

Original Research Article

Federalism And Inter-Ethnic Relations: Identity, Socio-Economic Affairs And Their Dynamics In Western Ethiopia.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Gumuz and Oromo along the border area. The study employed qualitative descriptive research to meet the stated objective of the study. Purposive sampling techniques were used to gather information. To attain the study objective, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used as primary data. Primary data were gathered from different informants in both Oromo and Gumuz. A total number of 48 informants participated in the study. The study showed that the main cause of the Oromo and Gumuz 2008 and 2018 conflict was the question of the referendum, political and economic interests of individuals, and cultural conflicts. The finding of the study revealed that the ethnic-based federalism way of conflict resolution mechanism is still used as a major way of resolving conflict in the study area.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, Federalism, Ethnic Conflict, Conflict Management*

Abbreviations

BGRS Benishangul Gumuz Regional State

EECMY: Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mechane Yesus

EPRDF: Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

OLF:s Oromo Liberation Front

SNNPR: South Nation Nationalities People Region

TPLF: Tigray people liberation front

UNDER PEER REVIEW

1. Introduction

Ethnic federalism has been institutionalized in Ethiopia for nearly three decades as a means of managing national political conflicts and enhancing democratization processes in the country. Initially, the new political rule raised hope with many that it would bring an end to the major predicaments of the country including political, economic, and cultural inequalities and oppressions. However, while the system has played some positive roles in cultural aspects such as in promoting diversity of languages, there were certain gaps in economic and political realms. Of course, in economic terms, there were some visible improvements such as infrastructure expansion and a rise in GDP. On the other hand, some economic mismanagement including economic inequalities adversely affected the majority of populations of the country. Perhaps, the worst score of the ethnic federal political order of the country is in politics. In sharp contrast to its initial promises, abuse of rule of law, human right violation, minority domination, and the polarization of inter-ethnic relations highly reigned in the country.

Among others, the mentioned political and economic impasse and deficiencies have yielded various oppositions at various times against the ruling regime. Yet, an irresistible opposition to the regime flared up over the last four years or so, more seriously in Oromiya and the Amhara regions. Unable to withstand the challenge, the EPRDF government subjected itself to reforms including the change of the Prime Minister.

Under the leadership of the new Prime Minister Ethiopia has entered a historic political transition, which among others includes the following: Armed and non-armed political organizations in exile were invited to come home and participate in peaceful political change and democratization processes. Thousands of citizens were freed from the agony of the notorious prison cells. It seems that freedom of speech and thought is more or less secure in the country. The most controversial anti-terrorist law came to abrogation. The long-standing animosity between Eritrea and Ethiopia is eased. A new political philosophy- synergy- is introduced to the political philosophy of the country. Consequently, the country is spared from the verge of disintegration. And a belief and hope for peace, development, and democracy have risen on the horizon of the country.

Yet, expectedly the road and processes to change are not smooth. Several challenges are practically testing the hope and processes of the ongoing reforms, some old and others new. The old challenges, among others, include inter-ethnic polarization, which has gradually been transformed into violent conflict almost in all corners of the country.¹ The new challenges are what have emerged in reaction to the reforms, which may be grouped into the following categories of interests. The first and the most immediate one is an expressed interest to maintain the system in place since 1991. The second is an interest that works against the ethnic federal political structure wishing to replace it with some unitary state system, which may be similar to the pre-federal setup, or at least implanting the non-ethnic form of the federation in the country. The other interest is those who fear that the success of the transition could lead to Oromo domination in the political economy of the country.² This latter case is what the first two interests share in common. The last one is an interest that has not yet developed confidence in the practicability and sustainability of the promised changes.³

The deep-rooted old conflicts, mostly local-based inter-ethnic relations seem to have married in myriads of ways with the national-based political oppositions.⁴ Combined, these problems are challenging the peace and security of the country from the national to the local level. One of the cases in point in this regard is the current conflict (2018) in Benishangul Gumuz Regional State (BGRS), particularly in the Kamashi zone and the bordering areas of Oromiya, which have inflicted thousands of displacement, losses of dear life, and incalculable damages to properties. This study explores the causes, nature, and consequences of the conflict including displacement, loss of life, and damage to properties.

2. Material and methods

To achieve the desired aim of the study, a qualitative research approach was employed. This approach was selected because explaining inter-ethnic relations: identity, socio-economic affairs, and their dynamics in western Ethiopia. As compiled by (Abiy, et.al, 2009) qualitative research involves studies that do not attempt to quantify their results

¹ Recently, inter-ethnic conflict has been intensified both at local and national levels

² Basically the root source of this view point is related to the accession of an Oromo to Prime Minister Position.

³ Such categories of political interests roughly represent the Tigray, the Amhara and the Oromo elites respectively.

⁴ See chapter two.

through statistical summary or analysis. Qualitative research seeks to describe various aspects of behavior and other factors studied in the social sciences and humanities. In qualitative research data are often in the form of descriptions, not numbers. But sometimes results of qualitative research are subjected to relatively less rigorous quantitative treatment. Often the goal of qualitative research is to look for meaning. That is, stress is laid on the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and researched, and situational constraints that shape the inquiry. Qualitative research is characterized by adherence to a diverse array of orientations and strategies for maximizing the validity of trustworthiness of study procedures and results. It is thus a type of empirical inquiry that entails purposive sampling for gathering data (ibid). It typically involves in-depth interviews, group discussions, artifact studies, projective techniques, and observations without formal measurement. A case study, which is an in-depth examination of one person, is a form of qualitative research. Qualitative research is much more time-consuming but provides more richness to the data. In epistemological terms, qualitative research is identified with phenomenological and interpretative research.

2.1. Data Collection Methods

To get sufficient qualitative data, both secondary and primary data were used to achieve the designed objective of the study. Primary sources of this study were obtained through interviews, FGD, and observation, particularly from well-experienced dispute settler elders, local peace experts, disputants, local leaders, prosecutors, women, and youth in selected areas of the Oromo and Gumz district. Secondary sources for this study were written books that documented

2.2. Samples and Sampling Techniques

To get purposely required participants such as peace experts, political elites, and well-experienced elders in dispute resolution; prosecutors, disputants, women, and youth were the main target of the researcher to gather qualitative data. Thus, in that the research participants were gained from the above-mentioned specific groups of people, the sampling techniques used for the first 7 different groups (peace experts, political elites, well-experienced elders in dispute resolution; prosecutors, disputants, women, and youth) was purposive.

