Causes and Trajectories of Local Conflict Among Pastoral Peoples in Northeast Africa

Jon Abbink

ABSTRACT

Pastoralist (herding) societies in Africa are claimed to be prone to violence due to structural conditions of environmental vulnerability, scarcity of resources and decentralized socio-political organization. Their contacts with expanding state structures and with neighbouring groups in different socio-economic conditions, are seen to add to instability, due to the underlying hegemonic project of national states, while major economic and demographic changes also play a role. This paper presents a comparative overview of general factors that come into play in the ‘production of conflict’ in and between pastoral societies, focusing on Northeast Africa. It is contended that while conflict was a regular feature of life in traditional pastoral societies, its nature and frequency have notably changed in the confrontation with state forces, whereby unresolved tensions between traditional and ‘modern’ judicial conflict regulation mechanisms play a role. External agencies approach these pastoral societies in conflict without paying proper attention to the larger political-economic context in which they operate and which constrains them in a political and ideological sense. Some case examples are adduced to make this point. These and other case studies reveal that structural instability in contemporary pastoral societies is usually not properly interpreted by outside agencies and is not easily ‘resolved’.

The paper concludes with a general model or checklist of conditions and factors of conflict production in pastoral societies.

KEYWORDS: pastoralism, conflict, Ethiopia, state policy, resource scarcity, culture and ‘ethnic’ difference, conflict mediation

Introduction

Conflicts in Africa are still widespread and headline-catching, as in Somalia, the Uganda-DR Congo border (LRA depredations), Sudan (Darfur), Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Ethiopia (Ogaden), reflecting the problematic basis of statehood, governance and economic (re)distribution, and in general indicative of the unresolved problems of developmental ‘modernity’ in a socio-political sense.

This paper focuses the discussion chiefly on causes of local conflict in pastoral herding societies in Northeast Africa, with key examples from Ethiopia, both on the level of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations. In the quest for ‘solutions’ or for better use of

1; African Studies Centre, Leiden, & VU University, Amsterdam.

mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms, it is relevant to understand the nature of the recurring conflicts in pastoral societies, both internally and, predominantly, in their relations with wider structures, notably state authorities and business enterprises.

As pastoral societies occupy large tracts of territory, often in border areas, they have been credited with environmental factors, livelihood decline, certain cultural values/ideologies, and state economic or other policies, which in various combinations impose on dispute generation and conflict behaviour. Conflict prevention, resolution and mediation structures are now a favourite subject of international donor assistance, and are useful to explore, but I will argue that the expectations and ideals of the growing irreversibility of conflicts. Many of these conflicts, while locally rooted in power structures and power struggles, tend to become enmeshed with state (trans)formation policies and tend to be imposed on local societies. In addition, the will and openness to mediation among many communities, even when induced by local elders or from above, e.g. by parts of Ethiopia, when people pursue local, short-term interests and claim dominance. As an pastoral society - to take the path of accommodation instead of conflict? An answer has to be sought in the interactive patterning of conflict situations in specific areas, paying attention to structural socio-economic conditions, available technology (including weaponry), cultural values (or repertoires), and state policies.

The socio-economic basis of pastoralist societies

While this paper is partly based on field experiences in Southwestern Ethiopia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I draw mostly upon secondary sources and other documents to make a more general argument. This is why views and quotes from members of these pastoral societies are omitted here.

Pastoral land use in Africa is substantial and in many countries close to half the territory is semi-arid lowland occupied by pastoral peoples. Examples are Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya. The population density is still relatively low in these regions, but, like most African countries, is increasing fast. Average population growth in Ethiopia and Kenya, for instance, has been c. 2.6 to 3% annually, and pastoralists share in this figure. Pastoralists are rural people who depend for their main livelihood on the herding of livestock mostly for subsistence and for trading of animal products. Among many groups in southern Ethiopia the average herder family has about 30-50 heads of cattle. Crop cultivation is secondary and sometimes very limited, as they trade livestock or livestock products for food, etc. in local markets. Ecological conditions in pastoral areas are by definition precarious - seasonal pastures necessitating transhumance, i.e. much mobility and somewhat risky travelling; overdependence on insecure rainfall, resulting in frequent drought; underdeveloped health or educational service structures; and remoteness from political and economic power centres. According to one popular paradigm, conflict in pastoral societies is closely tied to these competitive ecological-economic conditions of life in the semi-arid zone where these peoples live. Environmental resource scarcity in, now universal, conditions of population growth and shrinking of pastoral areas would lead to conflict and violence between the competing groups - in short, 'resource competition breeds violence'. Another paradigm, inherited from colonial perceptions, is that pastoral peoples are culturally predisposed to militancy and violence, not only due to the harsh environment and the dangers they face on an almost daily basis (wild animals, enemies), but also due to their ideals of personal valour and of amassing livestock 'for its own sake' - this would then explain their incessant raiding. In addition, their egalitarian-demonic society based on kinship and segmentary principles is often seen as stimulating their self-consciousness as independent identity as independent people in areas where the central state was long absent or at least quite weak in exercising authority. The Somalis are often mentioned as an example here.

While these two paradigms, which could be called respectively 'neo-Malthusian' and the 'primordialist', carry grains of truth - e.g., there is environmental degradation and dramatic population growth, and group identities are fostered - the latter is too simplistic and essentializing - they are only elements of a necessary but by far not sufficient explanation of the general and persistent causes of conflict in pastoral societies.

