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Ethnic Interactions and Conflicts in Maji *Awraja* and Surrounding Areas: Historical Insights from the 1980s to the Present

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Abstract

This article investigates the conflicting ethnic interactions in Maji awraja and its surrounding areas from the 1980s to the present, aiming to challenge prevailing assumptions about the causes of ethnic conflict. Utilizing a combination of qualitative methods, including interviews and historical document analysis, data was collected from local informants, government reports, and scholarly literature. The analysis focused on identifying key contributing factors to the conflict, revealing that the movement of South Sudanese Toposa people into the interior parts of Maji awraja basically searching for huge fertile and mineral rich (gold) lands, ethnic divisions within local governance, and ineffective governance at multiple levels were more significant than traditional explanations like resource competition and raiding. The principal findings indicate that political narratives and misrepresentations have obscured the complex realities of ethnic relationships in the region. The study concludes that attempts to improve interethnic relations have been largely unsuccessful, with persistent tensions and conflicts rooted in historical grievances and governance failures. It recommends that future conflict resolution efforts prioritize understanding local dynamics and historical contexts while enhancing governance structures to address the underlying issues effectively. These implications suggest a need for more nuanced policies that consider the socio-political landscape and historical injustices impacting ethnic interactions in Maji awraja.

Keywords: conflict interaction; conflict resolution; ethnic division; government failures; historical injustices.

1 INTRODUCTION

The ethnic interactions in Maji *awraja* ("*awraja*" refers to the sub-provincial administrative divisions under the imperial and Derg regimes) its surrounding areas represent a complex tapestry of historical grievances, cultural dynamics, and socio-political challenges that have significantly shaped the region's contemporary landscape (Abbink, 1993, pp. 675-680).

Despite Ethiopia's rich ethnic diversity, since the late 1980s the interplay between various groups, particularly the Dizi, Surma, and Toposa, has often been characterized by deep ethnic tensions and frequent violent conflicts (Abeje, 2000, p. 5). This article examines the complex ethnic interactions and ongoing conflicts in Maji *awraja* and its surrounding areas, highlighting significant findings that emerge from the historical and socio-political landscape of the region. The study addresses the objectives of uncovering the root causes of ethnic conflicts, the geographical dynamics that shape these interactions, and the implications of governance failures in mitigating tensions. This study seeks to illuminate the underlying causes of these conflicts, moving beyond traditional narratives that emphasize cattle raiding and cultural differences.

Maji *awraja*, situated in the southwestern region of Ethiopia, exhibits a rich tapestry of ethnic diversity, primarily inhabited by the Dizi, Me'enit, Surma, and Toposa peoples. This geographical complexity, marked by rugged mountainous terrains and proximity to the South Sudanese border, profoundly influences interethnic relations and conflict dynamics. Utilizing qualitative data collected from local informants, historical documents, and government reports, this research challenges prevailing academic assumptions about the root causes of ethnic conflict without ignoring resource competition as a cause of conflict.

The findings reveal that traditional explanations of ethnic conflict, such as resource competition and cattle raiding, are insufficient in understanding the root causes of the ongoing tensions. Instead, the movement of the South Sudanese Toposa people, ineffective governance structures, and deep-seated historical grievances have been identified as critical factors exacerbating the conflict. These factors have fostered an environment of mistrust and animosity among the ethnic groups, leading to increased competition for dwindling resources. The escalation of conflicts is further characterized by the proliferation of modern weaponry and the breakdown of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. Consequently, the consequences of these conflicts are severe, resulting in loss of life, forced displacement, and the destabilization of local governance structures.

In general, this article emphasizes the importance of understanding the intricate interplay of historical grievances and contemporary governance failures when addressing ethnic conflicts in Maji *awraja*. It underscores the need for tailored conflict resolution strategies that acknowledge local dynamics and enhance governance structures, ultimately aiming to foster sustainable peace and coexistence among the diverse ethnic groups in the region.

1.1 Geographical Setting of Maji *awraja* and its Society

This section provides a historical overview of the settlement patterns and socio-political organization of the Dizi, Me'enit, and Surma peoples in Maji *awraja*, ("*awraja*" refers to the sub-provincial administrative divisions under the imperial Ethiopian system) shedding light on the root causes of ongoing conflicts in the area. By examining the transformation of traditional livelihoods, community structures, and interethnic relations, we explore how the historical context has shaped current tensions. Therefore, this brief historical description of the layout of the *woreda*s (an administrative structure below *awraja* administrative structure in Ethiopian Imperial and Derg regimes) and settlement patterns of these people are meant to understand the root cause of the conflict in the area. The socio-political and economic organizations of the ethnic groups reveal a rich story of resilience and adaptability within the community.

Before 1991, Maji *awraja* was one of the sub-administrative divisions under the former Kaffa Kaffa Teklay Administration and later Kaffa Kiflehager province of Ethiopia (Gebre-Hawariya, 2013, p. 5); (Zewdu & Laqäw, 1991). It is now known as the West Omo Zone in the Southwestern People's Regional State. The Maji *awraja* was bordered by Sudan in the West, the River Omo in the South and Southeast, and by Kaffa *awraja* and River Omo to the East (Kebede, 1952). Maji *awraja* included the land and peoples of Dessenech, Nyangatom, Turkana, Toposa, Murle, Karo, and Mursi. Additionally, the *awraja* extended up to the Boma plateau in 1936, while the Dizi, Me'enit, Surma, and Zilmamo are ethnic communities who have always been inhabitants of the *awraja* (Garretson, 1986, pp. 212-216).

