytu, Gedamytu, and Qundafoo towns (2018–2021). The absence of public engagement, rule of law, transparency, equity, accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency has negatively impacted inter-ethnic relations in the study area. The lack of effective governance significantly fuels inter-ethnic conflict" (SKI-3, Jigjiga, March 16, 2022).*

The fragile nature of state politics often exacerbates hostile identities among competing groups. Many Afar and Somali interviewees, along with senior FGD informants, confirmed that the main causes behind the May 2018/19 violent inter-ethnic conflict can be attributed to the state's inability to promptly apprehend and prosecute those involved in the violence. Local government officials demonstrated limited knowledge of effective conflict management strategies, leaving interpersonal conflicts unaddressed. Rather than taking necessary measures against wrongdoers, these officials sometimes support their communities by arming local militias or police forces materially and ideologically.

The analysis indicates that dissatisfaction with the legitimacy of both federal and regional governments—stemming from a lack of public accountability and failure to uphold the rule of law—leads to grievances that ultimately result in violent inter-ethnic conflict. Particularly at the zonal and woreda levels, government officials appear more focused on advancing the ruling party's interests and corrupt political agendas, rather than adhering to accountability or the rule of law. Such unaccountability enables to scalate the conflict in the area. Many zonal and woreda officials and police forces lack impartiality during conflicts, which is exacerbated by ineffective governance in the area. Thus, such conditions are believed to aggravate the conflict, significantly contributing to the violence between the two ethnic groups.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the conflict between the Afar and Somali ethnic groups can be traced back to the late 1950s, with violent inter-ethnic clashes mainly escalating in 2014 within Zone Three of the Afar Regional State. The data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis indicate that the root causes of the conflict include disputes over political and administrative boundaries, competition for control and access to natural resources such as pasture, water, and land, the absence of good governance, the proliferation of small arms, ethnic rivalries, communal revenge attacks, and cattle raiding. Among these factors, competition for natural resources emerges as the most notable cause of inter-ethnic conflict, while territorial claims, particularly following the adoption of ethnic federalism in 1991, have further intensified rivalries. Additionally, the findings highlight that the establishment of arbitrary borders by the TPLF-dominated EPRDF, often without considering historical or socio-cultural contexts, has exacerbated identity conflicts and territorial claims. This has created an environment rife with longstanding grievances, allowing external forces to intensify tensions for strategic purposes.

5.2.   Recommendations and Policy Implications

To mitigate the ongoing conflict between the Afar and Somali communities in Amibara, Gewane, and Mille Woredas, various levels of government—national, regional, zonal, and local—should play a proactive role. It is crucial that they are not only work to reduce conflicts but also facilitate their transformation into peaceful coexistence. This can be achieved by focusing on issue-related attitudes and contradictions while fostering sustainable peace among the two communities. By promoting dialogue and understanding, governments can help to bridge the divide that has been exacerbated by historical grievances and territorial disputes.

Establishing regular forums for dialogue is essential for promoting understanding and resolving conflicts. These forums should include representatives from the Afar and Somali communities, as well as government officials and community groups. Open communication and inclusivity of all sectors of the community—women, youth, elders, and vulnerable groups—are representation. By capturing diverse perspectives and fostering cooperation, these dialogues can help build trust, facilitate conflict resolution, and create a collaborative atmosphere conducive to lasting peace.

In addition to fostering dialogue, there is a pressing need to prioritize shared economic projects that benefit both Afar and Somali communities. Initiatives focused on infrastructure, market access, and resource management can create shared interests and dependencies, thereby reducing resource-based competition and conflict. Furthermore, implementing targeted vocational training and employment opportunities for youth from both groups can directly address unemployment and prevent their involvement in conflicts. Socio-economic development initiatives should be emphasized along shared borders to promote mutual prosperity and cooperation between the communities.

Improving law enforcement visibility and effectiveness is crucial for creating safer and more equitable conflict zones. Security forces must be impartial, well-trained, and accountable to the communities they serve. This will help to build trust and prevent misconduct. Strengthening laws that govern land ownership, resource rights, and property disputes is also critical to ensure clarity, fairness, and consistency in their enforcement. Additionally, both federal and local governments should impose stringent penalties on individuals inciting prolonged conflicts to deter further violence and unrest.

Focusing on economic and social development is vital to resolving the inter-ethnic conflict in the study area. A long-term strategy aimed at advancing the welfare of both ethnic groups must be implemented. Acknowledging the historical and cultural contexts of all communities involved can help to promote a sense of global citizenship and social cohesion. Establishing an independent organization tasked with investigating border issues, compensating for damages, and fostering harmonious relationships within diversity will also be instrumental in creating lasting peace.

Lastly, to effectively combat the proliferation of small arms and light weapons among pastoralist communities in the Horn of Africa, stricter gun laws, disarmament initiatives, and heightened border security are essential. Collaboration among regional nations—such as Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea—will be crucial for dismantling arms trafficking networks. Engaging local leaders and communities in disarmament efforts, coupled with educating them about the dangers of small arms, will promote alternative livelihoods and reduce reliance on armed conflict.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of disarmament initiatives, along with partnerships with international organizations specializing in arms control and conflict mediation, will further support sustainable peace and security in conflict zones.

6. FUNDING

The data supporting the findings of this study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon request.

7. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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