What certainly can be said is that pastoral societies are largely kin-structured (lineages, clans etc. providing the basis of social solidarity), committed to defence of their livestock herds, very mobile and versatile, marked by low levels of technology (except, as we will see, in weapons) and vulnerable to the vagaries of precarious natural conditions (Wolfetensae 2007), state authority (Hagmann & Alemayehu 2008), and competition from neighbouring groups in similar circumstances (cf. Meier, Bond & Bond 2007). In this sense, it seems clear - and must be recognized in intervention policy - that in pastoral societies the thresholds of
decades. The growing presence of the state is evident in most pastoral areas, trying to services or in controlling the means of violence. This process has a great impact on local factors in stead of in the hand and cultural repertoires and values-related to group identity - on the other. The growing presence of the state is evident in most pastoral areas, trying to incorporate them politically and economically, although it is weak in the provision of services or in controlling the means of violence. This process has a great impact on local group relations and even on the pastoral economy (cf. Abbink 1997; Higman & Alemayehu 2008). One of the visible consequences is the gradual expansion of the economic presence of the state, through new markets, taxation, and administrative demands. This is even the case in post-1991 federal Ethiopia, where the official programme is local autonomy and decentralization of power, and that has led in effect to a strengthening of the state in all peripheral areas of the country, notably through processes of top-down cooptation. The policy package of the state includes sedentarisation programs for pastoralists (and rangeland development), conversion of the communal grazing lands of pastoral groups (redefined as 'state land') into private holdings for both richer herd owners and outsiders (for commercial enterprises) and given out in lease to foreign countries, with the state elite expecting to reap huge benefits*, as well as land alienation for other purposes. More than anything else, it is these processes that lead to a relative 'decline' or at least a weakening of pastoralism: not the problems of the pastoral mode of production itself.

languages or dialects, but shared much of the pastoral ways of life and their dealings with the natural environment. They also had well-established traditions of conflict regulation that were based on debate, mediation, compensation and ritual reconciliation via a ceremony of blessings and oaths and joint consumption of sacrificed animals. Cultural differences between pastoral groups were not a major cause for dispute or violence, as they shared much of the same challenges and values concerning male behaviour, gender relations, religious notions, rain rituals, etc. Some groups in conflict could even be considered part of the same people or linguistic community. The level of 'tolerance' toward violent action to redress perceived wrongs was higher among pastoral groups than among others, and although there were perhaps certain codes of fighting (see Musa 1998 for the Somali of the past), there was a sense that violence could be better solved with forceful and violent action than with talking and negotiation.

Among some ethnic groups, e.g., the Guar-Oromo (Taddesse 2009: 194), the Macc-Oromo (Bartels 1983: 229, 257); or the Bodi-Me'en (see Fukui 1979 for an influential study), there were or are ideals of specific violent performance and even cognitively rooted representations of violent action that had cultural value in the society. Having killed a large wild animal, e.g., lion or buffalo, or a human from another (ethnic) group enhanced the culturally required killer's status among peers, and was sometimes also required in order to qualify for marriage (the 'mentionable complex'; cf. Braakhem 2002). The discourse of boasting and 'achievement' in having killed others that is prevalent among sections of the young generation in many of these pastoral peoples (but not only them) should not be underestimated. Among others, for the Nuer or the Karinjang (cf. Simonse 2005: 251) it has been argued that the raids on neighboring groups were deemed necessary to accumulate sufficient livestock for the young (male) generation to be independent and to marry (high bride-worth). While these ideals are variable and can undergo change, they were at some point quite influential as motivational dispositions towards violent behaviour and not easy to prevent. Generational opposition or tension would then under certain conditions be an independent cause for violent behaviour.

The differences between pastoral peoples and sedentary agriculturalists were significant and visible, often expressed in mutually antagonistic images (of the other's inferiority or backwardness). Ideals on personhood and performance also diverged strongly, as did patterns of leadership and authority (cf. Abbink 2004 on Sun and Dizzi conflict). While mediation structures also existed between them (e.g. for dealing with cases of cattle damaging field crops) and disputes were resolved via new agreements and compensation was paid, these structures in many cases are on the decline, or have come under pressure by interfering outside forces in recent decades. Notably in the inter-ethnic, as opposed to the intra-ethnic, domain they have lost force. The Sudanese region of Darfur is the most evident example of this (cf. Flint & De Wand 2005, p. 58; Daly 2007, p. 266), but as ethnographic studies and NGO research reports have suggested (see e.g. Wairagu 2007: 45; Yohannes et al. 2009; Abbink 2007), also in Kenya and Ethiopia such structures were neglected or lost status, either because of changing local power balances and new linkages to wider outside networks, or due to misguided state appropriation of local mediation and biased intervention (cf. Ayalew 2001: 181, 183).

* Cf. the study of Tekele et al. 1994.
1 See Paul Vallely 2009.
Hence, while these mediation structures still exist (or at least the idea that they should be used), and indeed are often cherished by local societies, there is a development toward their devaluation. This points to the fact that more than cultural or ethnic differences per se being the cause of growing violent conflict, it is often the interference of the centralizing state that is itself a major disturbing factor. In its efforts to establishes political hegemony and economic advantage, it subverts autonomy and customary dispute resolution procedures, co-opting them and introducing bribes and bias in the local system, and the state also tends to appropriate pastoral land resources without proper alternatives or compensation. This process is accompanied by a discourse of difference and cultural denigration that is still prevalent, and which inevitably leads to new grievances, disputes, and often violence. Even if there would be real material issues at the base of growing conflicts, such as shrinking pastures, land grabs, closing of access routes, state repression and population or livestock growth exceeding the carrying capacity of the traditionally exploited areas of a group, resulting in ‘resource competition’ (cf. Getachew 2001: 96-97), it depends on the traditions of conciliation and on a just state policy whether conflict behaviour takes root or not. In addition, new formalities of power and bureaucracy may simply preclude the effective recourse to customary, local-level conflict resolution mechanisms, as the ideological economic and judicial independence of rural populations on the state structures is growing.