The Dizi people reside in three *woreda*s: Mehal Maji, Kurit, and Bero. Bero *woreda* Administration was bordered by several other *woreda*s and had one sub-*woreda* Administration called Dami, with Jabba as its capital. The Zilmamo predominantly lived in three villages Moga, Gotita, Nameri, and Bebhseni. The Mehal Maji *woreda* was divided into two deputy *woreda* Administrations: Kelt and U'r, while the

Kurit *woreda* Administration had one deputy Administration called Sisky (Kabada, 1952). The majority of the Dizi people live in mountainous, rugged land covered with dense natural forests, where they practice mixed agriculture and animal husbandry (Zerihun, 1993). The Dizi were arranged hierarchically in both their governmental and social spheres, at least since the start of the 18th century (Gebre-Hawariya, 2013). There were over 39 competitive, autonomous Dizi sections, with smaller chiefdoms existing before Emperor Menelik IIs conquest and continued to exist in the form of balabat territories. Their boundaries were often unclear, with informants attempting to define them by clan names. Section and clan leaders managed administrative tasks for each chief. The Dizi upper nobility was divided into three hierarchies, with Kiyaz as the highest rank, while the upper middle rank was called Key, and Burj, was the title for the lower tier. The middle aristocracies were the Doni and Nianng responsible for implementing the upper nobility's directives within a Dizi chiefdom. The working class, including peasants and serfs, formed the largest segment of the population. The lowest level consisted of occupational castes, such as hunters, smiths, potters, and tanners, who were often disregarded (Interview: Maji, September, 2023).

In the present days the Me'enit people live in three *woreda*s namely: Goldiya, Shasha, and Gore Gesha. The historical Goldiya *woreda* was in the East of Maji town and bordered by Kaffa *awraja* administration, Berebere River, and Shasha *woreda* administration. Shasha *woreda* had one deputy *woreda* called Jemu deputy administration. Shasha town served as the capital due to its strategic location. Gesha *woreda* was north of Maji town and divided into two sub-*woreda* Administrations. The highland Me'enit *woreda*s of Goldiya and Gesha also practice mixed agriculture and animal husbandry in mountainous, rugged areas with dense natural forests (Kebede, 1952).

The Me'enit society was characterized by at least 15 rival chiefs across four main geographical areas of Goldiya, Shasha, Gore Gesha and Decha. the Me'enit were loosely organized social and political group. This was because the Me'enit political administration did not evolve into formal chiefdoms with established hierarchies. Instead, clan groups (du'ut, zuk-te) form the fundamental units of their social structure. However, there were some clans who held greater legitimacy and exerted control over others, suggesting that Komurut were chiefs of clans within specific chiefdoms or territorial subdivisions rather than heads of a single clan.

Abbink (1986) notes, groups within chiefdom had a form of "cultural division of labor," which influenced the community's social and political structure. Certain clan subsets, like the Boshu clan family, were entrusted with religious duties, overseeing rain, land fertility, and the populace. Most of the population lives mixed agricultural and lowland Me'enits lived as pastoralists, while specific groups are known for their specialized skills. Their social structure was flexible and dynamic, with status and positions frequently changing due to conflict (Abbink, 1991).

The Surma people predominantly live in the Tirma-Ted *woreda*, which shared boundaries with the Central/Mahal Maji *woreda* in the East, the Sudan government in the South, and the Galeb *woreda* in the North. To the North, it was adjacent to the Bero *woreda*. The Tirma-Tid *woreda* was divided into two deputies *woreda*s, namely Banbu and Ted (Dubale, 1968; Kebede, 1952). They had formed two major sections which in turn further divided. The Tirma section of Suri contains four clans, while the Chai section contains six sub sections. The Suri socio-political system favored communalism, with social divisions based only on clan and age, rejecting hierarchical organization. The Suri are kinship-oriented, with patrilineal clans playing a key role in marriage and ceremonies (Abbink, 1998). Elders hold political authority, while the komoru serves as a ceremonial leader, embodying community harmony and spiritual communication. The gulsa is a secular village leader who derives authority from the komoru's blessing but cannot perform all of the komoru's duties. The gulsa is responsible for maintaining law and order in the community.

The Suri, as a pastoral society practiced age-grade governance, holding elections every 25 to 30 years throughout the early nineteenth century (Abbink, 1986, pp. 22–41). The Suri age system categorizes people into four groups: junior elders (rora), senior elders (Bara), children (lusi), and young warriors (tegay). Leadership is assumed by the rora, or third-age grade, which changes every 25 to 30 years. Once initiated, these individuals become decision-makers. Senior or retired elders, along with the reigning rora elders, hold the most political power. The younger tegay males are expected to respect and honor the elders, recognizing their role as the backbone of political society (Abbink, 2003, pp. 25-45); (Abbink, 1998, pp. 325-27). Women in the Suri society derived their age-grade status from their spouses instead of undergoing their own initiation.

Over the years these three ethnic groups Dizi, Me'enit, and Suri peoples had experienced significant

internal social, political, and economic transformations. There was a gradual rise in the authority of their leaders, leading to the emergence of ranking families and increased interethnic conflicts.

