

ETHNIC CONFLICT IN EAST AFRICA: AN OVER VIEW OF CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnic unrest and tension are prevalent in today's world. Newspapers and television are rife with stories about ethnic violence among the people of Africa, the Middle East, India, China, Srilanka, Ireland, etc 'Many other societies in little danger of civil wars---such as the United States, Britain, Canada, most of the western Europe, and Japan---are nevertheless torn by ethnic strife. In many ways they are more seriously divided along ethnic lines, marked by racial, lingual, religious, and national differences, than they were a generation ago'(Yinger,1997). It has been noted that violent conflicts around the globe are increasingly based on ethnic divisions. Only a tiny proportion of wars now occur between states; the vast majorities are civil wars with ethnic dimensions.

Comprising the largest share of ex-colonial states of the world, Africa is caught up in a range of intra- to inter-state conflicts. 'Since independence, about one-third of the countries of Africa have experienced large-scale political violence or war' (Ali, 2004:5). But not all African countries are affected to the same degree. In some African countries, a whole generation has never experienced peace since independence and has internalized war as a legitimate part of life (Nhema, 2004:11). For instance, within only four decades time (i.e., between the 1960s and the 1990s), approximately 80 violent changes in government in the 48 sub-Saharan African countries took place (Adedeje, 1999:2). Strangely enough, Africa has seen over seventy coups in the last quarter of the 20thC (Ali, 2004:9). Roughly in the same period, Africa has suffered the greatest number of armed conflicts in the world" (Andreas, 2010: i).

The Horn of Africa region is regarded as highly susceptible to conflicts, and is one of the most conflict-prone areas in the continent. The Horn is the sub-region of protracted conflict and instability (Weyesa, 2011; Medhine, 2003). Over the past six decades there was no single year when the sub region had free from conflict (Tafesse, 2011:4). In the Horn, the conflicts that have occurred since 1960s have largely been internal. Border conflicts have been rare (Sriram and Nielsen, eds., 2006:36), and most of the wars in this part of the continent during the last decades of the 20thC have been described in terms of ethnic conflicts (Befekadu and Diribssa, 2005:77). For example, the civic unrest in Darfur, the protracted war between Ethiopia and Eritrea (before its independence in 1993), ethnic violence in Kenya after the 2007 presidential election, among other, are some to mention. Some even contend the Horn of Africa region as highly complicated because politics and ethnicity are deeply interwoven. Similarly, the region is known for the pastoralist movement from place to place leading to almost continuous local warfare and frequent forced

migration. In general, the sub-region is often considered as the most volatile area in the world despite some progress made in ending long lasting regional wars (Dereje, 2010; Medhine, 2003).

Competing Approaches to the Explanation of Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict

An analysis of the current conceptual and theoretical debates over ethnicity and ethnic conflict shows that there exist competing views and wider gulfs among scholars in the field. Academics perceive ethnicity and ethnic conflict from different views. These approaches to the explanation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict are the primordialists, the instrumentalists and the constructivists' approaches.

Primordialism

The primordialists (Geertz, 1963; Van den Berghe, 1995) see the objective markers of ethnicity as crucial factors that determine ethnic identity. They see objective factors as natural, innate, given, ineffable, immutable and non-manipulable (Geertz, 1963). As to primordialists these objective factors predetermine a group's identity and are ascriptive elements that distinguishing one group from another.

Equally, primordialists' account of ethnic conflict contends that a group is turned into a natural community by the common bonds shared by the group members. Individuals belong to a group through primordial ties of blood, kinship, language and customs. As ethnic division is relegated to pre determined (ascriptive) characteristics, group membership is supposed to be the given of human existence. The sense of self is linked with the identity of the group of primitive levels. Belonging to ethnic groups is tinged with raw and primitive affects that pertain to one's sense of self and its protection (Joeng, 2000). Threats to these primordial elements results in violent and intractable conflicts (Geertz, 1967). According to primordialists' school of thought, the only possible solution to identity-based or ethnic conflict in a multi-national/ethnic society, if one takes the logical conclusion of the primordialists approach, is self determination to its extreme type or secession. Accordingly, a society with homogenous objective factors is guaranteed to have political stability. However, the case of the homogeneous Somalia challenges such a prediction: serious conflicts can easily exist within a single cultural group (Kifle, 2007:47).