In Ethiopia there is the special case that the political system since 1991 is structured along ethnic lines, with many regions and districts led by a dominant ethnic elite; and when disputes arise on borders, wells or other matters, the local administration takes the side of its own group, whatever the judicial merits of the case. These thoroughly ‘ethnicized’ political and economic instability and a politics of ‘trench warfare’ model has led to the rapid escalation of local conflicts along reconstructed ethnic lines, which were then subsequently declared the ‘cause’ of the conflict.

As one example I briefly discuss here the recent Borana-Garri conflict. Here we see that economic, political, environmental and ‘cultural’ factors merge, leading to notions of ethnic identity defining the contours of the dispute.

In February 2009 deadly clashes occurred between the Borana Oromo and the Garri pastoral groups, whereby c. 300 people were killed and 70,000 fled their homes. According to a BBC news message, it was apparently triggered by the construction of a new borehole. The Borana live in the Oromiya Regional State, the Garri, a less numerous pastoral group of mixed Somali and Oromo origins, live along and across the border of this State with the Somali Regional State (of Ethiopia).

This was not the first conflict between them, and a clash in 2000 with many people killed and displaced, had apparently not been followed by an effective peace or reconciliation agreement. While in the past these two groups were not good friends either, such numbers of victims and such a level of destruction and expulsion were not known before.

The Garri this time attacked Borana settlements at night, killed every one they met, destroyed and burnt the villages and cattle camps, and raised thousands of livestock. The past two years rainfall had been very bad, and lack of water and pasture were creating hardship among the two peoples. The new borehole had just been constructed by the Oromiya regional government for the Borana, and there was none for the Garri (who are in another state). In their attack, the Garri also destroyed the drilling rig. Much of the raided cattle was brought across the border to Kenya and sold there, impossible to retrieve.

One Borana witness of the attack said:

“They came on foot, without vehicles, but they had bombs and missile launchers, and at that time we didn’t have guns, only sticks to defend ourselves.”

“They didn’t want us to live well, and water is very important to us, so they attacked our water source.”

One local Borana politician was quoted as saying: “The Somalis [meaning the Garri, JA] are problematic people”.

“They are always pushing us. It’s as if I give you a place to pitch your tent and the following morning you are telling me to leave; the Borana are not accepting that.”

In the absence of effective trans-ethnic mediation or compensation mechanisms, the conflict saw no solution yet and Borana swore to take revenge. In this respect, the Borana were reported to be stockpiling weapons, and in response, the Garri did the same. Government forces are for the time being stationed between the two groups, but no effective peace procedures are yet in place.

Several familiar elements are evident here: traditional tension between two ethno-linguistically different groups (cultural difference), hardship due to drought (ecology), the new, ill-defined regional border dividing previously shared, ‘open’ pasture lands of two groups (politics), government policy of drilling wells in one place, but not in another

---

3 The latest threat in southern Ethiopia is the plan to build a huge dam, Gilgel Ili, in the Omo River, of which the future effects on local pastoral peoples (not consulted) seem grave. See Oreste 2009.
4 Another new development endangering the indigenous basis of agrarian and pastoral economies is the giving out of large tracts of land, notably in Ethiopia, to foreign concessionaries or countries, nor intending to produce for the local market but for their own, i.e., overseas. This development will have a major impact on Ethiopian rural society, e.g., implying severance of the bond of the local people with the land, alienation from their social and cultural ‘capital’, and, at the most, employment of a part of them as low paid wage labourers. The agricultural demonstration effect of the foreign producers on Ethiopian rural producers will be minimal, because they will not have a giving out of large tracts of land, notably in Ethiopia,
5 a major impact on Ethiopian rural society, e.g., implying severance of the bond of the local people with the land, alienation from their social and cultural ‘capital’, and, at the most, employment of a part of them as low paid wage labourers. The agricultural demonstration effect of the foreign producers on Ethiopian rural producers will be minimal, because they will not have a giving out of large tracts of land, notably in Ethiopia,
6 The decline of ‘carrying capacity’ is shown by the persistent out migration of (impoverished) members of these societies or of those who have lost rights of access to land and cattle, and their search for wage labour or other sources of livelihood elsewhere.
7 Constitutionally, sovereignty lies not in the Ethiopian people, but in the ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ of Ethiopia (Constitution, Art. 81).
9 In 2000 there was a violent clash between the two groups, then with c. 140 people massacred, including women and children, and hundreds displaced (see Abdurahman Ane 2006: 5).
10 See preceding footnote.
(politics), a high number of victims in a few days due to the use of large quantities of modern automatic rifles (new arms technology), differentially introduced among, or accessible to, the local groups, and the possible commercialization of raiding, as the cattle were partly sold in distant markets, to outsiders (economies). In short, opportunity structures for conflict are more prevalent, due to different positioning of the groups vis-a-vis the state, and due to durable, structurally entrenched disputes about (access to) material resources, political and legal power, access to economic opportunities (including markets), and about the relative socio-cultural ranking of groups within a context that gets more pervasive. Group identity, solidified with a politicized appeal to ‘ethnicity’ (bôlôrêsôt identity), is marshalled to draw the lines, even if actual cultural differences were quite limited.