The Toposa people, pastoralists from Eastern South Sudan who often sought grass in Ethiopia's mountainous regions during the dry season (Abbink, 1993, p. 329). However, since 1968, these Sudanese people of the Topossa infiltrated in to the Surma inhabited first Tirma Tid *woreda* of Ethiopia, and then in Bero *woreda* and thus causing conflict with the Dizi and Suri people (Interview: Tum, June, 2023). For all these cultural groups' livestock herding was the main livelihood strategy. The society primarily herded livestock such as cattle and goats, with limited cultivation along seasonally flooded riverbanks. Those closer to Lake Turkana relied more on fishing. In the remote past their relations and interactions were mainly centered on competing for resources and cattle raiding. Due to internal and external factors their interactions had got complicated.

In the next section we will see how this was changed over time. These communities maintain amicable ties with each other through the exchange of goods and services on the market, marriage, and rituals. These groups sell and buy items on the Tum and Maji market from one another, crosscutting group boundaries. Interethnic marriages between the two groups are not uncommon, and comforting one another in times of grief and sorrow is also an interethnic phenomenon. Similarly, the Suri used to regard the Dizi as ritual makers during dry seasons. Many stories are told about the historically created marriage bond between the Dizi and the Suri, in an effort to cultivate good relations between Dizi and their neighbors (Ibid). Similarly, the Dizi have maintained their amicable relation with Me'enit (Abbink, 2009). Both groups sell and buy items on the market from one another, crosscutting group boundaries. Interethnic marriages between the two groups are not uncommon, and comforting one another in times of grief and sorrow is also an interethnic phenomenon. The story of one of the Dizi chiefs, Mäšikiyaz, was an important political and social link between the two ethnic groups. Similar stories are told about the historically created marriage bond between the Dizi and the Suri, in an effort to cultivate good relations between Dizi and their neighbors. In the past, there were fewer conflicts, partly because droughts were less frequent. The level of destruction was also minimal, as traditional weapons were used. Due to the traditional peace-making mechanisms and a culture of interdependence or reciprocity elders were able to resolve such conflicts through, for instance, intermarriage and Jala (friendship) (Interviewe: Tum, September, 2023).

Today, the situation has changed significantly. Conflicts are occurring more frequently and with greater intensity, and the underlying causes and actors involved have become increasingly complex. One major factor contributing to these conflicts is the growing water shortage. As pastoralists face diminishing access to water and grazing land, they are compelled to travel greater distances in search of these essential resources. This struggle not only intensifies competition among different groups but also heightens tensions, leading to conflicts over increasingly scarce resources (Ibid). The above analysis reveals a rich tapestry of resilience and adaptability among these communities, while also highlighting the complexity of modern conflicts exacerbated by resource scarcity, the introduction of modern weaponry, and the marginalization of local governance (Fernyhough, 1994, pp. 5-10). The introduction of advanced firearms has transformed the dynamics of conflict; traditional methods of resolving disputes have been overshadowed by more lethal confrontations, resulting in higher casualties and significant destruction. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the evolving nature of interethnic conflicts in the region. The next section of this article will explore the fundamental causes of the conflicts.

2 Methodology

2.1 Qualitative Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the intricate ethnic interactions and conflicts in Maji *awraja*. By employing this approach, the research aims to achieve a nuanced understanding of the social, historical, and cultural dynamics that influence these ethnic relationships.

2.2 Data Collection Methods

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 local informants. This method enabled the collection of personal narratives and insights regarding ethnic relations and conflicts directly from those impacted by these issues. Focus on root factors and Key Contributing Factors The interview and its analysis examine root and critical factors that contribute to ethnic conflicts, transcending traditional explanations such as resource competition. Key factors explored include:

- The migration of South Sudanese Toposa people.
- Ethnic divisions within local governance structures.
- Ineffective governance at multiple administrative levels.

Historical Document Analysis: The researchers engaged in a thorough analysis of existing historical documents, reports, and scholarly literature. This investigation provides a contextual framework for the study, allowing for the identification of historical grievances and shifts in governance over time. Government Reports: The study incorporates data from Bench Maji Zone Administrative Office, archives mainly government reports that discuss issues related to ethnic conflicting interactions, conflict resolutions and resource management, and local governance structures. Thematic Analysis; Data collected from interviews and document analysis was systematically analyzed to identify emergent themes and patterns related to ethnic relationships, conflict dynamics, and governance issues. This thematic analysis highlights the underlying causes of tensions and informs the recommendations presented in the article. Contextual Framework: The research emphasizes a contextual understanding, highlighting the historical and socio-political landscapes that shape ethnic interactions in Maji *awraja*. This approach underscores the importance of local dynamics in formulating effective conflict resolution strategies.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 The Root Causes of the Ethnic Conflicts in Maji *awraja*

In 1898, the Ethiopian Imperial administration introduced a new administrative system, along with the slave and ivory trade to Maji *awraja* (Margery, 1948, p. 330). However, Maji had a worse imperial administrative structure in the 1920s and 1930s than other regions of the nation because of the insecurity and exploitation (Margery, 1948, pp. 333-34). Moreover, Maji's location along the Ethio-Sudanese border made the Ethiopian administration complex. The border divided pastoral populations, posing challenges to effective administration and the creation of a national identity. This division provided an opportunity for the local society to evade state administration. For example, when tribute or taxes were demanded from Surma pastoralist society, many of them would flee to Sudan to avoid these demands (Salvadori, 2010, p. 135). The arms, slaves and ivory trading and poaching practices were major sources of the insecurity and conflict in the region.

