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Pastoral conflicts and state-building in the Ethiopian lowlands

Abstract

This paper draws attention to the central role played by the Ethiopian state in reconfiguring contemporary (agro-)pastoral conflicts in its semi-arid lowlands. Contrary to primordialist and environmental conflict theories of pastoralist violence, we shed light on the changing political rationality of inter-group conflicts by retracing the multiple impacts of state-building on pastoral land tenure and resource governance, peacemaking and customary authorities, and competition over state resources. Based on an extensive comparative review of recent case studies, post-1991 administrative decentralisation is identified as a major driving force in struggles for resources between transhumant herders in Ethiopia's peripheral regions. Our analysis emphasises the politicisation of kinship relations and group identities and the transformation of conflict motives under the influence of the gradual incorporation of (agro-)pastoral groups into the Ethiopian nation-state. Ethnic federalism incites pastoralists to engage in parochial types of claim-making, to occupy territory on a more permanent basis and to become involved in 'politics of difference' with neighbouring groups.

Keywords

Ethiopia, violence, pastoralism, state-building, federalism

With the federalisation of Ethiopia under the stewardship of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) the fortunes of its pastoral communities have seized the attention of aid agencies, academics and politicians. The incumbent regime has vowed to 'decolonize' the

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country's 'backward' or 'emerging' regions where most of Ethiopia's transhumant herders and agro-pastoralists are found. Different factors account for the growing prominence and governmental recognition of pastoralism and pastoralist groups in Ethiopia over the past decade. Although Meles Zenawi's government remains committed to the 'voluntary' sedentarisation of livestock keepers in its periphery (FDRE 2002), it has actively fostered the emergence of a loyal pastoral elite in its lowland regions. Pastoralist interests have been institutionalised in the House of Peoples' Representatives in 2002 by dint of forming a Pastoralist Standing Affairs Committee that brings together all members of parliament from predominantly pastoralist constituencies (Lister 2004). Similarly, the holding of an annual 'Ethiopian Pastoralist Day' (since 1999) has permitted the EPRDF to convey the message that it is committed to the welfare of Ethiopian pastoralists. Parallel to this, activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have capitalised on global discourses of indigenous peoples' rights to lobby for the cause of Ethiopia's hitherto marginalised herders. Following the major droughts of 1995-1997 and 2000-2001, large-scale humanitarian aid and development programmes have been expanded to the eastern, southern and western lowlands, which cover 60 percent of the territory (Sandford/Habtu 2000; Berkele 2003). 'Pastoralism' and the representation of pastoral interests thereby became politically charged as well as financially lucrative fields of intervention for policymakers, development professionals and researchers.

It is within this particular context that one has to situate the discussion about the causes, dynamics and peaceful transformation of pastoral conflicts in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The region figures prominently in the debate about pastoral conflicts as evidenced by a number of major publications on this topic (Markakis 1993; Fukui/Markakis 1994; Anderson/Broch-Due 1999; Suliman 1999; Baechler et al. 2002). The concomitant degradation and shrinkage of the natural resource base and the proliferation of armed confrontations have paved the way for a 'disaster and emergency' discourse (Nori et al. 2005: 12), which associates pastoralism with uncontrolled violence. Starting from the mid-1990s researchers, journalists, development planners, donors and state officials gradually endorsed the idea 'that violent conflict is one, if not *the*, central concern' (Hussein et al. 1999: 402) of sub-Saharan African drylands. Numerous studies have reported the militarisation of pastoralist societies, an increase in the severity of resource conflicts, and the augmentation of casualties of warlike confrontations in Ethiopia (Abbink 1993; Farah 1997; Said 1997; Gebre 2001; Kassa 2001a; Feyissa 2003; Markakis 2003; Abdulahi 2005) and its neighbouring countries (Umar 1997; Fratkin/McCabe 1999; Osamba 2000; Mkutu 2001). In the past decade a number of large-scale clashes have occurred among Ethiopian pastoralists, resulting in major losses of life and displacement. Among the highly publicised incidents are the Afar-Issa (Afar and Somali regions), the Guji-Borana

(Oromiya region), the Anuak-Nuer (Gambella) and the Sheikash-Ogaden (Somali region) disputes. Whether or not one endorses Unruh's (2005: 230) statement that 'violent confrontation has become more frequent' in the Ethiopian lowlands, outbursts of pastoralist violence have challenged the federal and regional governments. Since 2003 the government regularly monitors pastoral conflicts in the Ethiopian-Ugandan-Kenyan Karamoja cluster in the framework of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development's Conflict Early Warning and Response Network.

