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Original Research

Dynamics of the Oromo-Gumuz Relations and its Implications in Western Ethiopia (1880-2008)

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Abstract

This study attempted to examine how the Oromo and the Gumuz peoples used to maintain ethnic solidarity and coexistence through their local institutions and the roles of actors in changing the modes of interactions in western Ethiopia. Data for the study were obtained from informants, archives, and secondary sources. The study argues that inter-ethnic relations in western Ethiopia cannot be understood separately from the political context at the centre and local actors. It explains that although the peoples' used to cooperate even under rising ethnic politics, actors' interventions and the subsequent reconfigurations of economic, social, and political relations deteriorated the existing harmonious relations. Beginning in the late 20th century, the shift of the region into a centre for large-scale agriculture and settlement, as well as population increases, brought changes in friendship. Finally, ethnically framed conflicts of the last two decades and the breakup of long-existing social relations and economic interdependence in favour of actors' interests have created wider insecurity in people's elationships. Thus, there is an urgent need to limit actors' intervention, revitalise local institutions, and strengthen resource governance to rebuild trust and harmony among the people in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

Western Ethiopia constitutes the Oromia National Regional State and the Beni-Shangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS). Ecologically, the region exhibits lowland below 1500 masl and middle altitude between 1,500 and 2,500 masl. It comprises extensive river valleys, including the Abbay, the Angar, the Didessa, and the Dabus (Tesfaye M. and Wondimu M., 2013). It is estimated that there are about 1 million hectares of potentially irrigable land in the region. The agro-ecology of the region is conducive to growing different subsistence and cash crops. Among others, sorghum, millet, and maize (covering over 70% of the cultivated land) are the most dominant food crops grown. Oilseed crops like sesame, *nugget*, sunflower, pulses, vegetables, fruits, cotton, ginger, and fibre

crops are also widely grown. In addition, the region is rich in various types of minerals, including gold, marble, limestone, cobalt, copper, zinc, lead, tantalum, sulfite, and neodymium (BGR, 2004).

Before the mid-twentieth century, the study area represented a very low population density. The prevalence of diseases and dangerous animals were ominous factors for large-scale habitation. The habitation of the area that lies in the Abay-Didessa-Dabus Triangle, which came to be the Kamashi Zone, has been subject to historical relations between the Oromo and the Nilotes (Tesema, 2006) and resettlement programmes since the 1980s. The Oromo of the study area are categorised as the Macha group, which constitutes three clans, namely the Jawi, Sibu, and Leqa clans. Until the late 19th century, they were governed by an egalitarian socio-economic and political institution known as the *Gada* system that enabled them to maintain quite harmonious relations with their neighbours through social integration and coexistence. During this period, these Oromo clans underwent socio-political transformation, because of which monarchical administrations evolved at the expense of the egalitarian *Gada* system. These monarchical states fell under the imperial Ethiopian state in the late 19th century (Tesema, 1984).

The Gumuz are an ethnic group speaking a Nilo-Saharan language and inhabiting the present-day Ethio-Sudanese border, the Blue Nile basin, and the Fazogli region in Sudan (Pankhurst, 1977). Their tradition explains that in earlier times they inhabited the western parts of the province of Gojjam but were gradually banished to the inhospitable area of the Blue Nile and its tributaries by their more powerful neighbours, the Amhara and the Agaw in the north, who also enslaved them (Wolde-Selassie, 2004). The Gumuz practised shifting cultivation, and their staple food was sorghum and millet (Wallmark, 1981). The Gumuz also hunted wild animals and collected honey, wild fruits, roots, and seeds. While most of the Gumuz maintain traditional religious practises, some are being converted to protestant and Islamic religions. The Gumuz were organised into clans, and feuds between clans and neighbouring peoples were solved using an institution of conflict resolution called *mangema* or *michu* (friendship). Besides, since the mid-1980s, significant numbers of people have come to the region because of the national resettlement programme and in search of living in the past (BGRS, 2004). In terms of demographic composition, the study area comprises the Gumuz (60%), the Oromo (24.61%), the Amhara (11.11%), the Berta (2.83%), and others (CSA, 2011).

The objective of this piece is to tell the story of their relationship to one another, beginning in the early 1880s. Some studies acknowledge that the socio-economic and political history since then has contributed much to the shape of the human landscape and interactions in the region. It is vital to note that people's movement, state formation, and trade were the major factors in people's interaction beginning in the late 19th century.