Primordialism has been challenged by many for presenting a static and naturalistic view of ethnicity that reduces cultural and social behavior to biological drives' (Eller and Coughlan, 1993:200; Ratecliffe, 1994:7). Primordialists underrate people's interest and strong commitments to rational values, senses of duties, classes and other socially constructed ends (Thompson, 1989:181).

Instrumentalism

It is in response to the strong emphasis on primordialism that the instrumentalists' school of thought emerged in the early 1970s. Instrumentalism can be considered as the continuum or opposite pole of primordialism. And "its key proposition rests on the purely instrumental use of ethnic identity for political or economic ends by the elite, regardless of whether they believe in ethnicity"(Varshney,2002:27). According to Abner Cohen, one of the most known proponents of instrumentalism, ethnic groups are a kind of informal political organizations which utilize cultural values for material motives. For instrumentalists in general ethnic

groups are products of individuals/groups for specific economic and political ends. It regards ethnic identity as flexible and rooted in adaptation to social changes (Cohen, 1974).

However, instrumentalists are also not free from blame. As to Varshney, for something to be manipulated by a leader when death, injury, or incarceration is a clear possibility, it must be valued as a good by a critical mass of people, if not by all. Varshney further contends that a purely instrumental conception of ethnicity cannot explain why ethnic identities are mobilized by leaders at all (Varshney, 2002:30). Instrumentalism's claim of excessive flexibility of ethnic groups is questioned by the experiences of some nations (France, Greece and Swtzerland) in which identities are more fixed for longer period of time. Anthony Smith argues that the civic-territorial and ethno-cultural ideals of the nation are closely interwoven in logic there may be a good case for such distinction, but in practice it is difficult to find any example of a 'pure' cultural nationalism, freed from its ethnic mooring (Smith, 2000:18-19).

Despite the fact that the two diametrically opposing views present a momentous vis-à-vis the conceptions and analytical perspectives of ethnicity and ethnic conflict, they couldn't explain the concept as they attempt to illustrate the complexity from mutually exclusive and opposing angles (Horowitz, 1985:139). This agony, however, can be lessened by adopting a milder approach of instrumental version of ethnicity as a response to the downsides of primordialism and instrumentalism to grasp fully the academic discourse on ethnicity and ethnic conflict assuming that ethnicity is not 'immutable', fixed and constant. Nor 'completely open', fluid, flexible and malleable phenomenon (Lake and Rothchild, 1998: 6). This position links to the 'social constructivists' approach to ethnicity and ethnic conflict.

Constructivism

The first major influence of this school was the approach by the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrick Barth. In his edited essay (1969), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; Bath described a new approach to ethnicity. In that writing Barth illustrates the fluidity of ethnic relations in different types of multiethnic societies. Although ethnic groups maintain boundaries such as language to mark their identity, as to Barth, people may modify and shift their ethnic identity in different types of social interaction/contexts. In this writing, Barth challenged the belief that "the social world was made up of distinct named groups" and proposed that the identity of the group was not a "quality of the container" (i.e. an 'essence' or a fixed, objective reality belonging to a cultural or ethnic group) but what emerges when a given social group interacts with other social groups (Barth, 1969).

'Constructionists regard identity as manufactured rather than given. Identity emerges from dialectic between similarity and difference in group interaction. Owing to its socially constructed nature, the significance attached to a particular identity varies in situations' (Jenkins, 1997:11). With respects to post colonial societies, constructivists argue that, the principal contemporary ethnic cleavages in the post colonial societies are a creation of the colonial power and, given immense power of colonial masters, such divisions have endured and will last for a long time (Varshney, 2002:33). The politics of differences concerns the way in which the political elite manufactures and utilizes the social meaning of difference.