Types and patterns of conflict
In the type of societies under discussion, conflicts are of a specific, historically well-assessed kind. They often follow similar lines or cycles. Three types of conflict can be distinguished, without suggesting that the lines and oppositions are always clear or follow neat ‘ethnic lines’.

a) Within pastoral groups.
Conflicts between pastoral peoples have often a long history and show elements of ‘balanced exchange’ (negative reciprocity), characterized by repetitive violent incidents (raids, attacks) but also corrective mechanisms of peace-making. Some affinities between conflicting groups are mutually recognized, based on similarities in their way of life and their customs, e.g., their socio-cultural focus on cattle or camels and certain ritual-religious beliefs. But despite occasional cooperative agreements in times of unexpected adversity affecting them both, different pastoral peoples usually vie for pasture, livestock (raids in times of local drought, meant to replenish lost herds) and water sources. Nevertheless, conquest and driving out others was rare, at least massive killing. In Africa this picture is changing, however, since the late 1980s, when pastoral groups occasionally started to push out others due to their larger numbers, better armaments, or selective state support (again, Darfur’s pastoral-womadic groups are a good example). As noted, in all societies, certainly in Northeast Africa, customary dispute or conflict resolution procedures seem to be under pressure, so that the state is more and more expected, or reluctantly called in, to ‘restore order’ - and often after it had positioned itself as a player bent to establish hegemony and pursue its own interests.

A clear tendency nowadays is that conflict starts not so much along communal/ethnic lines but more along generational and individual lines: not the ethnic groups as a whole battle another or have a strategy of expansion, but some individuals or social strata within a group - each as a young generation or age group - perceive the violence. However, in its turn it leads to the gradual mobilization of larger units of the same people. Some pastoral peoples have, however, due to population increase and regional migrations, divided into sections that combat one another as if they were separate ‘ethnic’ groups. The Karimojong of Uganda, for instance, a society flooded by automatic weapons, seems now to be irretrievably split into three antagonistic groups: the Matheniko, Pian and Bokora (Simone 2005: 250), who raid and kill each other and do neither appeal to compensation procedures nor reconcile.

b) Between pastoral groups and sedentary farming populations.

In many conflicts between pastoral groups and sedentary-agricultural peoples, notions of moral community and affinity are often not extended to the opponent. The conflicts are more intense and irreconcilable. Apart from historical enmity due to past campaigns of violent state formation by large pastoralist peoples (e.g., the Fulani states in West Africa) and recurring structural oppositions between ways of life and livelihood systems, there are often additional cultural differences, such as language, traditions of origin, authority structures, prestige ranking, religious tradition, and life-cycle rituals. This can lead to engrammed cultural perceptions of ‘difference’ that are actively cherished as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and, despite overlapping zones of similarity and shared activities, are still socially reproduced on both sides.

In many cases, violent conflict now typically takes the form of raids by pastoralists on sedentary peasant cultivators and their fields or villages, who are vulnerable. In this pattern of conflict, exploited by the Sudanese state elite, has led to the devastation of an entire region and its systems of livelihood (cf. Daly 2007). These raids, for a variety of reasons, make many victims, and the meager possessions of the cultivators (a few heads of livestock, clothing, or money) are taken and often leave them destitute. Retaliation is usually impossible, because the peasants are less well-armed and more under the control of the government. In pre-state conditions, there was often a delicate, negotiated (contractual) balance between these two kinds of groups, with rights and duties as well as some ritual complementarity clearly defined. These notions are now largely eroded, and conflict between sedentary farmers and pastoral groups tends to evolve into cyclical local warfare. Economic relations, not to speak of inter-marriages, are then declining steeply. The Darfur situation is a prime example (cf. Prunier 2005, Daly 2007). Ethnic stereotypes gain the upper hand and become a factor in enemy images and further conflict behaviour.

c) Between the state and local groups.
In many African countries the state is weak and dysfunctional, not providing services or effective legal redress to citizens, but it is still expanding its administrative and military presence in many formerly outlying areas. The aims are political and economic: stabilization of border areas, controlling of insurgent activities, and opening up land for external investment or resource extraction and taking a share of profits and taxes. The development of game parks for tourism is also one example; having recently created problems and controversy, e.g., in southern Ethiopia (cf. the experiences with the EU Funded National Parks project, 1994-1998, and the African Parks Foundation, 2004-2008). Local people in marginal pastoral areas are seldom consulted, and are confronted with state enclosures, hunting bans
and prohibitions on mobility. When clashes occur between two pastoral groups or a pastoral group and a farmer group, the government often comes in too late and lets the conflict rage on before efforts at mediation or settlement are attempted. A state-sponsored peace ceremony or agreement is often incomplete and does hardly set about to solve the underlying long-term problems, because for addressing them political reform and costly policies for developments are needed.

Many of the problems between groups relate the heritage of colonial borders, across which pastoral groups move to exploit traditional seasonal pasture land, although they are formally not allowed to do so any longer as nominal citizens of another country. Long-term ecological and political developments or decisions have had economic consequences that induce people to take action or to resist, sometimes in violent ways. But there is also the persistent view by outsiders that pastoralists live in quite different spaces, far from ‘civilization’.

