

Understanding Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict: In the Context of Ethiopia, Africa

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Abstract: *Ethnic conflict has gained much attention since the end of the Cold War and it has become a worldwide concern. It has now become a pervasive and salient dimension of political and social conflict in several countries of the world. Ethnic conflict is a phenomenon in international affairs that is sometimes difficult to understand as it is to define. In fact, over the past decades, ethno-nationalist conflict has become the dominant form of mass political violence. In ethnically divided societies like Africa, ethnic conflict is not the result of a single factor rather it is caused by variety of factors. The situation of ethnic conflict according to Easley (2000) has been considered to be the greatest contributor to the slow pace of development in Africa. With reference to Ethiopia, ethnic problem has been a long and pervasive problem in the country. It has gone through a long history of ethnic suppression, discrimination and ignorance. In this context, the present paper primarily attempts to conceptualize ethnicity and ethnic conflict in detail. Importantly, it brings out the major causes of ethnic conflict in different parts of the world and exclusively focuses on the causes of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. Further, the paper analyses the effects of Ethnic conflict on Socioeconomic Development. The paper argues that even depending on the context of each country or society, ethnic conflict can be caused by different factors such as economic, political, and socio-cultural and security factors. These factors are dealt in-detailed in the paper.*

Key Words: *Conflict, ethnicity, ethnic conflict, socio-economic development.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ethnic conflict is now a pervasive and salient dimension of political and social conflict in several countries of the world. In fact, over the past decades, ethno-nationalist conflict has become the dominant form of mass political violence. The overwhelming majority of civil wars in the post-Cold War era were fought in the name of ethno national autonomy or independence (Jinadu, 2007). Since the end of Cold War the majority of conflicts in Africa are internal conflicts; in other words, conflicts between groups (Bujera, 2002). The UN General Secretary Report on Africa (1999) highlights that the multi-ethnic character and politicization of ethnicity in Africa as a cause to conflict. Before going into detail on ethnic conflict, it is necessary to understand ethnicity. Fessha (2008:27) argues that ethnic consciousness is a frequent result of oppression by the state or the majority community, then ethnic identity is mobilized by political agents to demand greater concessions and share in power and authority. Thus, ethnicity, as a strategy has also often been associated with separatist movement and usually harnessed by minority groups who see autonomy and separation as a means to end oppression.

2. UNDERSTANDING ETHNICITY:

Ethnicity is an attribute of social construction, which is united by common economic and political objectives and serves as a tool for gaining resources (Sarna 1978:373). It is a sense of collective belonging, which could be based on common descent, language, history, culture, race or religion (Horowitz, 1985). It is the state of being ethnic or belonging to a certain ethnic group (Kellas, 1986). It is an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with they have a minimum of regular interaction. Therefore, ethnicity to come about, the group must have a minimum contact with each other and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves (Eriksen, 2002:12). Bujera (2002) opines that ethnicity is not primordial in the sense that the emotive power of ethnic distinctions inevitably leads to political conflicts and demands for rights. It is a kind of social formation on the basis of common descent, common history and having common homeland. This implies that ethnicity is a form of organization that is on the basis of former common descent, a common history and common home land. In other words, ethnicity is a social construction with a common economic as well as political objective that serves as a tool to have resources.

3. UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC CONFLICT:

Ethnic conflict has gained much attention since the end of the Cold War and it has become a worldwide matter. Since then, numerous theorists and scholars have attempted to explain the different causes of ethnic conflict based on their theoretical underpinnings. To begin with, Huntington (1993) in his book title *Clash of Civilizations* argues that ethnic conflict is a result of globalization bringing multiple cultures in contact with each other and ultimately causing clash of civilizations. Ethnic conflict is defined "as a protracted social and political confrontation between contenders who define themselves and each other in ethnic terms". That is, "when criteria such as national origin, religion, race, language and other markers of cultural identity are used to distinguish the opposing parties" (Stavenhagen, 1996:284). It is a dispute about important political, economic, cultural, or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities (groups). It is a continuous form of collective action between ethnic groups over ethnic issues, and involves a certain degree of organization (Brown, 2007:136). It can also be understood as a dispute about important political, economic, cultural or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities. Many ethnic conflicts result in a significant loss of life, a serious denial of basic human rights and considerable material destruction, some escalating into interethnic or internal war. Ethnic conflict is a disagreement with regard to political, economic, cultural issues between two or more communities (Michael, 1997). Ethnic conflict is one particular type of such conflict that the goals of at least one conflict party are defined in ethnic terms, and in which the primary fault line of confrontation is one of ethnic distinctions (Wolf, 2006; Cordell & Wolff, 2011).

4. UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA:

With reference to Ethiopia, ethnic problem has been a long and pervasive problem in the country. It has gone through a long history of ethnic suppression, discrimination and ignorance (Sara, 2003). The defining features of the imperial system were the exclusion of the mass of the population from the process of government, and the economic exploitation of the producers by an ethnically defined ruling class (Sara and Tronvoll, 2003). The successor of the regime, the military government had made an effort to build a unitary nation out of many with rhetoric (speechmaking) and military. Nevertheless, the military regime had failed due to massive resistance from Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) with the quest for ethno-cultural justice, equality and self-determination of ethnic groups. While EPRDF assumed power, the politicized ethnicity arguably was securitized and the FDRE (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) Constitution has chosen to concentrate on Federalism with the positive elements of ethnicity: its ability to provide a group of people that share language and cultural values with a sense of common identity, collective purpose, advantages which it believes can be usefully harnessed for social, economic and political development (Sara, 2003).

Since 1991, Ethiopia has gone further than any other country in using ethnicity as the central organizing principle of a federal structure of government (Bitwoded, 2014). Ethnic conflict is a phenomenon in international affairs that is almost equally difficult to understand as it is to define. The term loaded with often legitimate negative associations and entirely unnecessary confusions. The most important confusion is that ethnic conflicts are about ethnicity and ethnicity is not the ultimate, irreducible sources of violent conflict in such cases. Alternatively, ethnicity may provide the mobilization basis for collective action, with violence being used as a tactic (Cordell & Wolff, 2010). In Ethiopia, for example, several violent conflicts between neighboring ethnic groups erupted because of contested boundaries. Ethnic conflict is also a result of cultural incompatibility of groups, coupled with a sudden rise in awareness of one's identity vis-à-vis another ethnic group (Roessingh, 1996:17). In such a conflict, at least one of the groups will define its goals in ethnic terms, i.e. it will claim that its distinct ethnic identity and the lack of the opportunity to preserve, express and develop is the reason that its members do not have the same rights and cannot realize their interests.

The situation of ethnic conflict according to Easley (2000) has been considered to be the greatest contributor to the slow pace of development in Africa. Many decades after independence, ethnic conflicts are still in the news today from central Africa to Nigeria. The effects of these conflicts have been on income, growth and economic policies. It means that in the situation of warfare in countries of African, and even globally, there can never be any meaningful economic growth. The warring communities divert their resources and energies to fight with each other and hence lose out on developing their communities and nation in terms of engaging themselves in meaningful economic activities. Horn of Africa (HOA)¹ is one such part of the continent, which is highly susceptible to conflicts. It is the most conflict-prone area

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known in African politics of being an unstable, hostile and poor place due to protracted conflicts, wars and colonization (Muhabie, 2015). Ethiopia is not free from such ethnic conflicts.