This article draws attention to the central role played by the Ethiopian state in reconfiguring contemporary pastoral conflicts. Based on a comprehensive review of recent publications on local resource conflicts and management in the Ethiopian lowlands we elaborate a conceptual perspective on the interrelations between statehood and pastoral conflicts. This analysis also draws on our recently concluded doctoral research on conflict and resource management in Ethiopia's Somali region (Hagmann 2006) and indigenous conceptions of violence among Karrayu pastoralists in the Upper and Middle Awash Valley (Mulugeta 2008). A number of authors have argued that the state represents a major bone of contention for pastoralists in the Horn of Africa (Markakis 1994). However, to this day, established explanations of pastoral violence tend to propagate a depoliticised interpretation of inter-group conflicts, which are thought to be the product of primordial antagonisms and resource scarcity. In contrast, we argue that pastoral conflicts must be understood within the context of the historic and ongoing expansion of the Ethiopian state from its central highland to the remoter parts of its peripheral lowlands. We do not wish to play down the importance of multiple causes of pastoral conflicts that are unrelated to the state-building process, particularly climatic and economic factors. Nor are we suggesting that government officials have deliberately orchestrated violent conflicts among pastoral populations. Rather we pursue an interpretative approach that seeks to account for the changing rationality of contemporary pastoral conflicts in Ethiopia.

Our understanding of statehood is primarily sociological (Bourdieu 1994) and anthropological (Scott 1998) rather than limited to the analysis of formal institutional rules and practices, although the latter are important. Therefore, we propose a reading of pastoral conflicts in Ethiopia from the vantage point of the gradual incorporation of peripheral pastoralist groups into the nation-state's centralised 'apparatus of control' (Berman/Lonsdale 1992: 5). This state-building process operates at both material and symbolic levels, is highly contested and does not follow a linear path. Analytically, we examine the impact of state-building on pastoral conflict at three interrelated levels. First, we highlight how past state interventions in the realms of land tenure and resource management have undermined the communal use of resources and altered land tenure arrangements. Second, we explore the ambiguous involvement of the state in current peacemaking practices by co-

opting customary authorities and conflict resolution activities. Third, we draw attention to the politicisation of kinship relations and the politics of ethnic differentiation that were triggered by post-1991 decentralisation. These three parallel dynamics exemplify the 'hegemonic process of social and spatial rationalisation' (Sullivan/Homewood 2003: 23) of the Ethiopian state in its semi-arid periphery. In the concluding part we reflect on the wider political and conceptual implications of our state-focussed interpretation of pastoral conflicts. Before expounding on the nexus between pastoral conflicts and state-building, a number of terminological and conceptual clarifications are required in addition to details concerning the scope of our argument.

Paradigms of pastoralist violence

We use 'pastoralism', 'pastoralists' and 'pastoral' to refer to rural dwellers whose livelihood depends predominantly on transhumant livestock or agropastoral livestock production. Petty and cross-border trade, wage labour, remittances and humanitarian aid are important sources of income that complement local subsistence economies (Halderman 2004; Ammann 2005; PCI 2007). Although marked by important socio-economic and political differences that defy sweeping generalisations, Ethiopia's pastoralists share three broad characteristics. These include a segmentary kinship structure 'on the basis of moiety, clan, or lineage', the existence of 'age- or generation-grade organisation[s]' and the eminent role played by religious and ritual 'mediators, priests, or prophets' in managing public affairs (Abbink 1997: 4). Across Ethiopia's regional states a great variety of interactions are observable between different administrative levels from the *kilil* (regional state) to the *wereda* (district) and the *kebele* (village or sub-location) on the one hand, and pastoral groups' customary institutions and organised political interests on the other hand (Unruh 2005). Populous pastoral groups such as the Boran, Somali or Afar were divided by the colonial nation-states and therefore participate in multiple political arenas in Ethiopia and its adjacent states.