Common forms of violent action among pastoral populations as well as sedentary farming people (although the latter more often as victims) are:
- livestock raiding
- attack on villages
- targeted or random killings
- ambushes to rob people
- attacking traders or travellers going to the markets, and
- abductions.

When disputes arise, the impulse among the contending parties nowadays is often not to send a delegation and ask for discussion and negotiation through established channels, but to ‘create facts’ by acts of violence, to intimidate, eliminate or to chase out people from disputed areas by one of the means or tactics just mentioned (see also the model in the Appendix). This leads to spirals of violence that are not easily broken, not even by customary ritual leaders or religious figures. A neglected issue of attention here is the nature of the violence perpetrated in contemporary conflicts: ‘new’ forms of abuse and cruelty in fighting often create deep psychological scars and unplaceable hatred among people. Conflicts in addition often lead to damaging livelihood prospects, as fields cannot be safely cultivated, with food scarcity the result, and livestock cannot optimally access essential grazing areas, leading to their weakening and often death.

The impact of state policies and trans-border linkages of pastoralist conflicts

While no one doubts that the modern state, also in developing countries, has a prime role to play in de-escalating conflicts, maintain justice, and invest in service provision and ‘development’, there are conditions that make all this difficult. For example, a problem for state authorities is to effectively counter-act long-term ecological and economic changes in the pastoral areas; there is climate change, less rainfall, demographic expansion, and periodic livestock disease. There are trans-border conflicts or civil wars impacting on neighbouring groups, including the rapid spread of modern arms, often procured in one country and used in another. The impact of the southern Somalia conflicts on Ethiopia-Somalia border areas is one example; the expansion of the Nuer in the Ethio-Sudanean border area (Gambela), threatening the Anywa people, another.

In many pastoralist areas, state authorities have given up the semblance of exercising consensual authority, and ‘rule’ by force and violence (Darfur, northern Uganda, the Ogaden, northeast Kenya), although claims to sovereign power over the areas are not given up. As noted above, in other areas inhabited by pastoral peoples, state authority and its policing functions are gradually expanding in symbolic and material from (offices, police stations, etc.), although they are neither very efficient nor fair.

Incorporation of the marginal pastoral areas is thus often part of a state (re)building process, whereby cooptation and control are seen as essential. This policy from above has political and economic consequences, e.g. overall displacement of local people in their own areas, resisted by pastoralists for political-economic and cultural reasons. Trans-border economic activities - e.g., transhumance or livestock trade - are often also hindered by the state authorities, with the intent to control them and collect taxes, but the effect is to reduce the potential economic local benefits, to disturb customary patterns of exchange, and introduce an often arbitrary ‘legal’ of certain economic practices. In addition, land expropriations for external investment are often made without consultation of local people, let alone compensation. The cultural hegemony of state policy and its civilizational narratives or ideology leads in many cases to predictable depreciation of local traditions. A prime example is the state prohibition, some years back, of ceremonial stick duelling - deemed ‘violent’ - among the Suri people in southwest Ethiopia, or the interference of the Ethiopian state in Borana-Oromo rituals such as the groo group, a big initiation and generation-set ceremony held every eight years (The last one was in 2004). The authorities then descend on the Borana ceremonial meeting place with a host of officials and media people seemingly to ‘annex’ this event, intending to determine much of the proceedings and to advise on ‘policy outcomes’. This seems to show a lack of respect for an important local cultural tradition and incorrectly puts political demands on it.

At the same time, the state authorities have great difficulty or reluctance in investing in educational, medical, infrastructural and other facilities in the pastoral areas, or to put acceptable political mechanisms in place that prevent conflict or effectively allow mediation in cases of emerging disputes. There is much scope for taking the pastoral areas more seriously in this respect, all the more so because pastoral people link up with their ethics or regional brethren across national borders (Somali, Afar, Gabra, Maasai, etc.).

In their dealings with pastoralists, state authorities would also do better to recognize the relative autonomy of pastoral peoples, both politically and economically. Sedentary rain-fed agriculture will not be possible in the pastoral areas and in general livestock herding is more viable there than other agrarian pursuits. This means for example that the usual plans for the ‘sedenitization’ of pastoralist people should be modified. The state should also, perhaps with NGO assistance, institute conflict warning systems and establish a working local justice system that utilizes both the appeals to local customary mechanisms of dispute resolution as well as to a modern court system. If these things are in place, then the rationality of appealing to them, instead of grabbing the gun, is more evident. Donor countries have provided funding for such initiatives, but they have not been effectively used or monitored. In sum, the state authorities might be called upon to recognize the specificity of pastoral problems and their wider impact on sedentary populations, and enhance the political representation of pastoralists in over-arching structures (cf. Lister 2004) so that they can build on their Anuak roles, another.

In many pastoralist areas, state authorities have given up the semblance of exercising consensual authority, and ‘rule’ by force and violence (Darfur, northern Uganda, the Ogaden, northeast Kenya), although claims to sovereign power over the areas are not given up. As noted above, in other areas inhabited by pastoral peoples, state authority and its policing functions are gradually expanding in symbolic and material from (offices, police stations, etc.), although they are neither very efficient nor fair.

