
Introduction to Part 2

Part 2 focuses on the territorial crisis faced by the Borana Oromo since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. The context is relatively simple. Before the collapse of the socialist Derg regime in 1991, the Borana had customary rights to a large area adjacent to the Kenyan border. According to these customary practices, large parts of these pastoral areas were used seasonally in conjunction with other pastoral groups speaking Somali, Oromo or both languages (Oba 2013).¹ This also included access to some important traditional Borana wells (*tulaa*), which allowed permanent grazing for cattle that could be traded internationally. The collapse of the Somali state triggered a massive displacement of refugees from Somalia, assisted by Ethiopian and international governmental organisations. This phase coincided with important political changes within Ethiopia. During the brief period when the OLF was part of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, the OLF managed to establish a strong presence among the Borana in both Ethiopia and Kenya, a region where it had previously had little influence. From 1993, as the TPLF consolidated

1 Since the publication of the essays reprinted here, Gufu Oba's historical book (2013) has provided new insights into the impact of Abyssinian, Italian and British colonialism and the establishment of the border between Ethiopia and Kenya on the Oromo and Somali-speaking pastoralist groups in southern Ethiopia, northern Kenya and southwest-ern Somalia, and their interrelationships.

power in Ethiopia, government officials and the Ethiopian military worked to reduce the regional influence of the OLF, which had by then returned to clandestine operations. It was particularly important for the government to disrupt the OLF's ability to operate transnationally, both commercially and militarily. In retrospect, it is clear that the strategy was to create a buffer zone along the border between the Borana of Kenya and those of Ethiopia. The government used the policy of administrative restructuring along national and ethnic lines to give administrative control, where possible, to groups associated with Somali national identity rather than the Oromo.

I have been able to follow these events through three research projects. The first opportunity was provided by Richard Hogg in 1993 in preparation for the essay published in *Pastoralists, Ethnicity and the State in Ethiopia* (Hogg 1997), republished in Chapter 6. At that time, I was living in Ethiopia but had not had the opportunity to visit the Borana region. There were reports that serious clashes between the Borana, Garri and Gabra were taking place. Thus, I worked as an independent researcher to delve into the historical relations between the three groups, primarily using explorers' accounts and the latest anthropological and ethnohistorical sources. To understand the dynamics of the current conflict, I conducted some interviews outside Borana territory and made extensive use of grey literature produced by NGOs, government agencies and international organisations.

In retrospect, thirty years later, I recognise that this research was particularly useful because it was carried out at a time when events were unfolding. For this reason, I consider this paper to be a historical source. The paper also presents a critical dimension regarding the need for humanitarian and development workers to always acquire detailed knowledge of the context to avoid manipulations such as those that occurred on that occasion, and to apply a principle that is now explicitly invoked by major international organisations: "do not harm". Unfortunately, the inter-ethnic conflict that erupted at that time has continued to plague the region to this day and remains central to the role that customary institutions now play as Indigenous peace-building mechanisms.

The second research opportunity arose in 2004 in an applied context, when the operational group of the Pastoralist Communication Initiative (PCI) contacted me to provide advice on Oromo pastoralist customary institutions and to follow the 'Meeting of the Borana, Gabbra Migo and Guji Oromo pastoralists with representatives of the Government of Ethiopia and NGOs' held in Yaaballo (Southern Ethiopia) from 9 to 13 June 2004. PCI was a unit working in Ethiopia on behalf of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Since 2004, it has had a formal political mandate to improve dialogue between pastoralist groups and the government by

involving traditional leaders in the Oromia Pastoral Development Initiative (OPDC).

This time, in addition to updating the literature review and studying grey literature, I was able to spend enough time in the field to conduct numerous interviews with traditional leaders associated with the *gadaa* institution, as well as various elders and officials from the Borana, Gabbra and Guji Oromo. As is often the case with this type of assignment, I did not produce any publications based on the data collected, but the experience was important for reflecting on the role of customary institutions and the issues surrounding their engagement. These aspects have, over time, been incorporated into the policy recommendations proposed in Chapter 9.

The knowledge gained from my engagement with PCI was also very useful in framing the more traditional research carried out just a year later, funded by the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights at the University of Oslo. This project involved contributing a case study from the Borana zone to a project coordinated by Kjetil Tronvoll, which aimed to examine the relationship between Ethiopia's 2005 multi-party elections and traditional authorities. During the four weeks I spent in southern Ethiopia in January and February 2005, I had the opportunity to extend the research to include the 2004 referendum that established the boundaries between Region 4 and Region 5. The research was conducted through a review of primary and secondary sources and numerous interviews with customary leaders, rural elders, urban intellectuals and administrators in three Ethiopian regions. In Chapter 7, I republish the essay that appeared in the edited volume by Tronvoll and Hagmann (2012).