In terms of sample size, the researcher interviewed ten key informants, i.e., six key informants were with community elders (1 elder from each FGD). Again, these six elders' key respondents were selected for the interview with the contribution of the society, on the criteria of their level of understanding and knowledge about Oromo -Gumuz relation, culture, norms, values ethics in general, and the indigenous mediation mechanism in particular. About FGD, seven FGD were conducted to show the validity and reliability of data, i.e. two FGD from each selected district which means six FGDs took place in the three selected study area which includes different target groups such as elders, women, and youths, and one (1) FGD was conducted with local peace expert officers and local leader. Each FGD comprised different discussants and it contained fifty-four discussants. Six disputants were also included in the interview, which means two disputants from each kebele. So the total number of samples designed to get necessary information was sixty total respondents.

2.3. Method of data analysis

The data collected using semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis were analyzed and interpreted qualitatively. The handwritten notes of the interview and observation were transcribed, categorized, and compiled together into themes; summary sheets were prepared and translated into English. The result of the document analysis was summarized and organized into a related categories. Information collected through various qualitative techniques of data gathering interacted with the presentation, analysis, and interpretation part. With this regard, the researcher used the data gathered by making cross-checking different information that he gathered from different informants via different instruments of data collection tools. Accordingly, analysis and interpretations were made based on the interviews, Observation, and document analysis. Finally, the overall course of the study was summarized with findings, conclusions, and some possible recommendations.

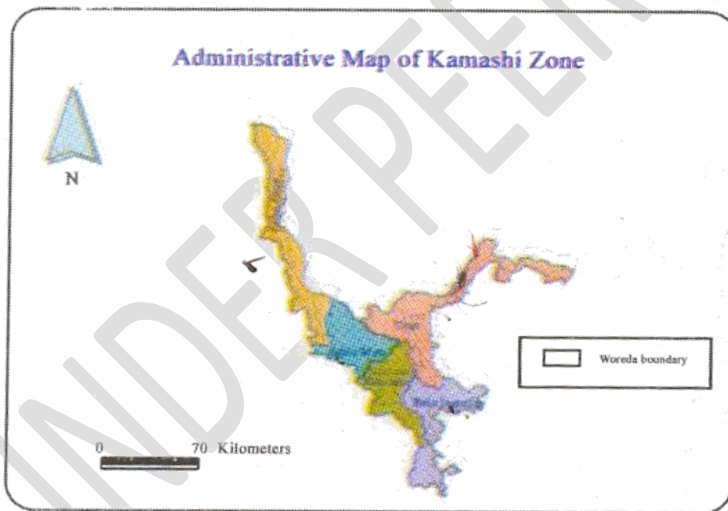
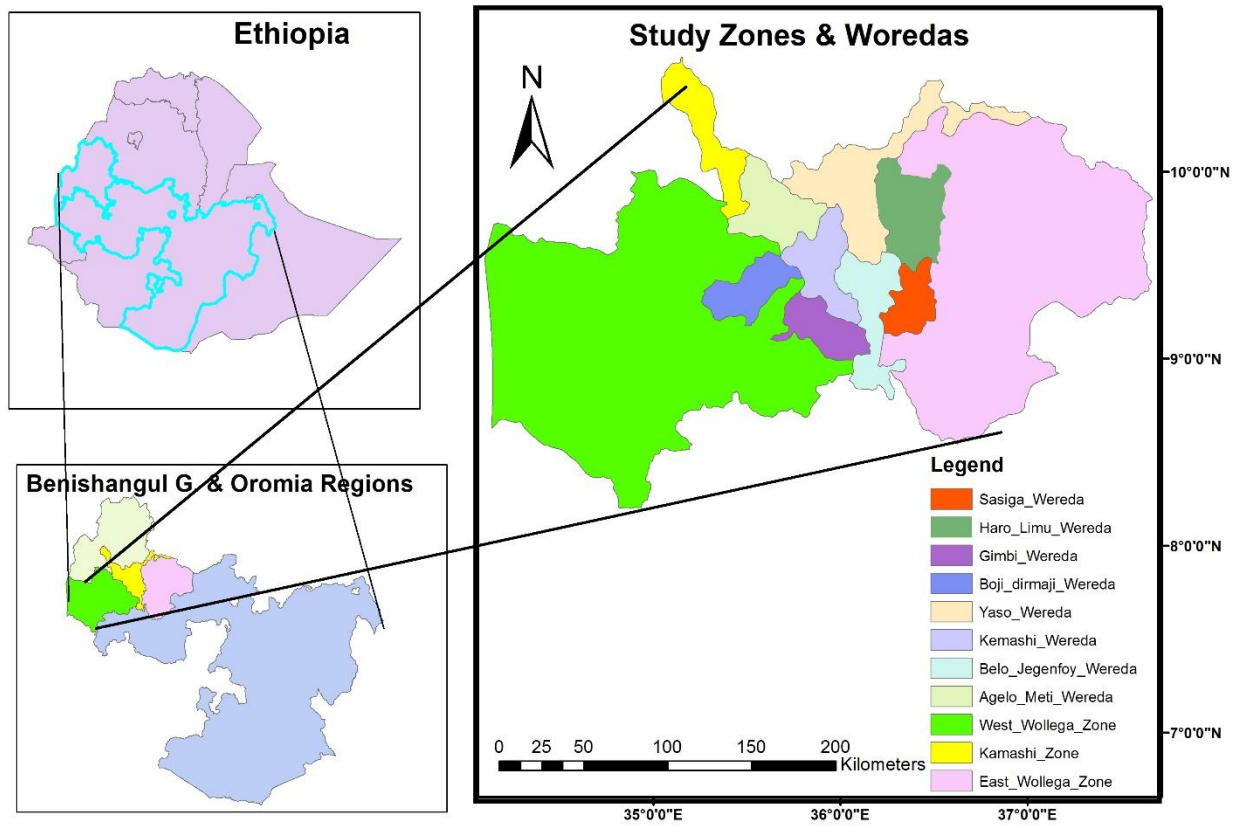


Fig 1: Map showing study location

3. The Gumuz Ethnic Group

The Gumuz ethnic group is one of the largest ethnic groups found in Ethiopia and Sudan. The language of the ethnic group is called “Guzma. The language is categorized under the Nilo Sharan language family. The Gumuz are a Nilotic people living on the border of Ethio-Sudan mainly what is now the area of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The part comprising Benishangul-Gumuz formally became part of Ethiopia under the terms of a Nile-focused 1902 treaty signed by Emperor Menelik II with Great Britain, which ruled Sudan⁵. The oral tradition indicates that before they spread to different areas the Gumuz people lived in eastern Sudan across the borderline with western Ethiopia. According to Atieb Ahmed, (1973), the Gumuz occupied an extensive territory along the Sudanese border extending from Metema in the north to the Dhedhessa valley in Wollega.