Incorporation of the marginal pastoral areas is thus often part of a state (re)building process, whereby cooptation and control are seen as essential. This policy from above has political and economic consequences, e.g. overall displacement of local people in their own areas, resisted by pastoralists for political-economic and cultural reasons. Trans-border economic activities - e.g., transhumance or livestock trade - are often also hindered by the state authorities, with the intent to control them and collect taxes, but the effect is to reduce the potential economic local benefits, to disturb customary patterns of exchange, and introduce an often arbitrary 'legal' of certain economic practices. In addition, land expropriations for external investment are often made without consultation of local people, let alone compensation. The cultural hegemony of state policy and its civilizational narratives or ideology leads in many cases to predictable depreciation of local traditions. A prime example is the state prohibition, some years back, of ceremonial stick duelling - deemed 'violent' - among the Suri people in southwest Ethiopia, or the interference of the Ethiopian state in Borana-Oromo rituals such as the groo group, a big initiation and generation-set ceremony held every eight years (The last one was in 2004). The authorities then descend on the Borana ceremonial meeting place with a host of officials and media people seemingly to 'annex' this event, intending to determine much of the proceedings and to advise on 'policy outcomes'. This seems to show a lack of respect for an important local cultural tradition and incorrectly puts political demands on it.

At the same time, the state authorities have great difficulty or reluctance in investing in educational, medical, infrastructural and other facilities in the pastoral areas, or to put acceptable political mechanisms in place that prevent conflict or effectively allow mediation in cases of emerging disputes. There is much scope for taking the pastoral areas more seriously in this respect, all the more so because pastoral people link up with their ethics or regional brethren across national borders (Somali, Afar, Gabra, Maasai, etc.).

In their dealings with pastoralists, state authorities would also do better to recognize the relative autonomy of pastoral peoples, both politically and economically. Sedentary rain-fed agriculture will not be possible in the pastoral areas and in general livestock herding is more viable there than other agrarian pursuits. This means for example that the usual plans for the 'sedentarization' of pastoralist people should be modified. The state should also, perhaps with NGO assistance, institute conflict warning systems and establish a working local justice system that utilizes both the appeals to local customary mechanisms of dispute resolution as well as to a modern court system. If these things are in place, then the rationality of appealing to them, instead of grabbing the gun, is more evident. Donor countries have provided funding for such initiatives, but they have not been effectively used or monitored. In sum, the state authorities might be called upon to recognize the specificity of pastoral problems and their wider impact on sedentary populations, and enhance the political representation of pastoralists in over-arching structures (cf. Lister 2004) so that they can build on their Anuak roles, another.

In many pastoralist areas, state authorities have given up the semblance of exercising consensual authority, and 'rule' by force and violence (Darfur, northern Uganda, the Ogaden, northeast Kenya), although claims to sovereign power over the areas are not given up. As noted above, in other areas inhabited by pastoral peoples, state authority and its policing functions are gradually expanding in symbolic and material from (offices, police stations, etc.), although they are neither very efficient nor fair.

Incorporation of the marginal pastoral areas is thus often part of a state (re)building process, whereby cooptation and control are seen as essential. This policy from above has political and economic consequences, e.g. overall displacement of local people in their own areas, resisted by pastoralists for political-economic and cultural reasons. Trans-border economic activities - e.g., transhumance or livestock trade - are often also hindered by the state authorities, with the intent to control them and collect taxes, but the effect is to reduce the potential economic local benefits, to disturb customary patterns of exchange, and introduce an often arbitrary 'legal' of certain economic practices. In addition, land expropriations for external investment are often made without consultation of local people, let alone compensation. The cultural hegemony of state policy and its civilizational narratives or ideology leads in many cases to predictable depreciation of local traditions. A prime example is the state prohibition, some years back, of ceremonial stick duelling - deemed 'violent' - among the Suri people in southwest Ethiopia, or the interference of the Ethiopian state in Borana-Oromo rituals such as the groo group, a big initiation and generation-set ceremony held every eight years (The last one was in 2004). The authorities then descend on the Borana ceremonial meeting place with a host of officials and media people seemingly to 'annex' this event, intending to determine much of the proceedings and to advise on 'policy outcomes'. This seems to show a lack of respect for an important local cultural tradition and incorrectly puts political demands on it.

At the same time, the state authorities have great difficulty or reluctance in investing in educational, medical, infrastructural and other facilities in the pastoral areas, or to put acceptable political mechanisms in place that prevent conflict or effectively allow mediation in cases of emerging disputes. There is much scope for taking the pastoral areas more seriously in this respect, all the more so because pastoral people link up with their ethics or regional brethren across national borders (Somali, Afar, Gabra, Maasai, etc.).

In their dealings with pastoralists, state authorities would also do better to recognize the relative autonomy of pastoral peoples, both politically and economically. Sedentary rain-fed agriculture will not be possible in the pastoral areas and in general livestock herding is more viable there than other agrarian pursuits. This means for example that the usual plans for the 'sedentarization' of pastoralist people should be modified. The state should also, perhaps with NGO assistance, institute conflict warning systems and establish a working local justice system that utilizes both the appeals to local customary mechanisms of dispute resolution as well as to a modern court system. If these things are in place, then the rationality of appealing to them, instead of grabbing the gun, is more evident. Donor countries have provided funding for such initiatives, but they have not been effectively used or monitored. In sum, the state authorities might be called upon to recognize the specificity of pastoral problems and their wider impact on sedentary populations, and enhance the political representation of pastoralists in over-arching structures (cf. Lister 2004) so that they can build on their Anuak roles, another.
local alliances and become partners in developing policies more towards compromise and cooperation with their sedentary neighbours. In Ethiopia, this is partly happening on the regional and zonal levels, where pastoral representatives are gradually more visible and allowed to air their views. Developing policies on the ground, however, also requires recognizing the useful practical role of local (and up to a point international) NGOs.