The region south of the Abbay River became a'reception area' for the Gumuz escaping for security (James, 1996). In the

years between 1880 and 1920, the wars, raids, and disturbances in southern Gojjam forced the Gumuz to settle in the Didessa Valley. 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 the movement of the people. The Gumuz dispersion was exacerbated by the military conquest of King Tekle-Haymanot of Gojjam in 1898 and the protracted expedition of the Agaw chief Qennazmach Zalaqa Liqu. The latter established an Agaw camp at the foothills of the Balaya Mountain to enslave the Gumuz and used modern weapons for the campaign (Abdussamad, 1995). The Gumuz considered the Yaringhe and Beri hills the homes of their ancestors, from which they further disseminated to the Didessa Valley. The process is said to have been accelerated by the Oromo chiefs in Wallagga, who attracted the Gumuz from the northern parts of the Abbay River. They resettled the Gumuz in their respective territories for protection and gave them their clan names. Tsega Endale argued that the Gumuz of the lower Didessa Valley are the descendants of those who were dispersed from Gojjam and Agaw-Midir (Tsega, 2006).

Materials and Methods

This study has culled data from various types of sources of information. Information for the late 19th and early 20th centuries came from travellers' reports, which in one way or another described the people, environment, and economy of the region south of the Blue Nile. Likewise, archives of various periods on politics, livelihoods, people's interactions, and agriculture since the 1880s, available in archives in Asosa and Nekemte as well as Addis Ababa, are significant sources of insights on the topic. These include correspondence, reports, and personal files that could yield useful information about different aspects of local history as well as centre-periphery, land tenure, taxation, and agriculture.

Moreover, oral tradition offers a broad picture of the Macca Oromo's history, including their livelihoods and highland-lowland socio-economic interactions. Oral traditions are helpful in narrating the land tenure system and mechanisms of resource utilization. Other significant sources important to the study are empirical studies in the region since the 1960s. Therefore, data for this study were collected from travellers' records, oral evidence, archives, and empirical research regarding the topic. Putting these sources together gives a comprehensive picture of multidimensional people's relations in western Ethiopia.

According to Ho-Won Jeong (2008), it is impossible to fully comprehend any dispute without first grasping its background. Different literature defines conflict in diverse ways. For instance, Bernard Mayer (2012) explains conflict in three dimensions, including perception, feeling, and action. In particular, Mayer indicates that conflict as action entails ‘violent or destructive. To the ECOWAS, conflict is ‘contradictions inherent in power relations that manifest themselves in individual and group interactions with one another and with nature in the pursuit of limited resources or opportunities’ (ECPF,

2008). For this study, conflict could be understood as a violent expression of disagreements and frustration frequently arising from unsatisfied needs and aspirations.

Inter-ethnic relations in Ethiopia from the late 19th century, when the region was incorporated into the Ethiopian state, to 2008 should be understood in the domestic and international political, social, and economic contexts of the period. The domestic ones relate to pertinent identity, political, economic, and social issues that are in one way or another linked to international situations. Since the late 19th century, the imperial system has installed a repressive and exploitative system that disturbed earlier inter-ethnic relations. In the pre-1974 Ethiopian Revolution, the people struggled against social repression and economic exploitation for meaningful changes. The revolution's leaders unleashed several promising changes in the state and society, as well as inter-ethnic relations. Nevertheless, the roads and processes to realising the changes have never been smooth because of two opposing categories. The first was an expressed interest in maintaining the old imperial system in place. This entails the desire to maintain the social and economic dominance of ruling social groups. The second is interest, which works for changes in the old system along with the revolution. Socio-economic injustices became highly attractive to serve civil conflicts. Among others, deep-rooted disputes and contestations among the peoples on resources, identity, territorial claims, and power served as fertile ground for inter-ethnic political allegiances as well as conflict. The post-1991 ethnic and language-based federal administrative arrangement in particular promised to solve the long-lasting inter-ethnic conflict. Yet, ethnic politics and resource ownership claims, including agricultural fields, mining areas, and the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), have shaped recent inter-ethnic relations at local levels. On the other hand, we cannot understand inter-ethnic relations in Ethiopia without understanding the international political context and the roles of international as well as regional actors. While Ethiopian leaders borrowed ideologies of nation-building and development from abroad, the persistent intervention of international actors in the affairs of the country to satisfy their national interests inevitably aggravated civil conflicts.