5. WHAT CAUSES ETHNIC CONFLICTS:

Ethnic conflict occurs when a particular set of factors and conditions converge such as a major structural crisis; presence of historical memories of inter-ethnic grievances; institutional factors that promote ethnic intolerance; manipulation of historical memories by political entrepreneurs to evoke emotions such as fear, resentment and hate towards the “other”; and an inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights (Cordell & Wolff, 2010). Esman (2004) identifies the causes of ethnic conflict as political, economic and social factors. First, as far as the political factors are concerned, control of territory is the most fundamental of political issues that can cause ethnic conflict. The status of territory is at the heart of many instances of ethnic conflicts. In many instances a single ethnic community may have gained control of state institutions and used that control to channel the benefits available from government to members of its own ethnic group. Ethnic communities who believe that their members have been victims of unequal treatment are likely to demand equitable inclusion in the polity. Likewise, democratization is also considered as a political factor that can trigger ethnic conflict. Three aspects of democratization are central for the outbreak of ethnic conflict. First, the opening of political arena for formerly marginalized or suppressed groups to mobilize and organize their ethnic group members and trigger conflict. Political competition is producing “winners” and “losers” because of a direct consequence of opening of the political arena. The emerging plurality of actors generates competition over constituencies and resources and finally, the sequence of democratizing procedures (Vorrath et al., 2007).

Second, with reference to economic factors, it is argued that ethnic conflicts are at their roots, economic-clashes control over economic resources. In ethnically diverse societies, economic issues are almost at the same time ethnic issues. When a nation-state is dependent on primary commodities, it is much more prone to internal violence. In Africa, economic factors have been identified as one of the principal causes of ethnic conflict. Most ethnic groups have been in competition for scarce resources in different parts of Africa. The third factor is cultural factors. Other than political and economic factors, the principal cultural issues that generate ethnic conflicts are language and religion. Both are at the core of an individual’s sense of identity and the collective dignity and honor of ethnic communities (Kaufman, 2001).

6. CAUSES OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN ETHIOPIA IN PARTICULAR:

With regard to Ethiopia, the causes of ethnic conflict in this country are multiple. They include historical, political, economic, social and cultural causes. There are root causes and major causes of ethnic conflicts that are related with cultural/traditional and economic factors. Likewise, different scholars categorize the causes in different ways. Identifying these causes will help Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to design appropriate strategies to address violent conflicts.

6.1 Historical Factors

Markakis (1998) who has done research on Ethiopian history argue that the cause of ethnic conflicts were over centralization of power and economic resources by the dominant and elite groups, principally people from the central parts of the country. Besides, state-sponsored nationalism was advanced aggressively by the hegemonic elite to ensure the continuity of its dominance and the centrality of the monarchy who legitimated such dominance in the name of tradition (Merara, 1999). It is argued that the military regime neither solved the country’s chronic problem of underdevelopment nor the demands of various forces, especially those of the marginalized ethnic groups constituting Ethiopia. The face of serious challenges from various directions, the military, which contending forces for the control of the state, never hesitated to use its comparative advantage (Merara, citing Woldegiorgis, 1986). Hence, both the imperial state (1930-1974) and the military regime (1974-1991) have been criticized for monopolizing state power and economic resources in “ethnocratic form” by few or one ethnic group and for excluding other ethnic groups’ access to state power (Assefa, 2003, citing Markakis, 1998 and Clapham, 1994).

6.2 Ethno-Centric Federalism and Ethno-Centric Politics

When the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991, its main agenda was to empower the ethnic groups and ensure decentralization. These two strategies were considered to be the key solution for the above stated historical problem. According to EPRDF’s perspective, the crisis was primarily as a result of ethnic domination not only in political power but also in all other aspects of public life, and cultural hegemony is not an exception to it. The centralization of power and economic resources at the center were simply a consequence, not the

primary cause of this ethnocentric state. Based on this premise, the ruling party, EPRDF, defined its struggle not on the basis of class or national party but along ethnic lines Sara (2003). To this end, in order to build unity from diversity, EPRDF introduced federalism² as an ideology and federation as a political institution (Ibid.).