On the other hand, the government of imperial Ethiopia since the late 1940s was making efforts to stabilize the region and attempting to manage the border in order to control tax evaders and to control ethnic conflict and prevent the infiltration of South Sudanese Toposa people across the border. The effort was not strong enough as it was based on occasional mobile military surveillance and expeditions were the common strategy of administering the border. Probably due to the worsening security situation in of the area in 1947 the imperial government had established three military bases which continued functioning until the last years of the Derg regime (**Mamo1968**) but couldn't stop the Toposa encroachment and ethnic conflicts (Seid, 2019, p. 57).

One of the reasons why government of Ethiopia failed to deploy permanent army along the border was as informants narrate it was due to the hot climate and lack of agricultural practice among the Suri and Me'enit people. According to informants thus to fill the lack of northern and Christian state personnel who were unfamiliar to the hot climate of the Tirma Tid *woreda*, the government relied on Dizi chiefs and their relatives who had no problem of living in the hot area were recruited as government functionaries like police, governor and tax collectors. the Ethiopian government therefore assumed control of border areas and implemented indirect rule through traditional chiefs in the post Italian imperial administration. After the Italians withdrawal and the pacification process in the early 1940s, the

Ethiopian government took control of the army outposts and promised to improve the administrative framework. As discussed above it established three military posts having 700 soldiers. In addition the state indirectly influenced settled farmers to maintain local peace and collect taxes through traditional chiefs (Seid, 2019, p. 45). Moreover, as sources claimed that the security problem of the *awraja* was a principal factor for the extension of miketel wäräda administrations (deputy *woreda*). Thus for the Surma the Dizi would mean part of the central government which was known for its exploitative and harsh administrative practices. In the long run this had caused suspicion and hostility among the Dizi and Suri.

As it is well known, the Italian occupation (1935-36) had profound effects on Ethiopian society and politics, leading to a complex aftermath characterized by conflict, resistance, and attempts at national rebuilding (Zewde, 2000). Maji Awrajja, in 1941-1943, was characterized by tension and chaos (Pankhurst, 1996, pp. 35-77). In this period the number of firearms in the hands of the natives had increased in different ways. Firstly Italians had left a lot of guns behind when they left the area at many locations nation, secondly, the British distributed and equipped local individuals against the restored imperial government and Ethiopian military while conducting the mopping up operations gave firearms to involving native individuals. All of these factors increased the number of firearms among the Dizi, Me'enits and the Suri. Chiefs and small, local communities benefited most from these weapons. As the result the balance of military power was maintained, so that ethnic conflicts were rare. In fact in the period between the liberation in 1941 to 1991 the conflict of the area was centered more against the state (Interview: Maji, June, 2023). All attempts of the government to disarm the equipped local chiefs and community members had all ended in fiasco, except few successes among the Dizi and Me'enits. The Surma who are living in extreme areas remained armed all through the time and in the late 1980s they had got access to modern firearms from the Sudanese People Liberation Army (SPLA). When the rise of the EPRDF (Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democracy Front) in May 1991, military bases and police stations were removed from the Maji area, allowing the SPLA to sell arms to the Surma and encouraging and arming the Toposa people with more advanced guns that the Surma, they were capable to displace the Surma from Tirma Tid *woreda*. This situation contributed for the shift of military power between the Dizi, Me'enit and Surma, the Surma acquiring Kilashinkov (Seid, 2019, p. 53).

Despite promises by the EPRDF government to address the issues, no real attempts were made until the late 1990s when the deployment of military forces was agreed upon but not realized. This has left the Surma and Dizi elders feeling deeply betrayed. What most contributed in the shift of balance of military power between the Surma and Dizi was the incomplete disarmament of effort of the EPRDF government, only Dizi were disarmed and the Suri remained armed. (Interview: Maji, September, 2023).

Due to pressure from the Toposa and famines in 1980 and 1984, the Surma people were forced to leave their ancestral land in the Tirma-Tid *woreda* and settled in the Dizi-inhabited *woreda* of Bero. At this time the well-armed Surma were able to displace the Dizi from sixteen kebeles (the lowest administrative unit) and settled in the high land areas of Mehal Maji *woreda*. The evacuation of the Ethiopian army from the border led to the disintegration of the Tirma-Tid *woreda* administration, facilitating the occupation of the area by South Sudanese peoples (Interviewe: Tum, September, 2023). Moreover, according to informants after 1991, the Sudan People's Liberation Front provided training and modern equipment to the Toposa, leading to their dominance over the Surma. Therefore, the Toposa have access to better equipment than the local government. The lack of control in the international border area by the Ethiopian side allowed for invasion by the Toposa backed by the SPLA (Interview: Tum, June, 2023).

The forceful occupation of pastures by the Toposa in the 1970s and 1980s, along with the support they received from the Sudan People's Liberation Front led to the displacement of the Surma people from their ancestral lands to areas west of the Kibish River. Since 1991, the Toposa have taken over much of the fertile pastures in the Tima-Tid areas of the southern and central Surma. They have built huts, started irrigated farms, and even built a school in the Surma *woreda*, as reported by Surma informants. Even today the Toposa are occupying grazing land in South West Surma and their attacks from Sudan have resulted in an increased in their numbers, estimated to be between 20,000-30,000 locally. They are regularly seen in Kibish, town the capital of Surma *woreda*, and its surroundings, deep into Ethiopian territory, around more than 150 km from the border. (Interview: Maji , September, 2023). The following narrative of the informant vividly explains the root cause of the conflict.