This study is based on data culled from various types of sources of information. Evidence for the late 19th and early 20th centuries comes from travellers' reports that describe the people, environment, and economy of the region south of the Abbay River. Likewise, archives of various periods on livelihoods, people's interactions, politics, and economy since the 1880s are significant sources of insights on the topic. Moreover, oral tradition and empirical studies also offer a broad picture of inter-ethnic interactions. Putting these sources together gives a full picture of the Oromo-Gumuz relations of the last century and helps to imply their effects on peace and development in the region at large.

Results and Discussion

Since the mid-20th century, ethnicity has been the most potent force for political mobilisation

throughout Africa. It also occupied a central position in ideologies of development, democracy, and nation-building (Mohammed and Markakis, 1998). Despite differing interpretations of the continent's inter-ethnic conflict, it has become one of the instruments of political mobilisation for self-identification and ascription of others, criteria for recruitment to office or employment, a source of conflict, and a source of division (Abbink, 1997).

In Ethiopia, the causes of ethnic conflict include historical, political, economic, social, and cultural factors. While resources such as land, water, and other resources cause conflict among different groups, power issues have become the major cause of severe conflict in Ethiopia (Merera, 2003). In connection with this, Asebe argued that the national question and the political struggles against ethnic domination and suppression were the major causes of conflict in Ethiopia since the mid-20th century (Asebe, 2010). Following the ethnic federal arrangement in the 1990s, the constitutional grant of ethnic rights and the political limits to their implementation are important conflict-generating factors (Habtamu, 2013). In the last three decades, there have been conflicts along the borders of Oromia and Somalia, SNNPR and Oromia, Afar and Isaa, Garre and Borana, Oromia and Gumuz, Guji and Gedeo, Agnwa and Nuer, Sidama and Guji, and Kereyu and Afar. Particularly inter-ethnic disputes in western Ethiopia have been the most complex and protracted conflict in the country.

As a region of diverse ethnic groups with differing livelihood strategies and diverging social institutions, western Ethiopia witnessed dynamic inter-ethnic relations and changing allegiances, including building and breaking alliances. The state played a decisive role in inter-ethnic relations at all levels. To depict the dynamics in the interactions with the changing factors, I have divided the discussion into the pre- and post-1991 periods.

Several factors contributed to Gumuz-Oromo cooperation and conflict during the study period. While trade and social relations such as adoption, friendship, patron-client relations, and religion interconnected the peoples, disparity in accessing resources and power caused conflict between the peoples.

Trade: Trade played an integrative role between the Gumuz and the Oromo. As early as the 18th century, the Gumuz were the sources of cotton for the highland Oromo (Bruce, 1804), while the Oromo were the sources of agricultural products (varieties of crops and livestock) for the major markets in the frontiers, including the Ethio-Sudanese borders (Kurimoto, 1995). The Oromo supplied lowland markets such as the Fadasi market with cattle (James, 1986). Likewise, in the late 19th century, coffee emerged as a crucial commercial item linking the highland and lowland peoples (Simons, 1960). The role of trade in connecting peoples continued with the varied scope and involvement of merchants and items until recently.

***Moggasa* (adoption)**: it was the most effective social institution by which the Oromo integrated the non-Oromo into their society. Through *moggaasa,* individuals such as war captives and refugees (people who sought shelter, harbour, access to resources,

etc.) were entertained (Mohamed, 1990; Tsega, 2006). Such willingness to offer essential needs to new members through peaceful means is determined mainly by the cultural value system, the social mechanisms of society, and the availability of resources to accommodate the newcomers. *Abba Gada,* on behalf of his *gosa* (clan), undertook the adoption. In this system, strangers were adopted into a family or clan to secure bonds, material resources, etc. The adoptees were known as *ilmaan meedhachaa, luba-basa,* or *galaa* (meaning the one who is admitted or accepted into the family or society). Through solemnly celebrated adoption, several Gumuz were integrated into the Oromo clans and were given land known as *dhaba* (literally meaning to establish). The system helped the Macha Oromo successfully integrate and establish socio-economic ties and, above all, peaceful coexistence in western Ethiopia (Mohamed, 1990).