Explanations of pastoral conflicts build upon different disciplinary traditions and schools of thought. In the past, social anthropologists have offered the most refined accounts of pastoralist violence by emphasising the ritual and symbolic dimensions of feuding and raiding between antagonistic tribal groups (Almagor 1979; Hendrickson et al. 1996; Abbink 1998). From this perspective, violence is an integral part of the herders' life-worlds, acting both as a means of conflict regulation and shaping individual and collective subjectivities. According to conventional wisdom mobile animal husbandry 'generates conflict without end, among the herders themselves and with cultivators' (Markakis 1994: 220). This assumption is widely shared by proponents of the idea that insecurity in pastoral areas has become endemic and

unmanageable as the logic of conflict has transformed from a cultural to a commercial and criminal one (Krätli/Swift 2001). Variants of primordialist theory and later on environmental conflict theory have enjoyed great popularity in explaining pastoral conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

Primordialist interpretations of pastoral conflicts tend to 'normalise' violence as they impute the recourse to physical force to the pastoralists' fragmented kinship structure and segmentary clan politics. This perspective is best captured in Edgerton's (1972: 163) classic review of 'Violence in East African Tribal Societies'. The author asserts that in the 'low-lying savannah areas' the 'environment is suffused with violence' as the 'texture of everyday life is a product of many routine acts of violence' (ibid). The reason for this high level of violence lies in the pastoral societies' internal social organisation as a balance of power must constantly be sought between 'contending and potentially hostile age, sex, territorial, and, principally, kinship groupings' (Edgerton 1974: 168). Another example is Lewis (2002: 308) who in his writings on Somali society concludes that

part of the problem here (...) is that conflict and war are normal conditions in Somali experience down the ages.

The 'stereotype of the belligerent herdsman' (Bollig 1990: 80) encapsulated in primordialist thinking has been challenged by a younger generation of anthropologists, range ecologists and pastoralist activists. They have criticised discourses imputing violence to pastoral peoples as part of the violent imagery that colonial and post-colonial states promulgated in their attempts to subdue nomadic communities, which escaped state control and discipline. In this sense, discourse about the supposedly 'warlike' and 'aggressive' nature of pastoralists represents only one of the many negative stereotypes of pastoral societies (Umar 1997).

Other popular explanations have emphasised the 'environmental influences on pastoral conflict' (Meier et al. 2007). According to the environmental conflict paradigm, unfulfilled demands for grazing land and water points for animal consumption fuel disputes between pastoral groups in sub-Saharan Africa (Homer-Dixon 1999). Adopting a Malthusian viewpoint of human-nature interactions, pastoral conflicts have been depicted as a response to relative or absolute resource scarcity (Baechler 1994). Numerous authors depict inter- and intra-community conflicts in semi-arid and arid ecosystems as a reaction to a shrinking natural resource base 'due to higher population and diminishing annual rainfall' (Moore et al. 1999: 14). Although reliable statistical data is mostly inexistent, these authors concur that demographic growth in the Horn of Africa is responsible for recurrent environmental and livelihood crises as population numbers outgrow food production (Gascon 1997). A growing body of literature has criticised the environmental conflict para-

digm of pastoral violence. The environmental paradigm is characterised by a causal determinism that neglects herders' agency and their ability to adapt to rapidly changing climatic conditions (Hagmann 2005a). It fails to take into account the institutional variables that affect resource scarcity as well as resource sharing arrangements (Bogale/Korf 2007). Finally, scarcity focussed arguments ignore key insights of political ecology, namely the necessity of understanding the 'interplay of local and extra-local social, and ecological processes' of resource conflicts (Turner 2004: 865).

Pastoral land tenure and resource governance

Conflicts over pastoral economies' life-sustaining resources are embedded in the evolution of natural resource management practices and their wider political economy. In the past decade the Ethiopian state has effectively contributed to the transformation of how pastoral groups relate to their natural environment. Since 1991 ethnic federalism and other public policies have produced more sedentary lifestyles based on more permanent and less flexible territorial boundaries. As Turton's (2005: 266) historic account of the Mursi in south-western Ethiopia demonstrates, herders have become progressively 'emplaced' by various interventions of the nation-state. In many lowland areas the concomitant break-down of customary institutions and the inability of central and local governments to enforce communal property have led to *de facto* open-access tenure regimes. These open-access regimes promote violent confrontations triggered by multiple claims on the same resource pool. Groups with higher bargaining power benefit from this situation as they are usually also in a position to capture strategic resources by force.