He further explains that Gumuz has the tradition that their areas extend to the shores of Lake Tana and Agew Meddire since time immemorial until they were pushed westwards by the Agew controlling them to the hot lowlands of Metekeleee.

One of the Gumuz elderly key informants said;

“in earlier times we occupied the western parts of the province of Gojjam, but we were progressively forced out to the inhospitable area of the Blue Nile and Northern Wollega.” Similarly, “the Gumuz lived along Angar River near Nekemte Town were already paying taxes to the king Kumssa Morda since 1882”⁶.

Another Gumuz key informant said that;

“due to harsh treatment from Gojjam governors, some part of Gumuz clan moved across the Abbay (Blue Nile) River up to the Diddessa Valley in Wollega to evacuate from dreadful treatment.”⁷

⁵ Abdussamad H. Ahmad. "The Gumuz of the Lowlands of Western Gojjam: The Frontier in History 1900-1935": *Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO)*, 'Oriente, Anno 50, No. 1. Marzo, 1995.

⁶ (Interview with Ato Delo Kuncha Tufa at kamashi, October 28, 2020.)

⁷ (Interview with Ato kebede Lenda at kamashi, October 28, 2020.)
(Interview with Ato kebede Lenda at kamashi, October 28, 2020.)

According to him, the Dorado clan of Gumuz came and settled around this area. They were forced to expel to escape from military expeditions and raids from the neighboring Amhara people as well as from diseases, taxation, and in search for a better living environment.

Similarly, the Oromo elder informant said that;

“We know that Dorado clan was from the Gumuz-speaking people of the lower Blue Nile, and he named his section Dizzela. He gave a somewhat emotional account of his people, mentioning the lack of priests and rulers, the fact that all men were regarded as equals, and that hunting and gathering were practiced”⁸

Available data indicate that the Gumuz might have originally lived in a large area in Metema, Kassala, Gojjam, and Agew Meddir including Dangela, Metekel, and Guba Mountain until they were pushed into the Wollega area to form the present-day Kamashi Zone.⁹

During data collection conducted in the study area, particularly from Yaso *Woreda*, the researcher gathered sufficient information from well-known local leaders and elders regarding the historical interaction of the Gumuz with other ethnic groups. According to a key informant historically Gumuz people were continually engaged in war with the neighboring Oromo people, who frequently invaded the area to obtain resources (slaves and gold). The people of the area were providers of slaves and gold to the central government during Emperor Menelik II and the reign of Emperor Haile Sellassie¹⁰

Similarly, according to Gumuz's elder informant, the Gumuz people were at one time considered slaves. During the 16th to 19th centuries, they suffered oppression under the Turko-Egyptian Empire, the Mahdist state in Sudan, and Emperor Menelik in Ethiopia. This has prevented the Gumuz people group from developing and modernizing¹¹.

According to another informant from Yaso, “the Gumuz have always been hated by the Oromo for their black skin and erroneously perceived inferiority.” Up to some decades ago, they were required as slaves by merchants of the Ethiopian Empire and sold in markets. Most of them were taken from the Kamashi area in Benishangul-Gumuz and they considered

⁸ (Interview with Ato kebede Lenda at kamashi, October 28, 2020.)

⁹ Wolda-Sellasia A. bute. "Gumuz and Highland Re-settlers: Differing Strategies of Livelihoods and Ethnic Relations in Matakal, Northwestern Ethiopia." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Göttingen, 2002.

¹⁰ Tsega E (2006). Inter-ethnic relation on Frontier: Metekel (Ethiopia), 1898-1991. Germany: Otto University of Tromsø Autumn

¹¹ (Ibid)

themselves “*Gudiffachaa*” or *adaption* to the Oromo. For this bad relationship, the Gumuz who lived in Kamashi are not sincerely intermingled with local Oromos. The memory of the horror of slavery and the raids organized by highlander or non-Gumuz peoples, sometimes called by Gumuz as “Showa raiders” against their villages is still alive in the Gumuz tales. Those injuries have not been completely healed yet. These distrustful interactions between them were not tolerable to keep and maintain their traditions at all.

According to key informant Gumuz elder,

the name “Gumuz” means “black people.” The use of the term was formerly associated with the phrase of darker-skinned peoples, indigenous to old Ethiopian civilization.

The territorial conquest of Gumuz pre-1991

The history of Ethiopia's western frontier state formation is a contending issue. According to central political nationalists, the Ethiopian state has existed for millennia. Whereas, ethno-nationalists like the Gumuz liberation front claim that the making of Ethiopia's western border is the result of conquest and incorporation of adjoining territories. This argument is essentially considered a precursor for the ‘Ethnic Federalism’ concept in Ethiopia yet it is subject to debates among intellectuals.

In the process of territorial expansion regional lords who surrounded themselves, Menelik II was allowed to rule their areas by paying a certain amount of Geber (tribute or tax) to the rule of shea (central government). Western rulers who peacefully submitted to Menelik II, such as the rules of Wallega, Benshagul, and Assosa, were allowed to rule their territories by paying a fixed amount of tribute. In its western rules, the border stretches along the Ethio-Sudanese border from Beni-Shangul-Gumuz Regional State, to the parts of East Wallagga Zones and West Wallagga Zone. The administrative arrangements of the border were subject to changes at various times. From the early 1840s until the conquest of Menilek II in the 1880s, the emerging petty states of Asosa, Shagul, and Leeqaa-Naqamtee administered different parts of the frontier region. From the late 19th century to 1936, while the western part was administered under the Asosa region, Matakkaal and the area that recently came to be Kamashi Zone was ruled under Leeqaa-Naqamtee. During the imperial and the *Darg* period, while the Asosa region was created as an *awuraja* and ruled under Wallagga Province, parts of the frontiers currently called Kamashi Zone (Sirba-Abay, Yaso, Kamashi, Agalo-Mexi, and Balo-Jegonfoyy districts) particularly the Blue Nile- Dabus -Dhidhessa Triangle were

administered under the Gimbi and Nekemteawurajas. Under the administration of the FDRE government, BGRS came to include the Asosa, Metekel, and Kamashi zones.

As it does geographically, the western border historically represented a very diverse population. Evidence for habitation indicates that by the late 19th century, while Metekel the north of the Abbay River was inhabited by the Agaw, Gumuz, Shinasha, and Oromo people, the Asosa region west of the Dabus River was inhabited by diverse peoples who belonged to the Nilotic stock. The predominant people of the region were the Benishangul (Berta), the Gumuz, Fakosho, Bake, Ma'o, Komo, Dabusso, Fapiro, Mandiya, Agadi, Gabato, and others¹² The habitation of the area that lies in Dabus-Abay-Dhidhessa Triangle that came to be Kamashi Zone, was subject to the historical relations between the Sibuu-Oromoo in the South, the Jaawwii Oromoo in the north and the Leeqaa Oromo in the east. By its very nature, the hinterlands were hostile to habitation. Human influence in such ecology was minimal and recent. Of course, the Sibiu, Jaawwii, and Leeqaa Oromo had long practiced agro-pastoral and apiculture and so had control over the land such as OdaGodarre, Agaloo-Mexi, Sirba-Abbay, Yaso, Balo regions for centuries.