Patron-client relationship: since the late 19th century, the evolution of monarchies and the demise of the *Gada* system have contributed to the withering of the *moggasa* system and the creation of a differing system of relationships. Several monarchies of the Leqa, Sibu, and Jawi Oromo established social bonds and gave protection to different Nilotes escaping slavery and imperial pressure from north of the Abay River and Beni-Shangul. The case in point is Leqa states, including Moroda Bakare (r. 1868–1888) and his son and successor, *dej*. Kumsa Moroda (r. 1888–1924). The former is said to have offered protection to the early arrivals and those who fled to the territory of Leqa-Naqamte in search of peace and good treatment. Moroda's successor, *Dejazmach* Kumsa, also granted land to the Gumuz in the Didessa Valley. According to tradition, *dej*. Kumsa resettled two clans of 'Gebeto', two clans of 'Sa'i' (Gumuz), and two clans of Ma'o in lower Didessa in what came to be Balo-Jegonfoy and assigned six Oromo *abba-qoros* to them (Tesema, 1980). For that reason, the lower Didessa Valley was referred to as the reception region for the "Gumuz Diaspora" (James, 1986).

Similarly, several Oromo chiefs of the region not only established a bond with the Gumuz and other Nilotes through oath but also resettled them in their administrative territory for mutual benefits (Ibid.). The Oromo chiefs attracted the Gumuz from areas north of the Abay, resettled them in their respective territories, and gave them their clan names. The Gumuz were renamed under Oromo clans such as Amuma, Yambal, Dende, Guto, Bariso, and others (Gemeda, 2010). Through time, the increased contact for agricultural purposes and, of course, taxation led to the establishment of a patron-client relationship between Oromo chiefs and the Gumuz (Ibid.). The relationship more or less continued with varying social, economic, and political allegiances until the end of the early 1970s.

***Michu/Mangema* (Friendship)**:
Beginning in the late 19th century, the imperial pressure for resource appropriation and slave raids from Sudan and the Ethiopian state focusing on the Gumuz and the Oromo caused population movement and new contacts, which forced the two people to devise

strategies of coexistence. The strategies allowed them to accept new members as their own and cooperate to establish a life. Among others, the Oromo widely employed *michu* in establishing relations with the Gumuz. In Gumuz, the equivalent term for *Michu* is *Mangema*, meaning friendly tie, where both communities used it as a peace-seeking strategy and to establish harmonious relations with the highlanders such as Oromo, Shinasha, Agaw, and Amhara (Tsega, 2006).

During the *Michu* ceremony, the groups performing social bonds slaughtered an animal, and both groups were ordered to mix their hands with blood to show absolute friendship. When the groups involved in the system were the contending groups, they were expected to break a bone to indicate that they had broken up their old quarrels. At last, they took an oath not to deny one another. The process led to the establishment of a historical bond in which the Gumuz were called *abba-michu* and their highland colleagues were known as *dhibanta*. In the relationship, the *dhibanta* freely enjoyed the right to get a plot of land to plough with a sharecropping agreement with the Gumuz client (*abba michu*). This resulted in the establishment of longstanding socio-economic bonds, including mutual coexistence and integration. (Informants: Aga Lami and Banti Hunde).

***Abaliji* (God Father/Mother)**: The expansion of Christianity in the region mainly during the 20th century contributed to the development of social institutions for socio-economic bonds between the two peoples. The Christian Amhara and the Oromo primarily utilised the system to establish friendship and cooperation with their neighbors. As a result, the first converters among the Leqa, Jawi, and Sibu Oromo employed *Abaliji* and *harma-hodhaa* as tools of social bonds and cooperation between their Gumuz counterparts. This is a type of relationship where the Oromo becomes a godfather or mother for the newly emerged baby from the Gumuz community involved in the Orthodox faith and establishes friendship relations. The system was functional until the early 1970s, when the *Darg* introduced differing strategies of social transformation and development (Informants: Mangistu Hirpa and Hailu Debela).

During the 20th century, the two peoples strengthened their social institutions owing to several socio-economic and political factors. These changes expanded the horizon of existing social and economic ties to wider inter-ethnic relations in the fields of labour, sharecropping trade, labour 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, interdependence increased owing to crop failure and 'bad famine' (Wallmark, 1981). Many Gumuz people migrated to the highlands to work and survive. By the early 1950s, the Gumuz were unable to pay tax, and because of this, they rebelled against the state under the leadership of Abba Tone. The war against Abba Tone (1952–3), commanded by *dej*.Yemane Gebregzabiher (the then governor of Gimbi province), disturbed Gumuz-Oromo relations as

dej.Yamane and several warriors were Oromo in origin (Tesema, 2006).