For that matter the boundaries of states in Africa, by and large, were drawn by European powers at the Berlin conference, in 1884, more to try to secure a balance of power than to match with any ethnic order based on cultural and lingual variation. Quite a lot of civil wars

have followed independence as different communities within the states have sought autonomy and cultural identity (Yinger, 1997:14). As a specific illustration, Mamdani relates the 1994 Hutu-Tutsi massacre as the outcome of the reconstruction of ethnicity by Belgians in that country. As to him, the Hutu-Tutsi distinction was codified by the Belgian colonial power in the 1930s on the basis of cattle ownership, physical measurements and church attendances. Identity cards were issued on this basis, and these documents played a key role in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (Mamdani, 2001). Markakis (1998:127-146), in his fascinating article entitled 'the politics of identity: the case of the Guraghe in Ethiopia', reveals credibly that the Guraghe identity is developed slowly but evidently over a period of time, and in the recent years religion and state reconstructing considerably shaped the Guraghes, now divided into two.

As we have seen in the preceding discussion, each of the three schools of thought has its strong and weak points. In any case, they are quite helpful to carefully put the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in their proper setting. Ethnic conflicts should be understood contextually beyond the common thoughts discussed above. 'In order to better comprehend the concept of ethnicity and ethnic conflict, there is no worth in dismissing one or the other of the thoughts for depending on a number of factors as all thoughts illustrates the real nature of ethnicity' (Jenkins, 1997:46-47). While some underline the significance of primordial feelings as the bond that keeps ethnic group together, others have greater emphasis to ethnicity as a site of mobilization for certain political or economic objectives. On the whole in understanding ethnicity [and ethnic conflict], according to Rotchild, three decisive elements need to be emphasized. These include: taking into account the past (history of the people) so as to have comprehensive understanding of the present; politicization of ethnicity involving the preserving of ethnic groups and their distinctiveness and 'transforming them into political conflict groups for the modern political arena; and the elastic nature of ethnicity and the wide variety of potential ethnic groups (Rothschild, 1981).

Causes of Ethnic Conflict

There is no single cause for ethnic conflict. It is rather the result of interplay of a number of factors. 'Whilst the prevalence of diverse ethnic groups in a state may not by itself lead to violent conflicts' (Alemayehu, 2009; Asebe, 2007; Varshney, 2002; Wolff, 2006), the specific political and economic contexts tend to influence the nature of interactions among the groups. Nevertheless, there is an emerging trend of shaping similarities and patterns that may explain the causes of ethnic conflict (Lake and Rothchild, 1996). Thus, here, I have broadly grouped the sources of ethnic conflict into political, economic, and cultural and historical factors.

Political Factors

It is believed by many that political power can be considered as a vital factor for generating ethnic conflict. According to Markakis (1994), though one of the major causes of ethnic conflict in the Horn of Africa is competition over resources or the motive to secure access to resources, the struggle for power is the most important cause of ethnic conflicts when government policies and institutions, which distribute resources, are based on ethnicity.

Similarly Medhine (2003) argues that, though the sources of conflict in the Horn of Africa are the results of the interplay among such factors as poor resource utilization and unequal

economic development, above all the nature of the state is at the center of the conflicts in the region. Medhine contends that the state does not reflect the interest of the society as a whole---almost all regimes in the region are the causes and not solutions of the historical contradictions in their respective countries. Political domination and a desire for persisting control of political power; the non-participatory approach of political systems as well as the lack of democratization have further contribute to the insecurity of the region.

In this regard discriminatory government policies play a significant role in aggravating ethnic conflicts. There is a close interconnection between the 'politics of exclusion' and violent ethnic conflicts. The direct reason for this is the exclusion from political power and rights. This means that where power holders favor their own ethnic group and discriminate others, it is likely for ethnic conflict to arise whenever there is conducive condition for it. In connection with this, Vanhanen (1999:65) stresses that 'ethnic nepotism, measured by ethnic division, is a common causal factor behind ethnic conflict'. Such a policy of 'ethnic nepotism' leads to the development of the feelings of being excluded, ignored, and discriminated against on the part of some ethnic communities. African experience in the post-independence period is a case in point (Hussien, 2004:11).