Perhaps the primary evidence for the human landscape of the western frontier is the record by the Dutch traveler, Juan Maria Schuver who traveled in the region and stayed there in the early 1880s. Schuver recorded the imperial pressure as well as the internal conflicts that caused the dispersion of the people. The Imperial pressure and slave raids since the late 19th are said to have pushed the Gumuz and Berta from where their ancestors had lived the present central and southwestern Gojjam and the Ethio-Sudanese border respectively¹³

Pankhurst referred to the Gumuz as the “previous occupiers” of Agaw-Midir who were displaced by the same people¹⁴.TsegaEndale argued that the Gumuz of the lower Dhidhessa Valley are the descendants of those who were dispersed from Gojjam and Agaw-Midir¹⁵

¹² Wolda-SellaseAbute. "Gumuz and Highland Re-settlers: Differing Strategies of Livelihoods and Ethnic Relations in Matakal, Northwestern Ethiopia." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Göttingen, 2002. IV. Published Books and Articles.

¹³ James, Wendy. *Lifelines. Exchange Marriage among the Gumuz*. In: Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

¹⁴ Bender, M.L. *Peoples and Cultures of the Ethio-Sudanese Borderlands*. Michigan: Michigan State University, 1981.

¹⁵ TsegaEndale. *Inter-Ethnic Relations on a Frontier: Mätakkäl (Ethiopia), 1898–1991*. Wiesbaden: HarrassowitzVerlag, 2006.

The lowlands south of the Blue Nile in Wallagga became a 'reception area' for the Gumuz escaping for security.¹⁶ The wars, raids, and disturbances in southern Gojjam forced the Gumuz to move eastward across the Dhidhessa Valley to the confluence of the Angar and Dhidhessa Rivers between 1880 and 1920. Wendy James has indicated that the Gumuz home base Beri, was destroyed four times by the attacks of the Sennar, the Ethiopian Kings, and the Guba rulers in 1800, 1882, 1898, and 1918 respectively¹⁷ Abdussamed's historical study on the Gumuz depicted that the attack from Arabs in the west and highland Ethiopians in the east for slaves caused movement of the people. The Gumuz dispersion was exacerbated by the military conquest of King Tekle-Haymanot of Gojjam in 1898 and a protracted expedition of the Agaw chief *qennazmach* Zalaqa Ligu. The latter established an Agaw camp at the foothills of the Balaya Mountain to enslave the Gumuz, and used modern weapons for¹⁸ The Gumuz considered the Yaringhe and Beri hills as the home of their ancestors from which they further disseminated to the Dhidhessa Valley. The process is said to have been accelerated by the Oromo chiefs in Wallagga who attracted the Gumuz from Banti, Wambara, and BambaQoratti to settle at BaddaJaale and BaddaXinno. Oromo chiefs resettled the Gumuz in their respective territory for protection and gave them their clan names. The Gumuz were renamed under Oromo clans such as Ammuma, Yambal, Dende, Guto, Bariso, and others. This established the basis of the socio-economic ties between the two peoples. Tesema has indicated that the Leeqaa rulers namely *mootii* BakareeGodaanaa (r.1841-1868), (Tesema, 2006:58) his son and successor, Morodaa (r.1868-1888), are said to have offered protection to the early arrivals in their territory of the Dhidhessa Valley (Interview with Alene, 2011). Particularly, Moroda's son and successor, *dejazmach* Kumsa, resettled two clans of 'Gebeto', two clans of 'Sa'i' (Gumuz), and two clans of Ma'o in lower Dhidhessa in what came to be Baloo-Jegonfoy and assigned six Oromo *abbaa-qoroos* to them similar circumstances were undergone by the Sibuu chiefs of Mandi, Najjo and Gimbi as well as the Limmu Oromo. □

The Political mobilization of Gumuz under the federal structure

¹⁶ James, Wendy. *Lifelines. Exchange Marriage among the Gumuz*. In: Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ James, Wendy. *Lifelines. Exchange Marriage among the Gumuz*. In: Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁸ Abdussamad H. Ahmad. "The Gumuz of the Lowlands of Western Gojjam: The Frontier in History 1900-1935": *Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO)*, 'Oriente, Anno 50, No. 1. Marzo, 1995.

The federal constitution ratified in 1995 boldly stated that the political arrangement is the product of a multi-ethnic coalition of Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples. Since political representation is organized on ethnic grounds, groups are encouraged to claim ethnic rights at the expense of others. Ethnicity has become the primary means of political mobilization.

Gumuz were historically peripheral to Ethiopian politics and hence their constituent ethnic groups have little presence in the national political landscape. They also suffered from chronic marginality in terms of social and physical infrastructure development. Indeed, despite some of the positive changes since 1995, the constitutionally enshrined self-determination clause incites them to control kebeles, districts, and regions to have a share of resources channeled from the federal to the local level.

Hence the Benishangul-Gumuz regions were established at the beginning of the 1990s, as part of the federal restructuring of the country. The Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional state came about by merging the former Assosa and Metekel administrative provinces and some inhabited parts of the Wollega and Gojam former administrative provinces.

Since their mobilization under the federal State, the Gumuz people remained at the periphery of Ethiopian politics. For instance, many parts of the ethnic group are not yet accessible by modern education facilities. More importantly, the historical, social, political, and economic of the ethnic groups are reinforced by the peripheral position of the dominant Oromo-Amhara and Tigrayan ethnic groups of the neighboring regions. In terms of religion, in the Kamashi area, Christianity has a wider following than Islam which has been the dominant religion at the center. There is also a marked difference between the neighboring ethnic group (highlanders) and the ethnic groups of these peripheral regions in terms of dominant economic activity. The former predominantly practice sedentary peasant agriculture, while the latter derive their livelihood from hunting, shifting agriculture, and extraction of alluvial gold.

The Gumuz since it mobilized into the Ethiopian federal arrangement remained peripheral to the political economy of the country. The level of social and physical infrastructure in the region is dismal compared with the generally poor level of the country. Moreover, security in the region is still precarious. This is in part due to the ongoing insurgent fight in the area. As a result, there is no regular public transport service in much of the region. The widespread distribution of small weapons and recurrent outbursts of violence between Oromo clans over

land resources further aggravates insecurity in the region. The continued instability in neighboring Sudan with which the region shares not only a long border but also people adversely affects its security.