Despite this troubling factor, a series of development projects and evangelization campaigns among the Gumuz by the ECMY of the Western Wallagga Synod further strengthened the bond and interdependence between the Sibu Oromo and the Gumuz. Guided by the principle of holistic missionary services' (for the soul and the flesh) that hold the unity of spiritual and social development, ECMY supported the Nilotes with health, education, and agricultural implementation (interview). ECMY built health centres and schools at Gombo and Sirba in 1963 and Qorka and Agalo-Mexi in the late 1960s. It also established the Dimtu Resettlement Centre, which focused on the promotion of settlement farms by the Nilotes and landless volunteers from the surrounding highlands (Addis Zemen, 1968). Emmanuel Abraham, who was a key figure in the project, wrote that Dimtu was established "in the belief that several... Nilotic clans who led nomadic lives in the Didessa Valley of Naqamte District could be given a better chance in life if they were assembled in villages and given instruction by experts in farming and other skills (Emmanuel, 1995). To that end, the project resettled volunteers from the Gumuz, Sa'i, Ma'o, Gabato, and Oromo, which also strengthened the integration between the Oromo and the Nilotes in the Didessa lowland.

Since the early 1980s, long-established relations and interdependence have deteriorated because of the involvement of different actors. On the one hand, the Ethiopian state was 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. However, firearms were distributed to them to defend the military activities of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) on the frontiers. The system at least created tensions between the Oromo people and the Nilotes of the frontiers, affecting the earlier 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 a new and complex socio-economic setting. The settlement of peoples of diverse origins in the region through the resettlement programmes in the 1980s and the establishment of state farms were factors that contributed to the reconfiguration of the social system (Dereje, 2018). As a result, the old social fabric deteriorated, giving way to differing inter-ethnic relations.

Shifting Relations: Conflicts and Their Effects on Peace and Development (1991–2008)

Since 1991, the change in the political landscape of the country has radically changed the social and economic aspects of western Ethiopia. Among other things, the political map of the country was redrawn along ethno-linguistic lines. These changes exerted far-reaching effects on earlier inter-ethnic relations and access to resources in the study area.

The political context implies the ways in which federalism was perceived and implemented and the role of the central government (Vaughan, 2003; Merera, 2003). Following the reorganisation of territories during the adoption of ethnic-federalism in 1994, BGRS was created from the Asosa region, the westernmost portion of the Gojjam Province (Metekel), and the northwestern portion of the Wallagga Province (Kamashi). It adopted its name from two local ethnic groups: the Berta (Benishangul) and the Gumuz. Federalism in western Ethiopia has become an issue because of the social complex of the region and the central government's active role in empowering the minority. On the one hand, in the federal boundary redrawing, the separation of the Asosa and Kamashi regions from the historical Wallagga Province created disputes over the Oromo domain territories, particularly the Dabus, western Abbay, and lower Didessa Valleys. These changes and the misconception of federalism exerted far-reaching effects on the patterns of population settlement and modes of resource utilisation in the study area. The process also involved local elites and authorities, who came to be the major actors in instigating conflicts between the two peoples.

The economic context that shaped these relations was the increasing significance of land in the lowlands for large-scale agriculture, which invited more powerful actors. The arrival of many farmer-investors and smallholder farmers from far and near since 1998, resulting in competition and negotiations to obtain crop land, disrupted the previous mutual ways of using 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 on the other. This came to determine the whole setting of inter-ethnic relations in the post-1991 period. In this regard, authority, access to land, and indignity (seniority) were causes of ethnically framed conflicts (Dereje, 2018).

The misperception of federalism is clear in the story of land deals and access to resources. The situation significantly reinforced the conflict between the Gumuz and the Oromo regarding the historical and customary legitimacy of land. 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's demand to control the entire lowland territory. The wave of large-scale land acquisitions began during the federal boundary arrangement. The regional states were delimited based on "the settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent of the peoples concerned" (FDRE, 1995). However, it is clear that under the system, many Oromo-inhabited areas of the frontier were placed in BGRS, and some Berta and Gumuz people were included in either the East or West Wallagga Zones. 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 elites did not acknowledge this Gumuz idea of boundary definition; instead, they sought that many areas of Balo-Jegonfoy, Metekel, Yaso, Agalo-Mexi, and Kamashi districts used to be Oromo land in which the powerful Oromo chiefs had historically resettled the Nilo-Saharans for mutual benefits, and as a result, these areas were 'wrongly' included in the BGRS. Oromo elders claimed that the entire valley land east of the Dabus River was part of the Macha land that the Leqa-Monarchy governed in 1840 (Informants: Banti Hunde and Dorsis Duguma). As explained above, the region has increasingly become economically important in terms of agriculture, mineral extraction, and the economic potential related to the construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The presence of vast cultivable land and a suitable climate enabled farmers to produce surplus crops. As a result, the state leased out a large acre of land to more than 250 investors who were engaged in large-scale farming and the extraction of gold, marble, charcoal, and others. Hence, the arrival of farmer-investors and smallholder farmers disrupted the previous land use system, processes, and terms of land acquisition. The land question was often politicised, leading to conflict. The need to get land and secure big benefits from the land led to the Gumuz-Oromo ethnic-framed bloody conflicts of 2004, 2007, and 2008 (Informants: Dorsis Duguma and Mangistu Hirpa). Among others, the Gumuz-Oromo conflict of 2004 is said to have been instigated by the motive of the Gumuz to control territories including Badessa-Gamada, Fix-baqo, and Baredu north of the Angar River, and Balo-Central, Balo-Bareda, and Tole that have already been parts of Oromia National Regional State (EWARO, 1995EC).