Over the decades, land tenure policies and state-led development programmes strongly undermined the communal land tenure traditions that characterised pastoral production (Abdulahi 2007). Past government interventions have decreased livestock mobility, promoted sedentarisation, mixed agro-pastoral production, and shorter migration routes of herds in vicinity to water points. State-backed agro-industrial projects such as the Metehara sugar factory and the establishment of the Awash National Park in the Awash Valley are exemplary of the exploitive policies carried out by consecutive Ethiopian governments. These policies forcefully expropriated the local Karrayu, which brought them into conflict with the neighbouring Afar and Argoba herders (Mulugeta 2008). During the imperial period all land that was not permanently settled or cultivated was owned by the state and pastoralists were legally dispossessed of their lands. The 1955 Revised Constitution determined that pastoral territory, referred to as *zelan* land, was state property (Arsano 2000). Starting from the 1960s consecutive livestock

development programmes propagated modern input delivery systems such as veterinary services, water development stock routes, holding ground and marketing facilities (Mesfin 2000). In the 1970s these interventions aimed at increasing the number of perennial water sources by excavating ponds, dams, and shallow wells, drilling boreholes, and building cisterns. The ensuing multiplication of water points weakened customary water and grazing management and triggered rangeland degradation in parts of today's Oromiya (Helland 2000) and Somali regions (Sugule/Walker 1998). In the aftermath of land nationalisation in 1975 the Derg pursued the settlement of pastoralists via peasant associations. This policy served the purpose of intensifying service delivery, resource conservation and the herders' identification with state institutions (Kassa 2000). Following the 1984-85 droughts the Derg resettled destitute highland farmers in the more marginal agricultural areas in the lowlands.

In terms of formal land tenure 'no fundamental differences' (Nega et al. 2003: 109) exist between the former Derg and the current government as the latter maintained state ownership of land including the rangelands. Ethiopia's federal constitution determines that 'Ethiopian pastoralists have the right to free land for grazing and cultivation as well as the right not to be displaced from their own lands' (FDRE 1995, Art. 40). But neither federal nor regional laws have been promulgated so far to enforce this constitutional principle effectively. A similar continuity between the two regimes is observed in terms of the contested sedentarisation policy as the current government aims at 'transform[ing] the pastoral societies to agro-pastoral life complemented by urbanization' (FDRE 2002: 6). Like its predecessors the incumbent government considers its arid and semi-arid areas as 'large tracts of unsettled land' that are to be developed for irrigated and rainfed agriculture (FDRE 2003: 31). Attempts to restore or enforce communal land-holding in the Ethiopian lowlands have been made in the framework of decentralised community-based natural resource management projects. In the 1990s NGOs began implementing participatory forest management and land use planning in pastoral areas in order to enhance land tenure security, the capacity-building of local institutions, and to minimise conflicts over the commons (Tache/Irwin 2003). Limited to particular localities, these management efforts are unable to counter the ongoing and rapidly spreading trend of enclosing grazing resources in many parts of Ethiopia (Kamara et al. 2004; Hagmann 2006; Mulugeta 2008). Accelerated by droughts, economic destitution and more intensive patterns of livestock production, the individualisation of resource tenure is concomitant to the erosion of reciprocal grazing rights and a decrease in herd mobility.

An additional and critical dimension of the transformation of dryland resource governance emanates from ethnic federalism. While it is difficult for pastoralists to claim constitutionally enshrined land use rights, the 'right to

self-determination' has been broadly promoted and vulgarised by the EPRDF. Helland (2006: 6) observed that 'formal land rights in the pastoral areas of Ethiopia seem to be a matter of loosely defined group rights that are granted to named ethnic groups'. The principle according to which political recognition depends on a group's ability to control and claim a distinct area of land encourages conflicts over spatially concentrated natural resources. Despite its name Ethiopia's ethnic-based decentralisation (*yaltmakele astedader*) relies on a territorially defined type of federalism as territory and not people is the organizing principle of politico-administrative units.² As a result since 1991 resource-based conflicts have become increasingly intertwined with a quest for territorial control for political purposes. This trend has been manifest in the Lower Awash Valley where Gebre (2001: 89) observed that disputes between the Argoba and Karrayu have evolved from competing claims over rangelands to a 'desire for territorial expansion and annexation'. Similar dynamics have been observed along the Oromiya-Somali border where disputes over grazing land and water points 'are now fought in the name of boundary disputes between the regional states' (Shide 2005: 39).