The socio-Cultural practice of Gumuz People

Socially, the Gumuz communities consist of recognized social strata. All Gumuz people are organized into clans. The clans are further divided into sub-clans, which are then separated into families. Traditionally, Gumuz people greatly respect elders and young people; this is familiar throughout the communal way of life. A dispute in societies is usually solved through traditional elders. This indicates that culture can be seen as a source of peace and civilization. Gumuz people forbid drunkenness and idleness; the entire clan punishes anyone caught in such practices. The whole clan will discipline any member caught stealing, mistreating their wives, or lying. However, this traditional culture is not much accepted by the young generation of today¹⁹

Culturally, the Gumuz strictly enforce taboos concerning food. They believe that a woman will go bald if she drinks milk; a man will be lazy if he eats cabbage; a woman or her husband will become extremely ill if the woman eats porridge while preparing it.²⁰ In Gumuz culture marriage takes place by sister exchange from one clan to the next. This means that the newly-married man gives his wife's clan a sister or a daughter from his clan to replace the woman he has married. Gumuz usually decorates their bodies with scarifications, but this custom is disappearing through government pressure and education²¹

Faithfully, Gumuz also believes that spirits exist in nature such as in the mountain, rain, grain, and even in animals. Those living at the study site are Christians, but a small number of Gumuz still maintain traditional religious practices. Spirits are called “*Musa*” and are thought to dwell in rivers granaries, fields, trees and mountains, etc. They have ritual specialists called “*Rebba*” the supreme god (“*mus'a*”) who knows all. In the study area, a few people pray to “*Rebba*” and other spirits also to ensure good luck, good crops, and good health and to ask for protection from evil spirits.

Economic Activities of the Gumuz People

I.1.1 ¹⁹ (Tsega, 2006b).

²⁰ (Ibid).

²¹ Tsega (2002:527) notes that the Dongoro Oromo and their chief Tufa Foroso who settled in the area where the Gumuz were living in the 19th century, after fighting established peace through a *michu* ritual at the river Qersa, named Qersa Arara ‘reconciliation river

The livelihood of the Gumuz people is based on natural resources; shifting cultivation alongside gathering wild forest foods, raising livestock mainly goats and chicken, hunting, fishing, collecting honey, and mining gold is the backbone of the economic activities of the people²². The Gumuz hunt various types of terrestrial and aquatic animals for food. Gumuz informants described as hunting one of the most respected practices in Gumuz culture. They hunt different arboreal animals such as apes, monkeys, reptiles, birds, rats, frogs, antelope, elephants, rhinoceros, and the like. Gumuz more benefited from the meat of wild animals rather than the meat of domestic animals. Besides, the Gumuz collect various types of fruit, leave and root species for food. However, the supplies of these forest resources are seasonal and affected by environmental changes. In dry seasons, their availability became scarce, while in rainy months it revives.

Deposits of gold drove expansion into the area in the mid-19th century by the Egyptian rulers of Sudan and by Menelik's armies in the late 1890s, wrote Ethiopian historian Bahru Zewde in his 1976 doctorate. "Gold was the overriding preoccupation of the conquerors, and their entire administrative and military machinery was geared towards the speedy acquisition of as much of the precious commodity as possible," he wrote about the Egyptians.

Gumuz elite Khalid Nasser claims that indigenous people have historically been denied access to ancestral land, which has been settled and farmed by outsiders, and that Ethiopia's most powerful groups have always had designs on the region. "Historically Benishangul is a Sudanese land that was abandoned due to a lack of responsibility and patriotism. Now there is a big rivalry between Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray, which is making the people of Benishangul suffer tremendously," he said.

"The area is endowed with vital natural resources such as rich in Gold, and fertile soils, enormous forest and vegetation composed of diverse plant species that also serve as a habitat for numerous wildlife, and ample perennial water resources"

²² AbeyaIffa. "Adaptation, Culture, and Changing Environment: The Case of the Gumuz of the Didessa Valley (Kamashi Zone), West Ethiopia." M.A. Thesis, Department of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, 2001.

dependent on hunting and gathering in their history. They are still poor in oxen and horse plough, instead, they use a simple hoe for agriculture purposes. They set fire to the field to make it ready for cultivation.²³

The families of a village shift their work from one area to the next, leaving their used fields fallow for many years. When uncultivated land is ready to be developed, men begin building new farmsteads on the outskirts of their fields. Farm huts are very simple, and separate huts are built for boys and farm animals. Although the Gumuz has permanent homes in their villages, they live on the farmsteads during harvest time²⁴.

Besides, trading is also an important economic base for the Gumuz people. Often they trade with the nearby Oromo. Gumuz exchanges their agricultural product with traditional handicrafts of neighboring Oromos at the local market. The Oromo people sell goods such as coffee, cloth, soap, razor blades, cigarettes, mirrors, and salt bars in exchange for Gumuz crops.²⁵ According to an elder informant from Haro Limu, “earlier Gumuz-Oromo local markets were Suge Lalissa Sunday market, Gatra Denibi Saturday market center, Barisso Thursday market, Dimtuu, Haroo for both ethnic groups.” These places were used for the exchange of goods, informal ways of experience sharing, and for intercultural meetings and drinking.

The Oromo Ethnic Group and Relations with Non-Oromo in western, Ethiopia

The Oromo community in western, Ethiopia

The Oromo people are one of the largest indigenous peoples inhabiting Ethiopia since times immemorial and belong to the Cushitic origin. Today the Oromo live in the western (Wollega Zones area) embraced a variety of relations and ways of living with Non-Oromo in the western part of the country relating to socio-cultural and economic aspects. This area is a heterogeneous area where several ethnic groups get together and different ethnic groups form an interconnected pattern of livelihood. These are Cushitic of Oromo, Omotic of Shinasha, and numerous Nilo-Saharan ethnic group families settled there. □

. During the reign of the Darg regime of Ethiopia and before, Wallaga was one of the provinces, with its capital city at Nekemte. It was bordered on the west by Sudan, on the

²³ Tesema Ta'a (1994) Religious Beliefs among the Oromo: Waaqeffannaa, Christianity and Islam in the Context of Ethnic Identity, Citizenship and Integration

²⁴ (Ibid).

²⁵ (Ibid).

North by the Abbay River which separated it from Gojjam, on the East by Shewa, and on the South by Illu labor. Part of its territory today Asosa and Kamashi *Zone* of the Benishangul-Gumuz Region was amalgamated into the province.