When the Derg dictatorship was nearing its end in 1990, many Dizi, Me'enit, and Surma people purchased weapons that were being sold by the army. After the rise of the EPRDF in 1991, officials aimed

to disarm the populace. As a result, EPRDF officials collected guns from the Dizi and Me'enit communities, effectively disarming them. The Surma people were willing to give up their long-held weapons but wanted improved border security first. Surma suggested using local weapons to protect the borders until the military arrived, showing concern for safety and life-saving measures. Emperor Haileselesie and the Derg stationed forces from Mardur to guard borders. The Surma people were willing to give up their weapons only after the military left and a new border-protection system was in place. The Surma forcefully expanded their territory, leading to conflict. The Dizi people suffered food shortages and oppression as a result. The once close relationship between the Dizi and Surma has weakened, resulting in fewer connections between the two groups (Interview: Maji, September, 2023).

Surma's perspective on the root cause of ethnic conflict emphasizes historical grievances and long-standing animosities between the Dizi and Surma ethnic groups. The Surma viewpoint argues that conflicts are the result of deep-rooted historical injustices, including land disputes and oppression. Cattle raiding had little to do with the conflict. Their main source of contention with the Toposa was their shared Ethio-South Sudan boundary and cattle raiding. Cattle raiding and gold mining areas were their primary points of concern with the Me'enit and Agnwa, respectively. The following statement from a Surma informant illuminates the Surma perspective more clearly.

Since ancient times, we Surmas went to Maji and trade in the market. In times of famine, we went to the market and buy food. We raised some people as friends and our son. We marry Dizi women. My wife is a Dizi woman. But now the conflict is stupid. It is the individuals who create the conflict, not the politics that created the conflict. The hardest conflict started after the 1991 regime change (Interview, Kibish, June, 2023).

When I asked my Surma informants about a possible root cause of the conflict with the Dizi being the cause of the current conflict, they unequivocally dismissed the territorial notion. According to my sources, the issues between the Surma and Dizi stem from elsewhere.

We do not have a border conflict with the Dizi. Our borders and relations concern only with Sudan. As Ethiopians, we recognize boundaries solely with Sudan. However, tensions exist with the Dizi due to their role as agents of oppression under imperial and authoritarian regimes. As state enforcers, the Dizi persecuted our people. Surma civilians fell victim to a coordinated attack by Dizi local forces partnered with the central government's military. In this regard, we always remember the events of atrocities that happened to the Surma people at Nameri, Dishu Gurbali, and Maji town. It is this dark history of subjugation and atrocities, not border dispute that lies at the heart of contemporary conflicts between the Surma and Dizi peoples (Interview: Kibish, June, 2023).

When I spoke to my Surma informants about the impact of the Toposa invasion on their territories, they confirmed that significant portions of Surma *woreda* lands, particularly in the southern and central Surma Mountains around Tirma Ted and Chai, have fallen under Toposa dominance. They indicated that the Toposas have taken control of mining operations, and irrigation farms, and have built schools on land traditionally inhabited by the Surma, causing significant grievance in the area. They were compelled to evacuate from the *woreda* but argued that they resettled in their ancestral lands. All the territories we currently inhabited are the lands we have inherited, as other Surma who faced expulsion relocated to their forefathers' domains as well. The only land reportedly taken by from the Dizi are Kollu and Dirabi (Ibid). The Surma informants' account of the preceding circumstances teaches us that the Surma and Dizi ethnic groups coexisted in the same area by planning their territorial settlement in a methodically manner. The Dizi people settled in the mountainous and forested areas, while the Surma people inhabited the lowlands of Maji and Bero *woreda*s. Therefore, the Surma people lived outside of the Surma *woreda* before 1991.

In 1991, the EPRDF government introduced a new form of governance to modernize society and the state. As the result Ethnic groups in Ethiopia were allowed to establish their own self administrative structure depending on their territorial and population size. The Maji *awraja* and its society were recognized as Dizi Me'enit and Surma people's territory and shared among. However, as discussed above the Tirma-Tid *woreda*, the core Surma country was collapsed and was taken over by the Toposa long years ago, while most of the Surma people lived in the lowlands of the Maji and Bero *woreda*s, under the Dizi chiefs. The newly structured/organized Dizi self-administrative *woreda*ts had maintained the ancient Dizi territories in which the Surma were living. Due to this and the Toposa occupation case the Suri were not granted a self-administration *woreda* until 1994.

In 1994 the Surma self-administrative *woreda* was established from parts of the Maji and Bero *woreda*s

after 1994 (Interview: Tum, September, 2023). The Dizi were not happy with the government's attempt to reorganize the Surma self-administrative *woreda*. The Surma people are dissatisfied with the Dizi claim on areas in the Maji and Bero *woreda*s, where they have lived for a long time. The Dizi are asking for the Surma to be removed from these areas. The regional and national administration failure to restore Tirma Tid *woreda* the local administrative divisions and ethnic-based federalism in such fragile security area have disrupted traditional cooperation and relations (Gemeda, 1990), leading to increased insecurity and strict exclusion regulations for those who were living together as neighboring ethnic groups (Ibid).

On the other hand, the EPRDF leaders claimed that the *woreda*-level self-administrative division in former Maji *awraja* was based on ethnic lines (Tegegne & Kassahun, 2004, pp. 2-25), but as we see it today these ethnic groups are exercising self-administration in more than two *woreda*, therefore they felt isolated from their keens' but former *woreda* administration from the previous regime, continued except the Surma. These ethnic self-administration policies of the EPRDF have damaged established traditional political institutions' ability to resolve disputes, and they should be seen as the primary cause of the prolonged ethnic conflict in the area (Ibid).