Co-optation of customary authorities and peacemaking

Consecutive Ethiopian regimes have co-opted and partially incorporated customary authorities and their peacemaking repertoires in order to uphold security and state interests at the local level. Over time the formal recognition of selected clan leaders by the imperial and the current EPRDF regimes – to a much lesser degree by the Derg – has multiplied titled elders who compete over the representation of their kin group *vis-à-vis* local government and aid agencies. Since the legitimacy of Ethiopia's statutory law remains weak, officials not only endorse but at times encourage and implement conflict resolution agreements based on blood compensation or other customary mechanisms. After 1991 the regional states' embracement of customary authorities has been particularly visible in the realm of conflict resolution and efforts to maintain or re-establish peace as ethnographic studies in the Upper and Middle Awash Valley (Mulugeta 2008) and Somali region (Hagmann 2006) demonstrate. Similarly, Tafere (2006: 69) documented how in the Afar region 'the state seems to adopt a *de facto* policy of encouraging the Afar to settle disputes on their own'. The selective state appropriation of local reconciliation mechanisms that fuse customary and religious elements both undermines and 'retraditionalizes' customary authorities of pastoral groups.

The Ethiopian constitution foresees the adjudication of personal and family disputes on the basis of religious and customary laws (FDRE 1995).

² We are indebted to Luzius Mader for suggesting this line of inquiry.

Criminal cases such as homicides must be settled on the basis of statutory law. However, the overwhelming majority of inter-personal and inter-group disputes – both violent and non-violent – in Ethiopia’s lowland regions are arbitrated by elders. Customary conflict resolution is deeply embedded in social norms, rituals and often involves the negotiation and payment of blood compensation. Recent studies have documented these peacemaking mechanisms among the Afar (Kassa 2001b), the Boran (Bassi 2005), the Karrayyu (Mulugeta 2008), the Suri and Dizi (Abbink 2000) and the Somali (Hagmann 2007). With the exception of urban dwellers, pastoralists by and large prefer customary conflict resolution to the formal legal system when resolving disputes and grievances. The avoidance of statutory justice is illustrated by the following example from the Somali regional state. Seid and Jotte (2004: 12) report that out of a total of 215 criminal cases (homicide, attempted murder, armed robbery) observed in 2002 in the Quorahe zone only six were resolved by district courts. Various authors have described the local administrations’ inability to provide for ‘lasting solutions’ to longstanding resource conflicts at the communal level (Gedi 2005: 46). State officials may propagate that ‘criminal acts’, for example killings in the course of a cattle raid, be admitted before local courts. Yet they often lack the necessary evidence to file charges against the perpetrators as large parts of the population turn to customary authorities and mechanisms for dispute settlement (Mulugeta 2008). Adding to the weakness of state law enforcement is the fact that local security forces are short of equipment and resources (transportation, weaponry etc.) to contain armed confrontations.

Since the coming to power of the EPRDF, administrative decentralisation has been accompanied by attempts to expand the outreach of state organs in the country’s more inaccessible areas. Regional states were vested with the power and obligation to uphold law and order in their territory. Characteristically, party cadres and government officials denounce incidences of violence as an infringement of human rights, the rule of law and state-led ‘democratization’. In the Somali region, the regional government’s conflict management strategy chiefly consists of dispatching senior bureaucrats as peace emissaries to the home areas of their clan. These bureaucrats, mostly high-ranking regional government officials or party members, then broker a peace agreement with elders representing the two conflict parties (Hagmann 2006). Considerable amounts of government budget often change hands in such negotiations, but the underlying conflict causes are seldom addressed. This holds particularly true for land conflicts as state officials and elders paid by district administrations insist on the principle that ‘land belongs to the government’ (Gebre Mariam 2005: 47).