Oromo Community in the study area has vast and very rich socio-economic and cultural potential, fostered by the size of the population and large land areas with diverse climatic conditions. The people have a distinct culture and religion. However, a wide range of integrity exists among the community grouping. Mainly the community follows Christian and Muslims, and some people also follow the *Waqeffaataa* religion. The Oromo *Waaqa* or the Gumuz *Tsunsä* is the same for all. He is the creator of everything, the source of all life, omnipresent, infinite, and incomprehensible; he can do and undo anything, he is pure, intolerant of injustice, crime, sin, and all falsehood. They have very comprehensive plant and animal names. The various customs about marriage, paternity, and dress have elaborate descriptions. Also, the people in the areas largely develop the indigenous governance called the “*Gada* system” and thoroughly became ruled under *Odda Bissil* decree.

Economically, agriculture is the main activity of the people. Still employing traditional methods, subsistence agriculture is the means of livelihood for the inhabitants. Particularly, oilseeds, spices, mineral resources, and wildlife are abundant. Trade and various kinds of skills such as wood and metal works, weaving, pottery, and tannery flourished are also other livelihood bases of the community.

Oromo-Gumuz Relations before the 1991 period

Over the last century, the Kamashi zone is described as a special platform for social relations and cultural integration of Oromo and Gumuz communities. The area represents a mosaic of diverse ethnic groups who have continually been intermingling among themselves, the most important of which are Gumuz, Oromo, and Amhara. While the economic and social-driven interests shaped the major parts of the relations at a local level, the imperial control in the late nineteenth century reconfigured the existing situations mainly disturbing the statuesque in favor of the center.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the relations between the Oromo and the Gumuz was cooperation and integration history. As neighboring peoples, the longstanding socio-economic relations include mutual co-existence and integration. Both of these groups have traditional practices to allow and accept new members from alien groups into their own. The

major ones include *michuu* (literary friendship), *meedechnaa* (adoption ritual), and *harmahodhaa* (licking breast). These had been systems of integration that tied the Oromo and the Gumuz and through which conflicts were also resolved.²⁶ Following the expansion of Christianity in the west, the social institutions God parent's ship/ 'Abaliji' institution was introduced to strengthen socio-cultural and economic ties between Oromo and Gumuz. The process led to the establishment of a historical bond in which the Gumuz were called *abbaamichuu* and highland colleagues were known as *dhibantaa*. In the relations, the *dhibantaa* freely enjoyed the right to get a plot of land to plough with a sharecropping agreement with the Gumuz client (*abbaamichuu*).

In the post-Italian rule, tenancy (landlessness and over-taxation, the expansion of trade, and Christianity) were major factors that strengthened the relationship between the peoples on the borderlines. These changes expanded the horizon of pre-existing social and economic ties to wider communal relations in the field of labor, sharecropping trade, labor and hunting, and religion. The result was the creation of a strong social bond and economic interdependence between the Oromo and the Gumuz. It is noticeable that during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the interdependence increased owing to crop failure and 'bad famine'²⁷ Many Gumuz people migrated to the highlands to work and survive. However, it should be noted that the Gumuz rebelled against the government for taxation, and the subsequent war of Abba-Tone 1952-53 and the involvement of Gimbi and Naqamteeawuraja in crushing the rebels put a scare on the relations at least temporarily.

Both Oromo and Gumuz are, respectively, the two largest ethnic groups that share the same protestant religion. And they even share the same church. Since the 1950s, a series of development and evangelization campaigns among the Gumuz by the EECMY of Western Wallagga Synod further strengthened the bond and interdependence between the Sibuu Oromo of western Wallagga and the Gumuz of Dhidhessa and Dabus Valleys. Guided by the principle of 'Holistic Missionary Services' (for the soul and the flesh) that holds the unity of spiritual and social development, EECMY Supported the Gumuz with health, education services, and agricultural implementation (Interview). EECMY built health centers and

²⁶ (Tsega, 2006:34).

²⁷ (Wallmark, 1981:109).

schools at Gombo and Sirba in 1963 and Qorka and Agalo-Mexxii in the late 1960s. It also established Dimtu Resettlement Centre that focused on the promotion of settlement farms of the Gumuz and landless volunteers from the surrounding highlands²⁸ Emmanuel Abraham, who was a key figure in the project, wrote that Dimtu was established "in the belief that several... Gumuz clans who led nomadic lives in the Didesa valley of Naqamtee district could be given a better chance in life if they were assembled in villages on fertile land in the valley and given instruction by experts in farming and other skills"²⁹To that end, the project resettled volunteers from the Gumuz, Sa'i, Ma'o, Gabato, and the Oromo, which also strengthened the integration between the Oromo and the Gumuz in the Dhidhessa lowland.

Nevertheless, since the early 1980s, the long-established relations and interdependence began to be disturbed because of the involvement of different actors. On one hand, since the 1980s, the Ethiopian state has been protecting and empowering the gumuz as opposed to the Oromo of their neighbors. The case in point was that the Darg regime equipped the Gumuz with firearms under the pretext of protecting their crops and livestock from wildlife. But, firearms were distributed to them to defend the military activities of OLF on the frontiers. The system at least created tensions between the Oromo people of the region and the Gumuz of the frontiers affecting the preexisting good relations. On the other hand, the influx of farmers for agriculture and commerce and the subsequent population stress in the area contributed to the creation of new and complex socio-economic settings. The settlements of peoples of diverse origins in the region through the resettlement programs in the 1980s and the establishment of state farms were factors that contributed to the reconfiguration of the social system. As a result, the practice of the age-old *harm-hodhaa*, *michuu* and *abalije* traditions between the Oromo and the Gumuz collapsed.

Gumuz People also choose to use the highway road that passes through Nekemte to come to the capital, Addis Ababa. Historically, their relationship has been characterized by territorial competition which often leads to disputes and conflicts over resources, including farming land.

Oromo-Gumuz Amity Relationships

²⁸ (Addis Zemen *Addis Zemen*, *Sene* 4, 1968).

²⁹ (Emmanuel Abraham, 1995: 310).

Oromo–Gumuz friendly relations have exhibited the forms of the myth of ‘neighborhood’, social ties, and economic relations. Thus, it is necessary to have a look at the forms of longstanding cooperation that existed between the two ethnic communities one after. To begin with the first one, historically besides the neighborhood the alleged ethnic affinity between the Gumuz and the Oromo was one factor for their limited hostility but co-existence. It is said that the Gumuz and the Oromo have had odder relations.

Accordingly, the former respects the latter in social interactions and cultural practices that they shared in common such as religion.

Consequently, the relations between the Gumuz and the Oromo have not been unfriendly until recent times (Based on the accounts obtained from Gumuz and Oromo informants, one can claim that the Oromo and Gumuz do not kill each other as they have inter-reliant. Because of that, if the Oromo and Gumuz kill each other, the informants expressed their deep belief in the myth that breaking the curse leads to fatal consequences like paralysis, leprosy, misfortunes in life, and even death.