Federalism has also been resorted to as a conflict management device for inter-ethnic or inter-communal conflicts in deeply divided society. It can be used to diffuse ethnic conflicts arising from historical experiences (Hashim, 2003 citing Daniel J. 1979). Hence, in ethnocentric federalism, state was established by the Constitution, which affirms a commitment to the ultimate sovereignty of the nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia. The Constitution gives them the right to self-government through their elected representatives or through their direct democratic participation and unconditional (unrestricted) right to self-determination, including the right to secession. However, ethnic federalism did not bring solutions to ethnic conflicts; rather it became a cause for recent conflicts. According to Teshome (2003), one of the major causes for ethnic conflict between Oromia and Somali ethnic groups is the formation of ethnic based regional boundaries and non-clarity resulted in the separation of ethnic groups from their traditional resource bases.

6.3 Economic Causes: Competition for Economic Resources and Asset Building

Competition for economic resources is an important factor in ethnic conflict and it lies at the heart of such conflicts. Conflict among ethnic groups, particularly in the borders predominantly by pastoralists, is not a new phenomenon. It arises mainly due to competition over grazing land and/or water resources, especially in times of drought. However, conflict took new forms when the 'modern' states emerged and boundaries that led to the apportionment of the land between different states were delimited and impeded the freedom of movement of the pastoralists. Asset building is another major economic factor that causes ethnic conflict. When boys of an extended family member reached their manhood stage and leave their parents' home, they are required to build asset for their future home. Their family hardly shares their asset with their sons. Hence, to get the required resources, they have to go outside of their ethnic group to raid cattle. In retaliation, the other ethnic members unite themselves and raid cattle from this ethnic group. Such actions usually trigger ethnic conflict and this can be considered as another economic factor of conflict (Vorrath et al., 2007).

6.4 The Politicization of Tribal Identity (Ethnic federalism)

As stated above, ethnic conflict cannot be blamed on ethnicity, but rather on the politicization of ethnic identity by self-seeking politicians. In light of this, of all the modalities of federalism (territorial, multi-national, ethnic, quasi-federal), ethnic federalism, with its politicizing of ethnic identity, is obviously the one that can cause inter-ethnic problems. In ethnically polarised countries, ethnic group loyalty induces citizens to vote for their ethnic party, which increases ethnic grievance and the probability of civil war (Valfort 2007:5). There have been a number of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia since the introduction of ethnic federalism. For instance, due to government-spurred divisiveness, the two tribes (Guji and Borena Oromo) that have historically managed to peacefully alternate control of their own region have clashed. It is due to the fact that the 'EPRDF government' has allegedly been inciting leaders of the subgroups (Holder et al. 2006:23). These scholars further state that the current situation in Ethiopia presents dangers that could affect all ethnic groups in the future (Holder et al. 2006:10). In other words, the federal system of government with the politicization of tribal identity could cause deep ethnic division that brings multiple problems such as secessionist movements and a culture of mistrust.

6.5 Cultural and Traditional Causes

The tradition of payment of dowry (gift) for marriage, which is paid in kind (cattle or goats), also another factor for ethnic conflict. According to the tradition of most ethnic groups, a young man requires to pay high amount of dowry to the bride's parents. As young men hardly own resources that can be given as dowry, they have to own something from other places. Hence, they raid cattle from other ethnic groups. This is a common phenomenon in most parts of the country, especially in the south Ethiopia. This act is enforced by a youth developing system within the ethnic system. For instance, some ethnic groups decorate men as heroes when that person makes victorious cattle raid over another ethnic group. A study highlights that in Surma culture, for instance, a Surma man has to give more than 10 heads of cattle, two guns and other goods to the parents of his fiancé (boyfriend, future husband) as a dowry. It is because; a Surma man who wants to get married would go and raid cattle from the Dizzi and Menit villages. In the process, one or two people of the

²Federalism as Tekena Tamuno observed is a form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a co-operative manner though the combined forces of ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity, among others, tend to pull their people apart (Tamuno, 1998, pp. 13).

Dizzi or Menit tribes are usually killed. In retaliation, the families of the victims would kill any member of the Surma tribe. This has long been the situation between the tribes (Ethiopian Human Right Commission EHRCO, 2003).