Walzer is of the opinion that nation-states normally have an ultimate goal to be achieved explicitly or implicitly to form and preserve a single nation under one political structure or a country. Basically, they aim at bringing all the members of a state into a single national or ethnic origin or into one political structure. To this effect, they aim at merging those who are different but live in the area by assimilation into one nation (Walzer, 1983 in Befikadu and Diribssa, 2005:87). However, it is extremely difficult to assimilate everyone who is different from the dominant ethnic group (Chazan, 1991). In Ethiopia, for example, during the imperial regimes, in the name of nation-building, attempts were made to assimilate all ethnic groups in the south, south west and east of the country into Amhara(the then dominant ethnic group) culture and way of life after cultural dominance of over a century.

In sum, the 'politics of exclusion' or 'ethnic nepotism' which favors some ethnic groups while marginalizing others can be a root cause for ethnic conflict. This in turn is a manifestation of the lack of the rule of law or a democratic environment in its entire forms. Under such circumstance, it is proper to expect the outbreak of ethnic clash, whenever there is favorable condition for it to surface.

Economic Factors

Although political power is central, it alone cannot explain the root causes of ethnic conflict. Political exclusion should be combined with discriminatory economic policies and exploitation to produce ethnic tension. Biberja(1998) found that, in the former Yugoslavia, some ethnic groups such as Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro felt that government policies worsened economic disparities and created 'uneven development', and that discriminatory approach contributed to inter-ethnic conflict. Markakis (1994), in the same way, underlines the role of economic resources in producing ethnic conflict in the Horn of Africa. As to him, regardless of the form it may take, the real cause of ethnic clash in this part of Africa is the desire to secure access to resources in the country concerned. This is similar to the argument of Harris and Reilly (1998) that portrays economic insecurity leads to ethnic conflict where political power holders discriminate against some ethnic groups in resource distribution. In the same vein, the unfair distribution of rural land during the

imperial Ethiopia that had been a vital cause for tension between the northern settlers and political authorities and the masses of southern peoples can be taken as illustrative.

Befikadu and Diribssa (2005:84-91), point out another conflict-bearing economic variable worth mentioning in a multi-ethnic country or nation-state in what is often termed as the 'rage of the rich'. As to them, one way of interpreting conflicts between groups is when rebel organizations are determined to fight to secede with the land on which primary commodities are produced. Such incidences are very common. The Katangan secession movement in Zaire (Copper mining region), the Biafran secession movement in Nigeria (oil producing region), and the Aceh secession movement in Indonesia (oil producing region) can be taken as examples of the rage of the rich. In this perspective, the insurgent groups fight a political cause, that is, the injustice of the rich region at paying taxes to the poor regions.

However, scarcity of resources may contribute to, but cannot be a decisive factor for, the emergence of ethnic conflict since various groups live together without falling into a violent clash even where there are no adequate resources. Conflict takes place where some groups attempt to benefit themselves at the expense of others. This happens either when power holders distribute resources among different ethnic communities unfairly or when an ethnic group attempts to occupy the territory of its neighboring group without the consent of the community concerned to allow it some access to the available economic resource. This type of conflict is common in the pastoralists' areas. But in Ethiopia, prolonged social conflicts have been the result of competition over the control of state machinery, which is a guarantor of access to necessary resources of survival. This means that power holders, particularly during the imperial regimes, rewarded the members of their ethnic group by providing them access to economic resources at the expense of the other ethnic communities.

Cultural and Historical Factors

Cultural domination, together with political suppression, is considered as another source of clash. Allen (1994) states that the development of ethnicity and ethnic conflict couldn't be examined narrowly from the economic or materialistic perspective alone. One should also consider the fact that differences in traditions, values, and the possible fear of suppression can lead to ethnic strife. Harris and Reilly (1998) contend that culture related conflict is the result of the quest for 'cultural/group autonomy' by the minority groups who are suspicious of cultural assimilation or suppression by the dominant group. This means that a politically dominant group may impose its traditions, values and beliefs on others. By doing so, it would suppress the language, values, and institutions of other ethnic groups (Hussien, 2004).