Last but not least the disintegration traditional governance and conflict resolution methods moral order among the Surma and others should be considered as exacerbating factors. These traditional practices were not merely rules; they were lifelines that helped maintain community stability, reminding everyone that in the face of conflict, the ultimate goal was harmony and unity. Through these rituals, the Suri in particular demonstrated their commitment to preserving the social fabric of their community, ensuring that even in difficult times; they could find pathways to understanding and peace. However, since the late 1980s, these traditional systems have significantly declined, undermining their ability to manage conflicts (interview: Kibish, September, 2023).

3.2 Courses and Consequences of the Conflict

This section delves into the courses and consequences of the conflict first by summarizing the root causes of ethnic conflicts in Maji *awraja*, tracing their origins to historical administrative failures, colonial legacies, and complex socio-political dynamics among the Dizi, Me'enit, and Surma peoples as discussed above. Beginning with the disruptive effects of Ethiopian imperial governance and the Italian occupation, the analysis highlights how the introduction of firearms and the lack of effective border management exacerbated tensions. The fragmentation of traditional governance structures since 1974 at least, the decline of traditional conflict resolution methods, alongside the impact of external pressures such as the Toposa's encroachment as coupled with ethnic-based federalism under the EPRDF, has further destabilized interethnic relations, leading to a resurgence of conflict. Ultimately resource competition, underscores the multifaceted nature of the ongoing strife in the region. As compared to the Dizi the Surma have increasingly used modern firearms to assert control over these territories, including strategic locations rich in resources like gold.

The Majj *awraja* societies have been heavily armed for a long time and this situation troubled the administrators of the time of the emperor (Salvadori, 2010, p.210). Cross-border firearms trade were found lucrative and there were a trade- in arms from Addis Ababa to Dima, which is to satisfy the demand for weapons needed by the gold producers to protect themselves from the attacks of Agniwa and Surma. However, it was the Sudan People's Liberation Front's involvement in the trade and support for the Topasa in the 1980s that had changed the type and size of arms in the region. On the other hand the Toposa's expansion which was backed by highly sophisticated weapons greatly affected the Surma as they were forced to evacuate from the Tirma Tid areas and expanded in to the less armed Me'enit Shasha, and Dizi in Bero, and Maji *woreda*s of the *awraja*. This had resulted vicious of conflicts in the area. According to the Dizi informants, this expansion of the Surma into their territory becomes more pronounced during every summer season since then (Interview: Tum, June, (2023). According to these informants, the Surma were expanding by armed forces into regions potentially containing gold mines. The Dizi complained that the Surma herdsmen, with the Surma *woreda* government's support, were relocating and taking control of trampled land, granting the Kebele structure to Surma residents. The Surma were said to be residing in and managing the ancient Dizi territory, which was fully under their control after 1991.

Compounding these territorial disputes are socio-economic dynamics, particularly high dowry demands linked to cattle ownership. The Dizi were disproportionately affected due to increased Surma

cattle raiding. According to the Surma tradition of marriage arrangement a young man to marry a girl, must provide thirty to forty cattle and a Kalashnikov weapon with full ammunition as a dowry. On the other hand, the cost of livestock and weapons had been raised rapidly. So that Surma youths, often in groups of five to ten, use modern weapons such as the Kalashnikov for cattle raiding to gather wealth for marriage and worsening the conflict as they not only raid cattle but also kill anyone they encountered. They also set fire to homes and other property. These actions have resulted in significant losses for the less armed Dizi in terms of both cattle and human lives due to retaliatory attacks and attempts to recover stolen animals (BMZOA Archive). The conflict escalates with retaliatory attacks from the Dizi against Surma aggressions, resulting in direct confrontations in highland areas of Maji. Between 1989 and 1998, this strife accounted for numerous casualties and the theft of cattle valued at over nine million birr (BMZOA Archive). However, the Dizi have sought refuge in highland areas, but even there, they have not found peace from attacks. The Surma and Dizi are directly fighting in the hills and highlands between 1989 and 1998 ((BMZOA Archive). The conflict between the Surma and the Dizi escalated every year as the Toposa continued pushing the Surma. Also, as the Surma continue to face pressure from the Toposa, their expansion incurs further skirmishes, in territories traditionally inhabited by the Me'enit. In due course of time the importance of cattle has grown in the lowland community, leading to conflicts between the Surma and the Dizi, Mienit, and Toposa, often arising from the desire to acquire more cattle for higher dowries.

The clashes are particularly pronounced between different ethnic groups in gold-producing areas, where competition for resources intensifies conflicts. The expansion of the Agwak in the Bero and its surrounding areas had led to further instability, exacerbating violence and provoking retaliatory actions. The socio-economic fabric of affected communities has been severely disturbed, with widespread violence and atrocities marking the landscape of ethnic conflict. This unrest has resulted in different forms of violence, including targeted attacks and mass killings during communal gatherings, which further proliferate cycles of retribution (Interview: Kibish, September, (2023).

The zonal government has not stopped the conflicts and displacement of the Dizi and Surma ethnic group members. Moreover, the conflict extended to the Me'enit due to the Surma's incursion into the Me'enit Shasha *woreda* and prevalent cultural and economic circumstances. The dispute between the Surma and the Me'enit remains unresolved according to Surma informants (Interview: Kibish, September, (2023).