Traditional conflict management procedures: prospects and realities

A start to conflict management, or rather transformation of conflict into manageable structures, is to depart from the immediate concern of the parties in a specific conflict. What are the casualties and the damage, how do they discursively frame their problems and opposition to others in a historical perspective, and trying to weigh who tells what version of the disputes and why. The trajectory of conflict can be analysed in event sequences and against the background of contextual factors, like (see the model in the Appendix) the long-term conditions of inequality, marginalization, environmental stress (Meier, Bond & Bond 2007), and problematic state policies of hegemony and incorporation. The third step is to reconstruct the 'trigger events', or the immediate agency of those involved, and address them concretely. Here decision-theory is needed: who initiates/decides on violent action, who joins and why?

In view of the precarious long-term political-ecological conditions of pastoral and agro-pastoral groups in Africa, it is impossible to expect that they will not be in conflict in the foreseeable future. But the puzzle or the cause for worry is the pressure on the mediation structures, of procedures of agreement-reaching and of shared action that could maintain or restore (some of) the common economic activities (e.g., sharing wells, dry season pastures, use of stretches of bush or forest) that the groups customarily resorted to, and to a large extent still do (cf. Desalegn et al. 2005; Lemma 2008; Ahmed & Yared 2008). Here the modern states in the Horn of Africa have mostly failed, either in 'early warning' and policing or in taking the problems and emerging violent conflicts of these groups seriously - probably because the latter were seen as located in 'marginal', ill-serviced areas, of no direct political significance to the state. As the persistent Ogaden conflict in southeast Ethiopia (a new round of violent confrontations started in 2007, and is still going on) has shown, this was a great miscalculation: pastoral groups are more and more involved in trans-border resistance movements, criminal activities (commercial cattle rustling), and perhaps also in radical-militant (if not terrorist) activities. See the Ogaden National Liberation Front’s (ethnic Somalis) attack in April 2007 on an oil exploration site in Ethiopia, killing 74 people in cold blood, activities of Somalis in the Kenya and Ethiopia frontier areas (cf. Osamba 2008); the Darfur-Chad rebel and criminal movements; or the Karamojong disturbances in northeast Uganda (Simones 2005).

As was noted at the start of this paper, expectations of conflict resolution in areas of conflict, notably in marginal pastoral areas, are in general too high-strung. Underlying ecological-economic, political and cultural problems are long-term and persistent, and local political culture in developing countries in Africa is largely authoritarian and state-centred, not geared to the effective flow and use of local traditions or initiatives. Cycles of conflict are often the result of failed attempts to start with the recognition that in pastoral areas the relations among pastoral groups themselves, as well as between pastoralists and cultivators or state agents, are structurally unstable. Miezeler & Young (2000: 426) even have talked about the Karamojong as a situation with 'a stable from of disorder'. But sometimes new rules of access to resources and balances of power can emerge from persistent violent conflict (cf. Uhrush 2005).

The role of the state can of course be important in contributing to conflict management (cf. Yohannes et al. 2004: 34-35). But it must be seen as one partner, and must rather provide the wider normative and institutional framework for developing solutions, but not prescribe them with armed force and administrative rigour from above. Policies that tie in with local views and initiatives, find socio-cultural resonance, and appeal to trans-group cooperation in areas of common interest (e.g., common property management) are to be stimulated. As said, there are also initiatives from within pastoral peoples themselves to at least start addressing problems. This was evident in December 2007 in the large meeting of representatives of 17 pastoral peoples in the Sudan–Ethiopia border area, held in Kangaten, southern Ethiopia. Only by patiently building on the results of such meetings can any headway be made in addressing conflict and its underlying causes, as well as in reflecting on the revival or adaptive reconstruction of (customary) dispute resolutions acceptable to all.

Conclusion: towards the acceptance and management of structural instability

A start to conflict management, or rather transformation of conflict into manageable structures, is to depart from the immediate concern of the parties in a specific conflict. What are the casualties and the damage, how do they discursively frame their problems and opposition to others in a historical perspective, and trying to weigh who tells what version of the disputes and why. The trajectory of conflict can be analysed in event sequences and against the background of contextual factors, like (see the model in the Appendix) the long-term conditions of inequality, marginalization, environmental stress (Meier, Bond & Bond 2007), and problematic state policies of hegemony and incorporation. The third step is to reconstruct the 'trigger events', or the immediate agency of those involved, and address them concretely. Here decision-theory is needed: who initiates/decides on violent action, who joins and why?