6.6 Dominant-Party Governance

In a similar vein, dominant-party control along with an undemocratic nature of a given state could be another factor that could create conflict among ethnic groups. Both the EPRDF in Ethiopia and the ANC in South Africa have dominated elections since the advent of federalism in the 1990s, but South Africa is relatively democratic and Ethiopia is claimed an authoritarian state; South Africa has a relatively advanced economy, but Ethiopia does not (Dickovick 2014). When the less secure People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria is also taken into account, it may be said that dominant-party governance holds across the range of regime types from a relatively democratic South Africa through the flawed democracy in Nigeria to the exclusionary authoritarian system in Ethiopia (ibid).

Since the coming of the present Ethiopian Prime minister Doctor Abiy Ahmed many observable changes have seen in Ethiopia. Now the government calls all parties who are living in abroad to their country to participate and influence the role of government. The media stated to pass information freely to the people of the country. The Ethiopian federal structure appears to be that of one-party state governance, which is characterized by highly concentrated and centralized powers maintained by totalitarian institutions such as the military, other security organs and state-controlled mass media.

7. THE EFFECTS OF ETHNIC CONFLICT ON SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

7.1 Effects of Ethnic Conflict on Social Development

According to United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) (2006), armed conflicts have a propensity to bear a multiplicity of long and short-term impacts on social development, in addition to human and environmental well-being. The impacts of internal feuds are manifested at diverse spatial levels, in the immediate region of conflict and neighboring nations. In general, conflict destabilizes or devastates environmental, social, physical and human capital, in addition to diminishing accessible openings for sustainable development. It is evident that conflict continues to impact on human welfare, where it has manifestly destabilized people's quality of life and their accessible legitimate choices. Consequently, this has resulted in the loss of livelihoods, lives, opportunities and human dignity, as well as basic human rights.

According to UNESCO (2010), in a study conducted by its statistics institutes in 25 countries, it is an undeniable fact that conflicts of all nature affect greatly the educational system of the conflict area. The study demonstrated the multifaceted effect of conflict on education, from access to school, progress through the educational system, destruction of facilities, teacher's absenteeism, and children insecurity while commuting to school or attending class, among others. This is anchored by Sany (2010), who asserts that in such conflict areas, education is relegated to the bottom in terms of national priorities to the extent that stakeholders are more concerned with finding a lasting solution to the conflicts. In such situations, education, which is seen as the bedrock of every country's development is affected significantly, which, in turn, impacts on the social development within the area of conflict.

The effects of conflicts on social development can also be seen in the area of intermarriages. Sociologists place a premium on the link between intermarriage and ethnic identity. Therefore, in an area of ethnic conflict where clashing parties are seen as enemies, intermarriages are prohibited. Cultural identity and chauvinism (prejudice, narrow-mindedness) play a critical role in inter-ethnic conflicts; therefore, one group does not want to identify with other groups, which negatively affect social life. Furtado & Trejo (2012) assert that since much importance is attached to ethnicity and identity, intermarriages become a social boundary which can completely erase their true identity. Therefore, in an ethnically-conflicted area, intermarriages are strongly prohibited because they weaken the entrenched (rooted) positions of conflicting parties; thereby, lessening their true identity.

According to Onoma (2009), ethnic conflicts lead to the collapse of social cohesion, as well as the impediment of local governance structures. Subsequently, this might also lead to the inaccessibility of the standard safety nets. In this regard, the escalating economic and social vulnerability, land and environmental degradation, generate new tensions as well as conflict over vital resources; for example, water or food. Poverty incidence is also likely to increase in the course of the loss of livelihoods, in addition to an escalating inability of populace to cope with changes.