As the course and consequence of the conflict we can consider the disintegration of Surma society and the reign of riotous spirit. Since the major displacement of the Surma people from the Tirma and Tid *woreda*s to the Dizi and Me'enit areas things changed rapidly. Three conditions have led to the collapse of the traditional socio-cultural values that support the authority of Surma elders to solve the mutual murders that spread in the area. These are: the proliferation of automatic weapons and their availability, the introduction of alcoholic drinks, and the increase in spending money that young Surma have accumulated by producing gold (Interview: Kibish, September, 2023). As the result among the Surma violence and atrocities had become widespread. The Surma group conflicts were characterized by acts of violence, ranging from riots and targeted attacks and killings were common during the traditional ritual of stick fighting, during which hundreds of youths are regularly collected. During this period, they easily carry out revenge actions due to emotional impulses. In this process, new circumstances were created that cause revenge. The main actors of this action were the underage youngsters, who were highly armed and disobedient to their elders. According to informants, this situation had reached the level of genocide, and 10-15 murders were committed every month (Interview: Tum, June, (2023). These acts of violence could result in the displacement of populations, destruction of communities, and loss of life. It seems that the basic reason for the destruction of socio-cultural institutions of power is that they were forced to migrate from Surma traditional lands in the last generation.

3.3 Local and Regional Conflict Resolution Initiatives

This section examines local and regional conflict resolution initiatives aimed at addressing interethnic disputes in Maji *awraja*, focusing on the evolution of customary methods in the face of changing conflict dynamics. The conflict over cattle raiding and disputes over resources were resolved through customary methods, but the nature of conflicts changed in the 1980s. Despite the change in the nature of conflict, these days, the ethnic communities continue to practice indigenous reconciliation rites, which have been historically effective in resolving interethnic disputes, including murder and raids. The Dizi conflict resolution custom is known as the "dofie," among Me'enit it is referred to as "asha",

and among the Surma it is called "ligin". Interestingly all the customs the procedure entails are similar. A public gathering of the disputing parties was followed by a ritual reconciliation ceremony and elder mediation based on an agreement for in-kind or cash restitution. The local chiefs of the affected ethnic groups held a reconciliation ritual during a period of increased and frequent interethnic hostilities in the area. The ritual might go on for several days. It includes killing two or more black oxen, washing the local chiefs in the blood of the killed animals, slicing open the carcass and drying the peritoneum on the fresh hide, the local chiefs of the respective groups swearing not to make the same mistakes again, washing their hands in the green material found in the dead animal's digestive tract, and hanging the dried peritoneum strips around the necks of the individuals in dispute (Interview: Tum, Kibish and Jammu June to September, (2023).

Even while they provided short-term fixes, these traditional methods of reconciliation were no longer successful in resolving disputes. Since the 1980s, in particular, their power to regulate interethnic relations has decreased and, even if there have been some recent reconciliation ceremonies; they were brief and prone to being broken. Because of their constant obsession with the idea that guns have supernatural abilities, the Surma are typically the ones who break these kinds of reconciliation agreements (Interview: Tum, June, (2023). Informants stated that local officials and elders led at least one reconciliation ritual annually. A large-scale tripartite reconciliation ritual ceremony of the Surma, Me-enit, and Dizi peoples was held at Tum Airplane Field in February 1994. At this time also all of the previously described reconciliation rituals were performed. However, informants stressed that the Surma had breached the terms and said to have had raided the Dizi barely eighteen days after the peace ceremony. All, however, remained unsuccessful. (Interview, Tum, and June 2023). The Suri informants have agreed on the facts of the reconciliation conferences but consistently argue that the Dizi took the responsibility of the breaching of reconciliations made (Interviewee: Kibish, September, (2023),

Similarly regional, zonal and civil society organizations that operate on the subject of peace and security have made multiple attempts at reconciliation. The highest level reconciliation meetings were led during the reign of Ato. Abate Kisho, Ato. Hailemariam Dessalegn, Ato. Shiferaw Shigute, who administered the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) from 1994 to 2018 at various points in time. Similarly all contemporary Presidents of the Bench Maji zone also involved in reconciliation efforts including Mr. Wondimu Gebre, the last president of the dual zone Bench-Maji zone before its split in to two zones, Bench Sheko and West Omo zones). The two civil society organizations, Mercy Corps and Pact Ethiopia were known for implementing projects on peace and security problems in the Zone since the late 1990s. These three agencies were working together mainly on facilitating consultative meetings, arranging and sponsoring reconciliation ceremonies and community dialogue on peace building and rehabilitation works (interviewee: Mizan, May, (2023). All parties ignored the root causes of the conflict and considered the traditional cattle raiding and resource competition as the cause (Interview: Maji, September, 2023). As discussed above the root cause of the conflict was and is the lack of security at the Ethio-South Sudanese border, and the responsibility of managing and solving this situation through the traditional conflict resolution method is beyond the capacity of the local chiefs and regional government of the former SNNPRS and the zonal and *woreda* administrations.

