Ethnicity & Conflict in the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

KATSUYOSHI FUKUI
& JOHN MARKAKIS

The Horn of Africa is the area bounded by the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Nile basin, and the East African highlands. It is a vast area with a richly variegated physical environment, to whose requirements the inhabitants of the region adapted themselves with great ingenuity. The cultural landscape of the region is also immensely varied, as is shown in the contributions to this volume. Variety notwithstanding, the people who share the region have much in common. A sizeable but diminishing section of the Horn's population are pastoralists occupying a distinct ecological niche, and their material and social culture though varied in form is similar in essence. That culture is now under intolerable stress throughout the region, and the pastoralists are involved in a violent struggle for survival, also depicted in several contributions to this volume. The majority of the region's inhabitants are cultivators whose existence, like that of the pastoralists, is jeopardized by drought, famine and violent conflict. Impoverished and powerless, they are victimized by all sides. The truth of the African saying, 'When elephants fight, the grass suffers,' is vividly illustrated in this volume with case-studies of cultivators caught in the maelstrom of war fought within and across state borders. This is another distressing aspect of the conflict that joins the people of the region in common misfortune, as war spills across state borders and people flee across frontiers in search of refuge.

Conflict has been endemic in this region for two decades. In their introduction to *Warfare among East African Herders* (1979) Fukui and Turton noted that intertribal fighting among pastoralists in this region was exacerbated in the 1970s by the

worse incidents of drought and famine in living memory, and the easy availability of firearms, which were now coming into common use. Much worse was in store for the region in the 1980s, when drought became the rule and famine reached biblical proportions. War spread to agricultural regions, and was fought on many levels simultaneously — between states, regions, ethnic groups, clans and lineages. Thanks to sophisticated weaponry generously supplied by patrons from abroad, warfare was waged on high technological levels far above the region's native capacity, and the antiquated Austrian Mannlicher rifle, the weapon of the 1970s, was now replaced by the Kalashnikov. Such escalation changed the nature of war just as anthropologists were coming to grips with this subject, and some of them found the groups they were studying facing extinction.

There are few areas or communities in the Horn fortunate enough to have avoided direct involvement in the manifold conflict. The selection of case-studies in this volume covers a broad spectrum of recent experiences by a variety of groups in different parts of the region. They range in size from the Oromo in Ethiopia, who number perhaps 20 million, to the Koegu in the same country who number less than 500. Some of them, like the marginal groups of the Omo valley, are involved in classic confrontations with their immediate neighbours over land. However, the nature of the conflict has changed even there, and a group can be literally decimated in one engagement. Other groups are drawn into larger regional confrontations, which provide a broader setting for the continuation of local disputes. Larger and more advanced groups, like the Dinka and the Oromo, are involved in conflicts at the level of the state, and for goals that include autonomy and even independence.

What purpose is served in putting such disparate groups under the same analytical spotlight? It is not merely to demonstrate the all-embracing nature of the conflict in this region, although that is an important part of the story. Rather, one purpose is to illustrate the variety of motives and goals involved in what is simply and obscurely labelled 'ethnic conflict'. This variety is best demonstrated in the sharply focused studies of small groups contributed by anthropologists. A contrasting purpose is to depict the common context — historical, material, political — within which motives and goals are defined and pursued, and this emerges most clearly in the more general treatment of the larger groups.

Conflict in what might be called the contemporary tribal zone, since it lies at the margin of the state's effective range of authority, is set apart by at least one peculiar feature: its motives

and goals are unrelated to the state, although the latter can significantly influence the course and outcome of the conflict — for example, by controlling the supply of firearms. Studies of conflict at the margin are presented in the first part of this volume. In contrast, with regard to motives and goals, the state is the common point of reference in conflicts involving groups large enough to compete at the centre for state power. Studies of conflict at this level are presented in the third part. Often, smaller groups are drawn into confrontations at the state level which are not directly relevant to their own motives and goals but which they seek to exploit for their own parochial purposes. Case-studies of this kind are included in the second part.