On the other hand, while Gumuz informants raise brotherhood, cultural ties, and intermarriage, the justification that ‘Gumuz never sheds blood’ and ‘fear of ancestral curse’ as fundamental reasons for the strict ruling out of killing and/or conflict between the two groups, the views of Oromo informants ranges from those who accept the Gumuz claim-with the exception of the ideas of brotherhood and ‘Gumuz never sheds blood’ to those who argue that killing a Gumuz man would not offer social prestige and economic values for the killer as the Gumuz was considered an ‘inferior ethnic community’ Warra Xinnoo (weak people) by the former.

In contrast, the killing of people who are rival neighbors like the Amhara enables the Gumuz to hold a Kuda ceremony (a ceremony in which they boast about their deeds after killing). Whether this happened from the brotherhood angle or Oromo’s view of the Gumuz as a ‘simple’ and ‘inferior ethnic’ community as the Oromo often argue remains unclear. Albeit Oromo’s claims are true, they still indirectly contributed to the coexistence of the groups. Besides the myth of ‘codependent ties’ or ‘conjoint, they have social interactions that include intermarriage. According to most of the key informants, from the two ethnic communities in the Kamashi as well as in Belojogfof, there are several examples to prove the existence of

inter-ethnic marriages. According to these sources, a marriage relation that exists between the two communities is practiced by the poor and the rich alike. The informants from Oromo earlier also told us that the Oromo normally do not enter into marriage with the Gumuz whom they consider as an 'inferior ethnic community. It is only the richest Gumuz man who may marry an Oromo woman as he can be able to find a wife from Oromo because of his surplus of capacity to afford bridewealth, which is offered in-kind/cash commonly heads of money. Both Oromo and Gumuz's key informants confirmed this assertion.

Nevertheless, no matter how views oscillate from the limited and unilateral flow of marriage relations (views of many Gumuz informants) to common and bilateral inter-marriage between the two groups (views of almost all my Oromo informants), marriage relations may have been among factors that contributed to Gumuz-Oromo harmonious relations until recently.

Finally, economic interdependence, which is the third area of cooperation, had been the most significant form of harmonious interactions between the two ethnic communities without which the very existence of the groups would be trivial. The two communities have been mutually dependent in terms of the exchange of products. The rock crystal and hunter Gumuz have been dependent on Oromo agricultural products while the Oromo, in turn, depended on Gumuz land and mineral of the rock crystal and hunter Gumuz. This mutual interdependence and cooperation, thus, created peaceful relations between the two communities. It seems that this economic interaction fits the reason why the relationship between them became peaceful until recent times.

Enmity Relationships

As discussed in the preceding section, Gumuz and Oromo have a long history of cooperation, interdependence, and friendship. Like any neighboring communities, they compete for land resources. They have also traditionally developed instruments of conflict management when conflicts happen between them over resources. Traditional patterns of conflict and conflict management between the two peoples were, however, changed as a result of the establishment of ethnolinguistic-based regional states. In the new federal structure, the Gumuz became part of the Benishangul Gumuz and the Oromo part of the Oromiya Regional State. This means the traditional competitive natures of relationships between the ethnic

communities are thus experiencing new dimensions following the formation of the two adjacent Regional States. As a result, traditional competitions/conflicts between the Gumuz and Oromo were transformed into territorial conflicts first in 2008 and then in 2018. Tensions between the two communities over border issues led to violent conflicts, which led to the death of many people, the displacement of thousands of people, and the destruction of property.³⁰

Oromo-Gumuz relations After the 1991 period

In post-1991, the relations between the Benishangul-Gumuz and Oromo have been shaped by the intertwined political and economic contexts. The political context implies the ways in which federalism was perceived and implemented and the role of the central government. Following the reorganization of territories during the adoption of Ethnic-Federalism in 1994, BGRS was created from the Asosa region, the westernmost portion of the Gojjam Province (Matakkal), and the northwestern portion of the Wallagga Province (Kamashi).

It adopted the name from two local ethnic groups—the Berta (Benishangul) and the Gumuz. Federalism in western Ethiopia has become an issue because of the social complexity of the region and the central government's active role in empowering the minority. On one hand, in the federal boundary redrawing, the separation of the Asosa and Kamashi region from the historical Wallagga Province created disputes over the Oromo domain territories particularly the Dabus, western Blue Nile, and the lower Dhidhessa Valleys. These changes and particularly the misconception of federalism exerted far-reaching effects upon the patterns of population settlement and mode of resource utilization in the study area. The process created tensions between the communities on the issues of territory, leadership, and resource use. As we shall see shortly, the process also inevitably involved local elites and authorities who came to be major actors in instigating conflicts between the two peoples.

The economic context that shaped these relations was the increasing significance of land in the lowland for large-scale agriculture that invited more powerful actors. The arrival of many farmer-investors and smallholder farmers from far and near since 1998 resulted in competition and negotiations to obtain crop land disrupting the previous mutual ways of use

³⁰ discussion with Ato Alen , 20 August 2020; Dereje Tulu, August 2020).

of land, processes, and terms of land acquisition. The growth of land deals in the valley resulted in overlapping claims among competing small actors, the Gumuz and the Oromo on the benefit and ownership of land on the one hand and between these people and guest farmers. The process also created land dispossessions under the pretext of agricultural investment, which in turn created grievances. This came to determine the whole setting of the inter-ethnic relations in the post-1991 period. In this regard, the causes of conflicts between the Gumuz and the Oromo since 1991 were related to land, indignity (seniority), and authority on the land.

It is vital to note that the misperception of federalism is clear in the story of land deals and access to resources in the period. The process significantly reinforced conflict between the Gumuz and the Oromo regarding the historical and customary legitimacy of land in the frontier. In the last two decades, conflicts were instigated by an irredentist ideology that aimed at the return of the territories, which the Oromo had lost to their Gumuz neighbors during the 1994 federal boundary arrangement and the Gumuz demand to control the entire lowland territory. Informants attributed the major factor for the 2004 and 2007/8 Gumuz-Oromo conflict to the need to get land and secure big benefits from the land³¹ In fact, the wave of large-scale land acquisitions began during the federal boundary arrangement. The regional states are said to have been delimited based on "the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned"³² However, it is clear that in the boundary arrangement, many Oromo-inhabited areas of the frontier were placed in BGRS and some Berta and Gumuz people were included into the Oromiya Zones of West and East Wallagga. Since then there have been repeated claims to restore the territories to their respective regional states. The Gumuz over-ambitiously claimed all the lowlands to be included in their territory. The Oromo did not acknowledge this Gumuz idea of boundary definition; instead, they maintained that many areas of Baloo-Jegonfof, Matakkaal, Yahoo, Agalo-Mexxii, and Kamashi districts used to be Oromo land in which the powerful Oromo chiefs had historically resettled the Nilo-Saharan for mutual benefits and as a result, these areas were 'wrongly' included into the BGRS. Oromo elders claimed that the entire valley land east of the Dabus River was part of the Maccaa land that the Leeqaa-Monarchy governed from 1840³³ Among

³¹ (Interview).