The Surma and Dizi communities strongly believe that the Federal Defense Forces should forcibly return the Toposa there to Sudan. The Toposa in Surma *woreda* are large in number and have been in the area for a long time (more than 30 years in some southern parts of the *woreda*) (Interview: Tum, September, (2023). This has proven to be the most difficult aspect of the process. In connection with this, there is widespread resentment in the area due to lack of government intervention in the area. Maji was a place where the central government has been relatively strong and active since the late twentieth century. There are also instances of nostalgic comparisons to the past (Ibid). Other strategies used by the government to solve the problem include: police protection and the local army. Since the last years of the 1990s there have been attempts to strengthen the police force in Surma *woreda* and other pastoralist areas by training more pastoralist officers (BMZAO archives). However, police stations were established in all *woreda*s, but limited to cities (Interview: Kibish and Tum, June, (2023). As discussed above, the disarmament activities that were started in the early 1990s were ineffective and the outcome created a military imbalance between the Surma who were least affected as they were not disarmed the Dizi who were highly affected as they were disarmed.

Promoting socio-economic development in all the *woreda*s of Maji proper was widely accepted as a solution to the problem as the governments and local NGOs believed. According to the governments and local NGOs the root cause of the conflict was underdevelopment. (Bench Maji Zone Administration office/BMZAO/ Archive). Based on the belief that development projects were implemented and some success has been achieved in the construction of government office buildings, police stations, educa-

tional programs, and road works in Kibish, Tum, and Jabba towns (Archive BMZAO Bench-Maji Zone Department of Peace and security, 2014 annual report p. 24). It was accepted by informants also that in some areas, especially in the Bero *woreda* where social services project were in good condition, the relationship between Dizi and Surma (Bali) was more peaceful than others (Interviewee: Tum, June, (2023). According to informants however, these social services have been seriously damaged due to the ongoing conflicts and the lack of sufficient resources to rehabilitate hampered their effectiveness, especially transportation to move around the *woreda*s.

Despite the above peace building the attempts, many voices of complaint have been heard among the Dizi. In other words, all the attempts were unsatisfactory for them. For the Dizi elites the cause of conflict in the area' results from the administrators' discriminatory practices is due to discrimination by the administrators against the Dizi as what had been considered Dizi areas were given to the Surma self-administration wareda. Thus all the solutions should emanate from building faith among the Dizi and Surma, the Dizi demanded that the Surma people can live in the territory as any Ethiopian citizens but the territory must reintegrated to the Dizi *woreda* administration and restoring the Tirma Tid *woreda* administration for the Surma people. According to the Dizi view no other solutions can convince them and thus they thought that they were being isolated and unprotected (Interview: Tum, September, (2023). On the other hand, one can say that the labeling of Surma as offenders while the Dizi understanding the root cause of the conflict should not force them to think that they were the only helpless.

4 Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article elucidates the complex interplay of historical grievances, ineffective governance, and material drivers such as cattle, gold, and marriage dowries in shaping the ethnic conflicts within Maji *awraja*. Specific violent incidents, including armed raids and brutal confrontations, underscore the urgent need to address these prevailing tensions. This article recognizes that the competition for cattle—long viewed not only as a vital economic resource but also as a marker of social status—has intensified conflicts among the Dizi, Surma, and Toposa groups. As dowries continue to rise, with young men required to provide substantial herds coupled with weapons, the cycle of violence is perpetuated. The fragility of peace is further threatened by the allure of gold mining, which has attracted both local and external actors, exacerbating territorial disputes and armed encounters over resource control.

Historically, these conflicts are rooted in the legacies of poor governance and inadequate administrative frameworks that have failed to regulate inter-ethnic relations effectively. The political narratives shaped by historical injustices have fostered mistrust, complicating local dynamics. In this context, the lack of functional governance structures has allowed armed groups to flourish, further destabilizing the region. Ultimately, the findings suggest that addressing these interwoven factors historical grievances, economic drivers, and governance failures holds the key to fostering sustainable peace in Maji *awraja*. Without acknowledging the material realities and historical contexts underpinning these conflicts, any attempts at reconciliation or conflict resolution are unlikely to achieve lasting results. The path forward must prioritize not only immediate security measures but also equitable access to resources and recognition of the socio-cultural fabric that binds these diverse communities. This article offers an original contribution to the understanding of ethnic interactions in Maji *awraja* by challenging conventional narratives surrounding the roots of conflict. Through a comprehensive analysis of historical and socio-political contexts, it underscores the significance of factors such as the movement of the South Sudanese Toposa, local governance divisions, and broader governance issues in shaping ethnic relations. By shifting the focus away from traditional explanations like cattle raiding, this research provides a nuanced perspective that is essential for both academia and policy-making.

The implications of these findings are substantial. Policymakers must recognize the intricate interplay of historical grievances and contemporary governance failures when addressing ethnic conflicts in the region. Strategies aimed at conflict resolution should prioritize enhancing local governance structures, fostering interethnic dialogue, and addressing the socio-economic disparities that exacerbate tensions. Furthermore, acknowledging the historical context of grievances may help create more effective reconciliation processes that consider the complex realities of the affected communities.

However, this study is not without limitations. The reliance on qualitative data, while providing depth, may introduce biases based on the perspectives of individual informants. Additionally, the historical

focus may overlook recent developments and their impact on current dynamics and unable to incorporate the Toposa perspectives. Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods approach that incorporates quantitative data to complement qualitative insights, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving situation. Further fruitful lines of research could explore the role of external actors in the conflicts, such as regional governments or international organizations, and their influence on local dynamics. Additionally, examining the effects of socioeconomic development initiatives on interethnic relations could provide valuable insights into effective peace-building strategies. Ultimately, this article lays the groundwork for further inquiry into the complexities of ethnic interactions in Maji *awraja*, emphasizing the need for continued research to inform policies that promote sustainable peace and coexistence.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest

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