In cases of highly escalated and protracted conflicts that threaten the institutional architecture of or the power balance within regional states, the federal government – first through the Prime Minister’s Office and later on

through the Ministry of Federal Affairs – has established so-called ‘joint peace committees’. The success of these committees, which exist even at the lowest administrative level and are composed of local government officials and elders, has been mixed at best (Abdulahi 2005; Mulugeta 2008). In the case of the longstanding Boran-Degodia conflict, government conflict management rather ‘had the effect of escalating the conflicts’ (Abdulahi 2005: 15). In the south-western Maji area Abbink (2000: 544) discovered that party cadres’ approach to conflict mediation consisted of paternalism and conceptions of conflict resolution ‘shaped by a partly traditional northern Ethiopian ethic modified by secular and revolutionary-socialist thinking’. Overall, most government efforts to contain or resolve pastoral conflicts have been characterised by coercion, short-term approaches and limited spatial outreach. In his analysis of herder-farmer conflicts in the Dawa-Genale river basin Gedi (2005: 31) concluded that

government officials interfere in some disputes, which take place in (...) accessible areas, while they often neglect those disputes, which take place in remote or distant pastoral areas.

In the past decade government sponsored conflict resolution in Ethiopia’s pastoral areas has effectively commercialized peacemaking. In many cases elders of pastoral communities who engage in mediation and reconciliation are either paid by the government or NGOs. Conflict resolution thereby became a lucrative activity for customary leaders who implement local government agendas in return for per diems, *khat* and other personal benefits. At the regional level special budget lines for conflict resolution were established, providing generous funding for politicians and government appointed elders (Hagmann 2006). With the rise of the peacebuilding agenda in international development, many local and international NGOs have made conflict resolution a priority. Many NGOs working in Ethiopia’s pastoral areas assume that conflicts arise from resource competition and thus consider conflict management trainings as a strategy to prevent an outbreak of violence. During her field research among the Karrayyu Mulugeta (2008) witnessed how NGOs organised conflict resolution and awareness raising workshops, paid per diems, and arranged transportation for the customary *gada* authorities in order to attend peace meetings related to cattle raids. The co-optation and enrollment of elders by local administrators and NGOs has been met with scepticism by many community members whom these elders claim to represent. The perception that ‘the district administration chooses its own elders’³ erodes the customary authority’s legitimacy as well as the elders’ capacity to enforce peace agreements that had been agreed upon.

3 Author’s [AM] interview with a Karrayyu pastoralist, Boditi, 27 May 2004.

Political economy of ethno-national claims-making

The Ethiopian government has rationalised ethnic federalism as a political project that accommodates ethno-linguistic diversity by generalising ‘the right to self-determination’ on all administrative scales (Turton 2006). As a result many of the previously marginalised pastoral groups were for the first time ever recognised as ‘nations and nationalities’ within the Ethiopian polity, obtaining self-government at the regional, zonal and district level. This process of ‘matching’ ethno-linguistic groups with administrative units proved highly conflictual. On the one hand, pastoralists’ reliance on mobility and flexible resource tenure in accordance with seasonal variations contradict the idea of permanent territorial occupation. On the other hand, ethnic federalism postulates a primordial concept of unchanging and bounded group identities, which does not take into account the historic flux, constructedness, and flexibility of group identities (Aalen 2006). Since 1991 state-building in Ethiopia’s lowland regions dramatically politicised and reconfigured kinship relations. The principle of ethnically defined representation activated ‘politics of difference’ (Schlee 2003) between competing groups who frame their claims to state resources, political office and representation in ethnic terms. Inter-ethnic conflicts within regional states, tensions between regional majorities and settler minorities, and boundary disputes pitting neighbouring regions against each other have all been animated by this logic (Kefale 2004).

Pastoralists mostly interpreted ethnically defined administration as the exclusive rule by a dominant group within a given home territory. Demographically bigger and more powerful groups had much better chances of achieving this goal than smaller and minority clans. In the Somali regional state and elsewhere the right of self-determination to be enjoyed by ethnic groups was ‘taken as the rights of clans’ (Kefale 2006: 5). Since 1991 a minority of Somalized Bantu clans such as the Garrimarro or Rer Barre have been systematically excluded from local administration in districts where they are in numerically small numbers. The warlike confrontation that occurred in the beginning of the 1990s between Ogadeen pastoralists and an alliance of Rer Barre farmers and Haawiye agro-pastoralists along the fertile riverbanks of the Wabi Shabelle is a case in point (Hagmann 2006). As an Ogaadeen interlocutor stated, ‘the Rer Barre believed that since the Ethiopian constitution gave every people the right for self-determination, [that] they should be the only ones to have political power in their area’.⁴ The Rer Barre’s aspirations to self-government were brutally crushed by the numerically larger Ogadeen who managed to mobilise an impressive number of clan militias from the entire zone.