³² (FDRE Constitution, 1995, 46/2).

³³ (interview).

others, the Gumuz-Oromo conflict of 2004 is said to have been instigated by the motive of the Gumuz to control parts of Badessaa-Gammadaa, Fiix-baqqoo, Bareedduu north of the Angar River and Baloo-Central, Baloo-Bareeda and Tolee areas of East Wallagga Zone³⁴.

In April 2004, an organized Gumuz militia attacked Oromo villages in the areas presumed to be contested areas including churches and resettlement centers. The Gumuz youth emerged as a group in the conflict of 2004 and 2007/8 to regain the territories. The conflict claimed hundreds of lives and was only stopped with the intervention of the federal government and a promise of boundary negotiation. Although the regional governments of the two regions several times agreed to negotiate, the land dispute remained unresolved and became the major factor in the more pervasive 2007/8 conflict.

Conflict in the contested areas also flared up from May 2007 to May 2008, when groups of armed Gumuz militia forcefully displaced the Oromo and settled the Gumuz people in Sholo Chargogo kebeles in Diggaa and at HoraWaataa, *mender* 4, 5, and 8 in Sassiggaa district. In the conflict, the Gumuz's access to firearms in the west from the Sudan border strengthened their power and was the source of unbalanced relations. Oromo elders explained that Gumuz officials and elites spurred the territorial dispute by propagating the mistaken view that all the bamboo-growing lowland territories 'naturally' belonged to them. The Oromo in such areas expressed their grievance that, against the values of the constitution, the restructuring of the regions humiliated them and allowed the Gumuz to seize massive fertile lands, which had previously belonged to the Oromo including Angar-Shankoraa, Dimtu, Rufo, Sekele, Sholo, Gome, Hora-Meti, KutaMuri, TulluDhangego, Chorgogo, and others. This not only denied the fact that many ethnic Oromo had lived on these territories for a long but also stimulated the Gumuz militia to attack Oromo civilians in these areas³⁵ The conflict killed nearly 200 civilians. The most disastrous part of this story was that about 175 people lost their lives and 15,579 people were displaced from both sides in the conflict, which lasted for a year. The case in point was the Hora-Waataa Massacre in which 98 Oromo civilians were killed on May 19, 2008.

³⁴ (A letter from President of BGRS, 1998 EC).

³⁵ (interview).

These conflicts can cause the displacement of tens of thousands of people. In 2008, the administrative border dispute ensued between them and following the outcome, tens of thousands of ethnic Oromo reportedly fled the areas for fear of repercussions. The quarry has still not been implemented and this is one factor behind the current conflict. Since the two communities are largely agriculturalist and cross borders in search of their fertile land.

In addition, the conflict happened in kamashi Zone, belojojofye Woreda, Soge Town (especially yeri Kebele) which starts on 10 September (on Ethiopian new years' eve), 21,2018. According to Mr. Mulatu (public relations officer of the Oromo congress party (opposition party), in the Kamashi zone; the Oromo people and Gumuz have been living together. However, the ethnic conflict which was first initiated by the indigenous peoples' calls for evicting all highlanders from their area, has dynamically changed the political landscape. The conflict has resulted, in serious injury, amputation, and sadly the death of more than 200 people. The attack is directly attributed to the increasing land acquisition process in the area mainly by domestic (Government affiliate individuals) and Oromo investors. This is the most productive area and this area has been given to retired TPLF/EPRDF officials when the Gumuz claimed this is their land, officials told them, it is the Oromo/settlers who are in their land and evict them from their land.

According to a Benishangul Gumuz official, it is naïve to assume that this group of people who used to live together for almost half a century will go into conflict because of the illegal settlement issue. The state knew the problem but it doesn't say it so because it is its fault. As has been elaborated, the greed of the political elites has been orchestrated to look like ethnic grievance. Similarly, one highlander confesses that we have been living with these people for a while, we have mingled and raised kids, we share the agony and fiesta and now after all this, from nowhere these incidents happened the real issue is the invasion of the land from this zone mainly for TPLF/EPRDF officials who are making the conditions to look like ethnic conflict. To worsen the problem, the kamashi zone is the only suitable place for cash crop production, which makes people within the ruling regime to be interested in the land.

According to Gumuz FGD in B-G the hunter-gatherer indigenous Gumuz people were threatened because of the suitable nature of the environment for sorghum-growing investors.

The investment besides taking the huge chunk of land is also facilitating the migration of many highlander communities from other parts of the country which is causing acute ethnic tension in the area. Such a situation has escalated into an ethnic conflict that results in the deaths of both Mejenjers gumuz and Oromo as well as the displacement of more than 2000 non-Gumuz (Oromo) into the neighboring region.

Unless the main underlying resource-based conflict is resolved any attempt at peacebuilding without addressing such imminent questions may provide absorption of conflicts not resolving them once and for all which eventually will spark resource-oriented fault lines and conflict³⁶ Similarly, the government characterized the incident as ‘ethnic conflict’ without touching the main causes of the conflict which traces back to its stubborn nature to take a proactive role while the local community was begging.

When an ethnic group claims and challenges the state, it is quite straightforward and discernibly challenging the state's power. However, this scheme becomes complex when it involves multiple mobilized ethnic groups that make the competition quite intricate, because of multiple competing claims³⁷

In Ethiopia, ethnic regionalization since 1991 has dramatically transformed the relations between the titular (regional majorities) and the non-titular (regional or settler minorities) groups from a nonviolent frontier one into an inter-ethnic tension and conflict. The cases from the Regional States of Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Oromiya, and SNNPR in this respect attest to the impact of ethnic federalism on the generation and transformation of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia.³⁸

³⁶ Aalen, L. “Ethnic Federalism and Self-determination for Nationalities in a Non-democratic State: The Case of Ethiopia.” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 13 (2006): 24361.

³⁷ Merera Gudina (2003b). „The Elite and the Quest for Peace, Democracy and Development in Ethiopia: Lessons to be Learnt“ *Northeast African Studies* Vol. 10, no. 2

³⁸ Tadesse Berisso (1988) “Traditional Warfare Among The Guji of Southern Ethiopia,” MA Thesis in Anthropology, Michigan State University.

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