In April 2004, an organised Gumuz militia attacked Oromo villages in the areas presumed to be contested, including churches and resettlement centers. The Gumuz youth emerged as a group in the conflicts of 2004 and 2007–2008 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 dispute over land remained unresolved and became the major factor in the more pervasive 2007–2008 conflict (EWARO, 1998EC).

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 Diga and at Hora Wata, *menders* 4, 5, and 8 in Sassiga district (Gemeda, 2010). 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 that had previously belonged to the Oromo, including Angar-Shankora, Dimtu, Rufo, Sekele, Sholo, Gome, Hora-Meti, Kuta Muri, Tullu-Dhangego, Chorgogo, and others. This not only denied the fact that many ethnic Oromo had lived on these territories for a long time but also stimulated the Gumuz militia to attack Oromo civilians in these areas (Informants: Ejeta Tolesa and Hailu Debela). The conflict killed and displaced several civilians, breaking the long-established bonds between the two peoples (East Wallagga Zone, 2001).

The ethnically framed hostilities adversely affected the old peaceful socio-economic relations and efforts for development in the region. Among others, conflicts disturbed harmonious people-to-people, highland-lowland, and intergovernmental relations and development activities in the region. Disputes over the ownership of land hindered crop production. Conflict also occurred over access to resources, including minerals and forests. Disagreements between individuals over a resource developed into a conflict that was easily politicised and spread across the region. For instance, conflicts broke out between landholders and contract farmers when the former wanted to monopolise produce during harvest seasons. Categorizations of farmers' social status as pioneer vs. newcomer, native vs. alien, and host vs. guest aggravated such conflicts, leading to killings, resource damage, and displacement. Enmity replaced a culture of cooperation and interdependence between the two peoples (Dereje, 2018).

The conflict became a threat as mass violence was inflicted without any discrimination based on age, sex, occupation, religion, or political outlook. Still important to note about the conflict are its implications for mutual trust in the area. Failure to control the conflict distorted trust among the population and between the community and the regional governments. Above all, conflicts easily broke socio-economic interactions and inter-regional relations. Conflicts blocked movements and the implementation of development projects. To make matters worse, conflicts blocked humanitarian support, creating frustration.

Moreover, there is already a sign that the conflict has become a source of regional and state security threats, with the possibility of destabilising the region. Tensions on the issues of territory, governance, and resources have implications for regional security and development in that they discourage nation-building and the realisation of large-scale projects, including the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and the opportunities that would follow.

CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to show the changing relations between the Oromo and the Gumuz peoples and their implications for western Ethiopia. The dynamics of their relationship could only be understood in the context of actors' interventions in local interactions. As neighbouring peoples, through diverse social institutions, they established longstanding socio-economic relations for mutual coexistence and interdependence. In the post-1991 period, the national discourse on ethnicity and ethnically framed resource and territorial claims resulted in conflict in the

region. The fundamental causes of conflicts were centred on the gap between implementing ethnic federalism and weak land governance. The continued territorial claims from both the Oromia Region and the BGRS were the source of tension. The fracture of age-old social bonds and the need to capitalise on surplus production from the control of the lowlands have created opportunities for intermittent conflicts. The causes of the conflicts were neither resolved nor relinquished but were rather postponed to erupt whenever the political environment would be ripe. The intermittent conflicts became a threat to harmonious people's lives, nation-building, agricultural investment, and the realisation of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Thus, re-establishing old social fabrics to redevelop trust, friendship, harmony, and the common good, as well as investing in youth to create a harmonious society, would help to realise peace and development in the region.

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