From the perspective of the Borana, the events described in the papers have led to a drastic reduction in the accessible territory, resulting in the concentration of both people and livestock in the remaining areas, with inevitable overstocking, pasture degradation, and a heavy dependency on food aid. This situation, typical of international emergencies, has become almost permanent, forcing families to rely more than ever on agricultural activities, a shift encouraged by government policies. The cultivation of land previously used for grazing has exacerbated the pastoral crisis, while the climatic conditions do not guarantee a successful harvest. The result was a spiralling process of environmental and economic degradation. If not counterbalanced by the introduction of alternative sources of income that do not depend on the direct exploitation of land and pastures, this process becomes irreversible and prevents the population from achieving self-sufficiency.

The seriousness of the situation prompted traditional leaders in those years to move away from their attitude of maintaining a separation between customary and statutory spheres. They began to interact with government authorities to preserve as much territorial

integrity as possible. Until then, the traditional governance apparatus, particularly the *gadaa* institution, had primarily regulated the rural and pastoral sectors. Now the material basis of this way of life - the territory - was being eroded, along with the cosmological concepts that link life cycles and forms of human and natural interdependence, shape societal ideas and define fundamental values. At this historical moment, engagement with governmental agencies and bodies meant addressing the fundamental mandate of customary institutions: to regulate pastoral activities and thereby ensure the renewal of life through the generations, maintaining the flow of divine blessings, or *nagaa*, for the entire population.

Engagement in Ethiopian politics did not occur without a significant initial price in blood, or contradictions and rethinking. As detailed in the chapters of Part 2, at least two Borana *abbaa gadaa* were murdered for their activities in the Ethiopian political arena, and a third was involved in a suspicious road accident. Although not reported in these papers, interviews conducted during the 2004 research revealed a tendency among various traditional leaders to alternate between periods of engagement with government officials and periods of withdrawal. At that time, the OPDO was keen to engage customary leaders for its own interests, namely to isolate the OLF and other Oromo opposition parties and secure popular support for use in the Ethiopian political arena, particularly in the run-up to the 2005 elections, which, on the pressure of the international community, were expected to be based on genuine democratic competition. To this end, the OPDO was more interested in winning the sympathy of individual leaders through co-optation than in establishing an institutional framework that would enable the real effectiveness of customary institutions within the overall governance.

The two papers republished in this second part focus on ethnic conflict in the region up to the mid-2000s. As noted in section 7.6, they highlight a shift from conflict between different linguistic groups - Oromo and Somali - over the demarcation of regional state boundaries to the manifestation of intra-Oromo conflict, coinciding with the internal definition of new zones and districts within the Oromo regional state. This second component involved the Borana, Gabra and Guji and was the specific subject of two publications that were not available at the time of writing the two essays presented here. Both are essentially critical assessments of the process of restoring peaceful relations through the organisation of large meetings facilitated by international organisations, with significant involvement of traditional leaders and the participation of pastoralists and government representatives.

The paper coordinated by Patta Scott-Villiers (Scott-Villiers et al. 2011) focuses on the series of gatherings supported by PCI, with an emphasis on the autonomous initiative taken by Borana traditional

leaders and other elders since 2004. The authors explain the principles used by the elders to restore peaceful relations based on customary practices and law. Dejene Gemechu's paper (Gemechu 2014) refers to the Allona Peace Conference supported by the Ethiopian Red Cross Society in collaboration with the local administration. Both studies highlight the importance of customary institutions because of the legitimacy they enjoy within the community. However, Gemechu analyses the events in the context of the constitutional solutions adopted in Ethiopia and is much more critical of the potential of customary institutions in addressing the problem, especially their limitations in promoting effective mechanisms across ethnic lines (Gemechu 2014, 160, 164). Gemechu also notes that the Gabra of Ethiopia have been ambiguous about their position along the Oromo-Somali divide, a position that is also reflected in their choice of customary institution among the types that have also been outlined in chapter 7.5 of this book. The revival of the *gadaa* institution by the Gabra of Ethiopia in 2006 was one of the preconditions for achieving the 'Allona Agreement', which was implemented with elements of *gadaa* governance (Gemechu 2004, 155).