4 Author’s [TH] interview with an intellectual, K’elafo, 21 July 2004.

Historic animosities over grazing resources and water points were revived by administrative decentralisation as pastoralists sought to expand the boundaries of their *kebele* and district to claim sole possession of disputed localities. Changing the names of areas where strategic rangelands, water wells and settlements were concentrated in order to legitimise their incorporation into one's home territory became another strategy of ethnic claims-making (Mulugeta 2008). Ethnic federalism thereby induced a fragmentation of self-ascribed group identities from higher to lower levels of genealogical segmentation. Although important inter-ethnic tensions persisted through the 1990s, particularly at the boundary between the Oromiya, Afar and Somali regional states, prolonged confrontations mostly involved individual clan lineages and not entire ethnic groups. Since access to political representation depends on the ability to control administrative units, genealogical groups struggled to establish their own districts in order to 'gain a better political position' within their zone and their larger clan family (Gebre Mariam 2005).

A major incentive for pastoralists to identify with pre-defined ethnic collectivities and to adopt expansionist political tactics to the detriment of neighbouring groups was the extension of fiscal and administrative resources from regional capitals to districts. Since 2001 a nationwide District Level Decentralisation Programme implemented by the Federal Ministry of Capacity-Building and its regional corollaries reallocated block grants from the regions to the districts.⁵ Ethnic entrepreneurs including elders, party officials and school graduates strategically deployed clan identities to benefit from decentralised public resources in the lowlands. In the Awash Valley Mulugeta (2008: 127) observed that 'representation at political office, as a potential source of resources, subsequently becomes a relay for conflicts between district administration personnel from neighboring areas'. Particularly for the small educated elite who qualified for civil service, employment in a regional, zonal or district office became a lucrative income source. Local and regional administrations provided important opportunities to appropriate petty cash, both by means of regular salaries and irregular funds. In addition, education opportunities, food aid, development projects, 'security' and other state-sponsored activities fuelled inter-group tensions and ethnic claims-making within the wider political economy. Concomitantly with the 'trickling down' of public resources into Ethiopia's pastoral areas neo-patrimonial relations between state representatives and pastoral groups expanded (Hagmann 2005b). These networks linking rural constituencies to urban gatekeepers, determined the allocation of state resources and assured the

5 The decentralisation of federal budgets to districts occurred in two waves in Ethiopia; first in the four central regions Amhara, Tigray, Oromiya and Southern Region (after 2001) and later on in the more peripheral Somali, Afar, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions (after 2004).

politicians popular support on election day. In this regard Gebre Mariam (2005: 50) observed that in the country's eastern lowlands 'the location where public infrastructure is built (...) depends mostly on where the president of the region comes from'.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that contemporary conflicts in Ethiopia's lowland regions must be viewed within the context of the current state-building process by which the government expands its 'structures of control' (Turton 2005: 270). Neither primordial nor environmental conflict theories of pastoralist violence take these dynamics into account. State-building in the semi-arid periphery strongly shapes the rationality of inter-group conflicts by both integrating and excluding pastoral communities. Although violence between herders and agro-pastoralists is carried out in 'non-state spheres' (Mulugeta 2008), it is directly related to the state, which mediates resource governance, peacemaking and group identity. Administrative decentralisation has reconfigured pastoralists' relation to their territory, interactions between customary authorities and government officials as well as relations between competing ethnic or clan groups. Since 1991 ethnic federalism has permitted local groups to establish and appropriate administrative and political spoils at local and regional levels. These processes are partly in continuity with previous interactions between the Ethiopian state and pastoral communities, which have shaped pastoralists' attitudes towards state institutions. In this sense post-1991 decentralisation has accelerated a historically unfolding state-building process and its transformative impacts on pastoral life-worlds, politics and resource management.