Agbewode (2013) asserts that the dislodgment (displacement) of persons is a key social and economic cost of ethnic conflict, both in the short-term and the post-conflict phases. Normally, the casualties of contemporary armed ethnic conflicts are civilians. Since ethnic conflict usually engages ethnic overtones and contemporary conflicts in the African continent typically involve guerrillas and militias instead of regular troops, it is easy to target the civilian populace. This is because they share similar cultural or ethnic identity to the enemy group. According to UNEP (2006), a study executed by

Department for International Development (DFID) in 2001 reports that since 1960 more than eight million people have perished as a direct or indirect consequence of war and ethnic conflicts across Africa. In this context, projections show that by 2020, war injuries in the African continent may be considered the eighth leading factor in placing a sickness burden on the society. As a result, violence continues to assume new forms with the purposeful targeting of the civilian population, in addition to an escalating incidence of rape, mutilations and violent rituals.

7.2 Effects of Ethnic Conflict on Economic Development

Conflicts impact on local, regional and national economic development. From this perspective, the following discussion treats this emergent regionalism and budding localism as interconnected characteristics of emerging territorial politics. According to Boone (2012), the emerging territorial politics revolve around restructuring core-periphery relationships, reorganizing political hierarchies, control of market access as well as resources. The author also asserts that these impacts entail a reduced state capacity that is linked to a lessening revenue base, in addition to significant economic stagnation. Moreover, they entail decreased public spending that is attributable to disinvestment, plummeting exports, depreciating exchange rates, hyper-inflation as well as capital flight. In this context, the economic impacts are seldom limited to the nation of conflict. Therefore, it follows that nations bordering conflict zones might require enhanced security spending in military as well as non-military segments. In addition, such nations might incur new expenditure with regard to refugees as well as losses emanating from weakening regional trade. An additional aspect of ethnic conflict is the disintegration of public institutions or the failure of such institutions to survive.

According to UNEP (2006), a study conducted by the Department for International Development (DFID) in 2001 reveals that for the period between 1980 and 2000, the African continent lost more than 50 percent of its core infrastructure due to conflicts. According to Bah (2004), local, national and global issues are increasingly important in creating and perpetuating ethnic conflicts. Moreover, these issues interact in diverse and shifting ways. According to John (2010), conflicts are typically expected to lead to production losses of up to 12 percent in addition to undercutting development in the agricultural segment by approximately 3 percent per annum. Therefore, by widening the divide between food production and need, conflicts exacerbate poverty as well as hunger and continued reliance on food aid. The devastation and collapse of infrastructure impact significantly on the provision of necessary services thereby resulting in the disintegration of communication, in the course of the loss of roads and telecommunication networks. Ballard and Banks (2003) argue that ethnic identity that is encouraged within-group collaboration may encourage inter-group antagonism over land and other resources. Subsequently, this may impact negatively on a region's economic development.

8. CONCLUSION:

From the above arguments, it is understood that ethnic conflicts have a myriad of impacts to the communities in warfare. Especially, it has a severe impact on the socio-economic development of the communities of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. It is also understood that there is a direct linkage between ethnic conflicts and its impact on the economic growth and development of a country. Any economic, social or political development requires an environment of stability, peace and smooth governance. It also requires government's active intervention in shaping pro poor policies with the overall development of the communities. More specifically, activities of economic growth and development require the state and non-state players to be in a non-conflict situation. It is true that ethnic conflict affects the economy as the economic interests of a country or community may play a key role in ethnic conflict, which leads to even more destruction into the economy. It ends up being a never ending vicious cycle. Ethnic conflict affects people's economic incentives. It is worth mentioning that the socioeconomic development of the people is in most cases are hindered the by ethnic conflict specifically in Southern part of Ethiopia that consists of diversified ethnic groups living together especially after the adoption of ethnic federalism. Thus, it is understood that the ethnic conflict is still remained a critical challenge in relation to the socio-economic development, particularly in multi-ethnic regions of Ethiopia. Thus, there is an immediate need to take necessary measures to resolve the long lasting problem of ethnic conflict in Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. There is a need for concerted efforts by the government and other societal actors to address the key issues that are directly or indirectly linked to ethnic conflict.

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