A further problem in the matter of ethnicity is that a conflict between the dominant ethnic group and the minority often results in external involvement (Heraclides, 1990). Another country, usually a neighboring one, gets into the conflict with the official declaration of aiming at protecting or supporting the rights and interests of the minority. Neighboring states often do so because the ethnic group that is subject to domination at the site of the conflict is the majority in the state that decides to involve. Such an involvement of a neighboring state or country strengthens an ethnic connection and emotional bond between the minority group and the neighboring state. In most cases, the objectives of the neighboring states, as Yagcioglu (1996) argues, are more fanatic than just protecting the rights and interests of the minority. Its objective is rather to redeem or to liberate that minority group and the territory in which it lives possibly to annex it into its own territory. Such a goal and the setting of

politics to achieve this invariably have an aggravating effect on minority-majority conflicts. By enhancing mutual suspicion and enmity, such an event often results in violence and sometimes even war (Yagcioglu, 1996). For example, in Ethiopia the wars between government of Somalia and the Imperial government of Ethiopia and, later on, with the *Derg* regime was triggered by Somalia's alleged intention to form Greater Somalia by annexing the Somali ethnic groups in neighboring Ogaden region of Ethiopia.

Historical factors also matter. It can be a source of conflict. In areas such as Africa, the Middle East and Asia, colonial influence by governments such as the British, Dutch, Belgian, French and Germans went a long way in inciting ethnic violence in areas where people of different groups live in peace. It was the colonial powers, and the independent states succeeding them, which declared that each and every person had an 'ethnic identity' that determined his or her place within the colony or the post colonial system (Bowen, 1996:3). Since colonists were a much smaller group than the natives were, and so were always at a disadvantage, they would often ally themselves with a strong local leader. They created class divisions and would give those in the allied group special privileges and influence that would not extend to other groups. This would cause resentment among native groups, particularly when the favored group was a minority group, such as the Tutsis in Rwanda. Bown portrays that this was not the case just in Africa: some historians of India attribute the birth of Hindu nationalism to the first British census, when people began to think of themselves as members of Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh populations. The colonial powers---British, Belgians, Germans, French and Dutch---also realize that, given their small numbers in their domains, they could effectively govern and exploit only by seeking out 'partners' from among local people, some times from minority or Christianized groups. But the state had to separate its partners from all others, thereby creating firmly bounded 'ethnic groups' (Bowen, *ibid*).

According to Befikadu and Diribssa (2005:90), in the analysis of a conflict, the history of a country needs to be looked into. As to them, a country that has recently experienced a civil war has a high risk of further war. In Ethiopia, for example, the history of ethnic conflicts during the 20thC is often presented frequently by the insurgent groups and even by the EPRDF government. The then dominant ethnic group (the Amhara) led by the then government (the imperial regimes of Menilek, and HaileSilassie) had been reacting so brutally against the indigenous peoples of the south, south west and eastern Ethiopia. The history of cruel punishments practiced by emperor Minelik's army (usually identified as Amharas) against the southern people are recently officially uttered to the community while the descendants of the then dominant groups (often termed as *neftegna*) are still living in the area. This has resulted in quite a lot of clashes between the historically indigenous communities and those of *neftegna* origin even though there is no more *neftegna* currently after such long time. The conflict between the group occurs either because of the rage of the dominated group against the dominators in history who are currently minorities and may be weaker, or the fact that the former dominant group owns the best of the communities' resources as compared to the majority because of their past political power and opportunity.

Conflicts can breed another conflict. Particularly if groups have history of conflict or that they have experienced conflict among each other, it has an impact upon the current relations. In this regard Megeera (2011:51-52) argues that conflicts can be instigated by the past history

of conflicts between particular groups. Such history of the past may make it difficult to integrate different ethnic and religious groups successfully because of their past experiences. History of conflict between different people can easily result in the continuation of the hostile relationship persistently unless some effective measures which can change the negative attitude towards one another are addressed at some point. Indeed if there is a history of conflict which had negative effect or which has left a big scar upon the other group, it would become very difficult, if not impossible, to change the type of relationship between such groups.