Our conclusion has an important bearing on the pastoral conflict debate sketched at the beginning of this article. As pastoral societies are incorporated into wider political and economic systems, the rationale of conflicts and violence is changing. Without completely losing its ritual and customary referents, collective violence in the pastoral areas is 'modernised' as its connections with modern state politics and capitalist modes of production intensify. The term 'pastoral conflict' seems increasingly inappropriate to grasp the current logics of violence as it embodies a nostalgic connotation of herders and conflict. Contemporary disputes in the Ethiopian lowlands are sparked by competition over urban real estate, electoral campaigns or contested access to public budgets as much as by competition over wells and pastures. In many cases conflicts, which before 1991 were animated by 'competition over scarce natural resources', have changed into 'competition over new sources of revenue and control of market centres' (Shide 2005: 38). Consequently, there is a need to consider the changing logic of resource conflicts in the semi-arid parts of the Horn of Africa as the 'same' groups fight – from a his-

toric perspective – over increasingly diversified natural, political and economic resources. Similarly the outdated assumption about the incompatibility between centripetal nation-states and centrifugal transhumant herders (Meir 1988) must be called into question. The analysis of conflicts among Ethiopian pastoralists confirms Schatz's (2004) conclusion that state institutions and kinship organisations are highly interrelated as modern states reproduce clan identities, divisions and alliances.

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Zusammenfassung

In diesem Aufsatz wird argumentiert, dass der äthiopische Staat eine Schlüsselrolle in der Rekonfiguration aktueller Gewaltkonflikte zwischen (agro-)pastoralen Gruppen im semi-ariden Tiefland spielt. In Abgrenzung zu primordialistischen Erklärungen von Gewalt und umweltkonflikttheoretischen Ansätzen machen die Autoren auf den sich verändernden politischen Kontext aufmerksam, in dem sich Konflikte zwischen nomadisierenden und sesshaften Viehzüchtern manifestieren. Im Mittelpunkt stehen die verschiedenen Auswirkungen des äthiopischen Staatsbildungsprozesses auf die Landnutzung und das Ressourcenmanagement im semiariden Raum, auf bestehende Konfliktlösungspraktiken traditioneller Autoritäten sowie auf die Konkurrenz um den Zugang zu Staatsressourcen. Als Ergebnis einer umfassenden vergleichenden Analyse vorliegender Studien identifizieren die Autoren die 1991 initiierte Dezentralisierung der Verwaltung als wichtigsten Motor gewalttätiger Auseinandersetzungen in Äthiopiens peripheren Teilstaaten. Das zunehmende Eingreifen des äthiopischen National-

staates in die Lebenswelten nomadisierender Viehzüchter politisiert deren Verwandtschaftsbeziehungen und Gruppenidentitäten und transformiert somit bestehende Konfliktursachen. Der ethnische Föderalismus multipliziert ethno-politische Forderungen, welche einer ausschließenden Gruppenlogik folgen. Zudem begünstigt er eine sesshaftere Lebensweise und Bewirtschaftung von Weideland sowie die Entstehung von Streitigkeiten zwischen benachbarten Viehzüchtern.

Schlüsselwörter

Äthiopien, Gewalt, Pastoralismus, Staatsbildung, Föderalismus

Résumé

Cet article met en évidence le rôle central joué par l'Etat éthiopien dans les reconfigurations des conflits actuels entre éleveurs (agro-)pastoraux dans les régions semi-arides du pays. Contrairement à ce qu'affirment les théories primordialistes et les approches environnementales des conflits et violences entre éleveurs (agro-)pastoraux, nous attirons l'attention sur la logique changeante de ces conflits en retraçant les impacts de la construction de l'Etat sur la gestion du territoire et des ressources naturelles, sur les pratiques de résolution des conflits par les autorités coutumières ainsi que sur la compétition pour l'accès aux ressources étatiques sont retracés. Basée sur une analyse comparative d'études récentes, cet article identifie la décentralisation administrative après 1991 comme une force majeure des hostilités entre éleveurs transhumants dans les régions périphériques de l'Ethiopie. Notre analyse souligne la politisation des relations de parenté et des identités collectives ainsi que la transformation des conflits sous l'influence de l'incorporation graduelle des éleveurs (agro-)pastoraux dans l'Etat-nation éthiopien. Le fédéralisme ethnique incite ces groupes à adopter des revendications de type exclusif, à occuper le territoire de manière plus permanente et à s'engager dans des hostilités avec les communautés voisines.

Mots clés

Ethiopie, violence, pastoralisme, construction de l'état, fédéralisme

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