In view of the precarious long-term political-ecological conditions of pastoral and agro-pastoral groups in Africa, it is impossible to expect that they will not be in conflict in the foreseeable future. But the puzzle or the cause for worry is the pressure on the mediation structures, of procedures of agreement-reaching and of shared action that could maintain or restore (some of) the common economic activities (e.g., sharing wells, dry season pastures, use of stretches of bush or forest) that the groups customarily resorted to, and to a large extent still do (cf. Desalegn et al. 2005; Lemma 2008; Ahmed & Yared 2008). Here the modern states in the Horn of Africa have mostly failed, either in 'early warning' and policing or in taking the problems and emerging violent conflicts of these groups seriously - probably because the latter were seen as located in 'marginal', ill-serviced areas, of no direct political significance to the state. As the persistent Ogaden conflict in southeast Ethiopia (a new round of violent confrontations started in 2007, and is still going on) has shown, this was a great miscalculation: pastoral groups are more and more involved in trans-border resistance movements, criminal activities (commercial cattle rustling), and perhaps also in radical-militant (if not terrorist) activities. See the Ogaden National Liberation Front's (ethnic Somalis) attack in April 2007 on an oil exploration site in Ethiopia, killing 74 people in cold blood, activities of Somalis in the Kenya and Ethiopia frontier areas (cf. Osamba 2008); the Darfur-Chad rebel and criminal movements; or the Karamojong disturbances in northeast Uganda (Simones 2005).

As was noted at the start of this paper, expectations of conflict resolution in areas of conflict, notably in marginal pastoral areas, are in general too high-strung. Underlying ecological-economic, political and cultural problems are long-term and persistent, and local political culture in developing countries in Africa is largely authoritarian and state-centred, not geared to the effective flow and use of local traditions or initiatives. Cycles of conflict are often the result of failed attempts to start with the recognition that in pastoral areas the relations among pastoral groups themselves, as well as between pastoralists and cultivators or state agents, are structurally unstable. Miezeler & Young (2000: 426) even have talked about the Karamojong as a situation with 'a stable from of disorder'. But sometimes new rules of access to resources and balances of power can emerge from persistent violent conflict (cf. Uhrush 2005).

The role of the state can of course be important in contributing to conflict management (cf. Yohannes et al. 2004: 34-35). But it must be seen as one partner, and must rather provide the wider normative and institutional framework for developing solutions, but not prescribe them with armed force and administrative rigour from above. Policies that tie in with local views and initiatives, find socio-cultural resonance, and appeal to trans-group cooperation in areas of common interest (e.g., common property management) are to be stimulated. As said, there are also initiatives from within pastoral peoples themselves to at least start addressing problems. This was evident in December 2007 in the large meeting of representatives of 17 pastoral peoples in the Sudan–Ethiopia border area, held in Kangaten, southern Ethiopia. Only by patiently building on the results of such meetings can any headway be made in addressing conflict and its underlying causes, as well as in reflecting on the revival or adaptive reconstruction of (customary) dispute resolutions acceptable to all.

In Ethiopia this is now a big problem because of a new law (of 2009) severely restricting if not cropping the activities and mandates of NGOs in the country.

---

15 In Ethiopia this is now a big problem because of a new law (of 2009) severely restricting if not cropping the activities and mandates of NGOs in the country.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to the participants at the Workshop on traditional conflict resolution, at the Bonn Centre for Conversion (Bonn, 27 March 2009), for their critical comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers of EJSSH for their careful reading of the paper and their criticism and valuable suggestions, urging me to improve this paper.

References


Joon Abbink


APPENDIX: Sketch of a generative mode of violent conflict (in pastoral societies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infrastructural conditions and root causes (longue durée factors)</th>
<th>Precipitating or proximate causes (short-cycle factors)</th>
<th>Positive intervening factors:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic inequality</td>
<td>Bad leadership: internal or by state agents</td>
<td>* Appeals and de-escalating actions by ritual leaders or elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political marginalization</td>
<td>Development project interventions</td>
<td>* Pre-emptive action by neutral state agents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct, visible exploitation by outsiders</td>
<td>High number of livestock deaths due to disease or epidemic</td>
<td>* Mediating role of local or foreign NGOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erosion of customary dispute resolution mechanisms</td>
<td>Commercial livestock raids (fuelled by outsiders)</td>
<td>* Trans-group collective action by women's groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited or blocked market access</td>
<td>Sharp increase in the spread of modern arms (automatics)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land alienation (by state or companies, e.g. for national parks)</td>
<td>Lack of rainfall causing acute crisis: drought and/or food scarcity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disputed border location</td>
<td>Play upon ethno-cultural difference via (in)formal ranking and inferiorization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generational opposition (young vs. old)</td>
<td>Humiliating actions of non-group members vis-a-vis cultural traditions or specific custom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural traditions validating aggressive action (initiation, raiding, masculinity ideals)</td>
<td>Cases of abuse or bias in the legal system against a group, and lack of protective and policing activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental deprivation or degradation, due to natural or political-economic causes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State incorporation, or appropriation of local powers, e.g. of traditional mediators or local ritual leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Short-cycle factors:
- Bad leadership: internal or by state agents
- Development project interventions
- High number of livestock deaths due to disease or epidemic
- Commercial livestock raids (fuelled by outsiders)
- Sharp increase in the spread of modern arms (automatics)
- Lack of rainfall causing acute crisis: drought and/or food scarcity
- Play upon ethno-cultural difference via (in)formal ranking and inferiorization
- Humiliating actions of non-group members vis-a-vis cultural traditions or specific custom
- Cases of abuse or bias in the legal system against a group, and lack of protective and policing activity

Triggers:
- Group monopolization of wells
- Raids on cattle
- Inter-group homicide
- Village raid
- Revenge attack
- Abduction/abuse of females or children
- State land grab
- State repressive measures/campaigns
- Territorial infringement

Negative intervening factors:
- Individual criminal acts
- Specific divide-and-rule tactics by incitement by either outsiders or group members

ARMED CONFLICT