Professor Ali Mazrui (2004:6-8) in his key note speech in the Proceeding of the International Conference on African Conflict held in Addis Ababa from 29Nov–1Dec.,2004 stated on historical but decisive event as cause of ethnic conflict in Africa. As to him, while most African conflicts are partly caused by borders, those conflicts are not themselves about borders. Before the western colonial powers arrived, there were almost no boundaries in Africa. Most people lived in loose groupings. Their territories were unmarked. Empires came and went, absorbing new groups and being assimilated themselves, but possessing few, if any, rigid frontiers. But at the end of the last century the colonial west arrived. After the historical Berlin conference of 1884, they imposed the iron grid of divisions upon the continent. Professor Ali further states that the political boundaries created by colonial powers enclosed groups with no traditions of shared authority or shared systems of settling conflicts. These groups did not necessarily have the time to learn to become friendly. In West Africa, for example, the large territory which the British carved out and called Nigeria enclosed three major nations and several smaller ones. Among the largest groups, the Yoruba in the west were very different from the Muslim Hausa in the north, who in turn, were quite distinct from the Ibo in the east. This artificial mix up was to lead to one of Africa's great human tragedies, the Nigerian civil war of 1967-'70.

Repercussion of Ethnic Conflict

The bulk of existing literature tends to ignore any discussion of the effects of ethnic conflict, although this matter deserves special attention. The intensity of the effects of an ethnic clash is determined by the nature and scope of the conflict concerned. The adverse effects of violent ethnic conflict could be categorized into political, economic and socio-cultural factors.

As experience has shown, the political effects of an ethnic conflict can be seen at two levels. The first is the weakening and possible collapse of the central government. The deposing of the military regime in Ethiopia, in May 1991, by the ethno-nationalist groups of TPLF/EPRDF forces can be taken as a case in point. Another political effect of ethnic conflict could be the disintegration of the ex-Soviet Union and federation of Yugoslavia might be an illustration. As a result of intra ethnic conflict, the republic of Somalia remained the only state less country of the world since early 1990s. What is hinted here is that ethnic conflict can play a crucial role both in the collapse of the central government; and at the extreme cases, the disintegration of the country totally.

Seen from economic angle, ethnic conflict destroys the very bases of development: environmental resources, economic infrastructure, and the social and civic ties that permit and sustain development. The overall disintegration of the country's infrastructure and other economic resources in Somalia can be taken as good examples. When there is violent

conflict in a country resources that otherwise could have been invested for development endeavors, would be shifted to cover the expense of the war. The productive labor force will be drained to the war front and hence production and productivity decline in the countries engaged in the war. In a country where there is violent conflict no tourism and incomes associated with tourism. Trade and other social and civil institutions either completely or partially ceases there services as a result of which life become costly and terrible. Conflict also reported to be among the major factors of vulnerability that destroy people's social and private property and trigger unemployment in the area.

The final and perhaps the most severe outcome of violent ethnic conflict its social costs. The war in Darfur Sudan, other than its economic, social and environmental crises, claimed the lives of over 400,000, and displaced over 2,500,000 people. More than 100 people continue to die each day; 5000 die every month (<http://www.darfurscores.org/>). As of the obliteration of government in Somalia, the violent conflict among people in different clans claimed the life of over a million citizens of that country. 'The 1994 horrific war in the country of Rwanda in central Africa, among Hutu (the majority) and the Tutsi (the minority) ethnic groups, apart from crises in the priceless economic, social and environmental assets, claimed the life of over half a million Tutsi ethnic people within a few weeks' (Scupin and Decourse, 2004). Another upshot of inter ethnic conflict concerns displacement of a large number of people as refugees.

CONCLUSION

By and large, ethnic conflict is an outcome of a number of interrelated factors. It is thus imperative to cautiously and systematically study each of these factors and establish relationship among the attributes involved. An area based and contextual approach is useful in an endeavor to resolve ethnic conflicts by a peaceful means.

Ethnic conflict leads, among other things, to the breakdown of law and order, the disruption of economic activities, humanitarian crises and a state of uncertainty which deter long run investment and development efforts and stability. Violent ethnic conflict leads to unprecedented out migration of people including vulnerable groups---- Women, children, the old as well as the disabled who often seriously affected by unexpected violent conflict that leads to displacement. Therefore, it is worthwhile to give due concern to interethnic relations and manage it cautiously and systematically. Conflict is like contagious disease. Unwise handling of conflict gives it the opportunity to widespread all of a sudden. If once occurred, conflict must be handled at its early stages. If allowed to escalate, it would be changed to violence that cannot be easily remedied.

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