Like the conflict itself, the purpose of this work is manifold. Rejecting the Hobbesian explanation for social conflict, as indicated by Turton in his essay, the contributors delve into the motivation of those who engage in it. As is to be expected, given the many differences among the groups studied, conclusions vary, though without being fundamentally contradictory. The impact of violent conflict on social and cultural institutions and values is another theme pursued by the contributors to this volume. The destructive aspect of war is predictable. Even so, the impact of widespread and protracted warfare depicted in this volume, waged without defined front lines or distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, is stunning.

The impact, however, is not unambivalent. A contrasting theme emerges from the accounts of peoples' creative responses to the hazards posed by conflict. These concern not merely survival, but also social and cultural adaptation to new circumstances. The adoption of new technologies of warfare is the most obvious response. More significantly, this may be followed by social adaptation to new circumstances created by conflict. The coalescence of clans and lineages into larger political units with unified leadership, usually labelled 'tribes', is such an adaptation familiar to social anthropologists. Indeed, 'tribalization' is said to have occurred centuries ago in the 'tribal zone' as a response to pressures from expanding European imperialism (Ferguson & Whitehead, 1992: 12–16). In this volume, Lamphear describes this process in connection with the Jie and Turkana in the mid-nineteenth century. Turton suggests that war is essential to the creation and maintenance of Mursi political unity. Also in this volume, Allen points to a contrasting phenomenon, that is, the weaving of networks of social interaction that span 'tribal' lines between the Acholi and Madi, which are relied upon to mitigate the impact of 'tribal' conflict between these two groups.

Most parties to the conflict in the Horn wage sophisticated propaganda battles, deploying a variety of ideological weapons. Nationalism, socialism, religion and ethnicity are commonly used. The first three have a universal appeal, designed to transcend the parochial attraction of the fourth, and have been used for that purpose by those who control the post-colonial state in this region. As it turned out, ethnicity proved by far superior as a principle of political solidarity and mobilization, and emerged as the dominant political force from the wreckage of the post-colonial state. Therefore, it would seem that the 'ethnic' label usually attached to conflict at all levels in this region is not altogether inappropriate.

The conundrum ethnicity represents as a concept and tool of social analysis is well known. It is a term, someone wrote, 'that invites fruitless definitional arguments among those professional intellectuals who think they know, or ought to know, what it means' (Tonkin *et al.*, 1989: 11). Its application in a multitude of conflict situations compounds confusion, which is why Horowitz (1985: xi) complains 'there is too much knowledge and not enough understanding' about ethnicity. At the centre of the confusion is the hazy perception of the 'ethnic group' itself. Aside from the old primordial (Shils, 1957; Geertz, 1967) and the new socio-biological (Van den Berghe, 1981) schools of thought on this subject, it is generally agreed that the ethnic group is a social construct and, therefore, subject to change. Its fluid, chameleon-like character defies precise definition and limits its value as a category for analysis.

A long, earnest discussion took place during the 1991 Osaka symposium, at which the papers included in this volume were presented, and it was not without misgivings that the participants consented to the use of the term 'ethnic', which they deemed to have little analytical value, in conjunction with the type of conflict they had studied. The anthropologists, who were the majority, considered it impossible to define ethnic identities on the basis of genealogical or cultural criteria, because, once the ideological screen of common origin is pushed aside, a complex pattern of fusion and fission among groups is revealed which, if it follows any discernible rule, it is to enhance a group's chances for survival.

Discussions on the definition of ethnicity often conclude that the term need not be defined for scholarly work to proceed. In his contribution to this volume, Turton also argues that it is not necessary to start by defining ethnic identity, because 'an ethnic group is not a group because of ethnicity, but because its

members engage in common action and share common interests' (p. 17). These are operational criteria to be applied by the researcher to collective behaviour in competitive or conflict situations, and the approach is the reverse of the usual one that begins with a priori definition of the 'ethnic group'. Once the group is identified on this basis, then the ethnic construct can be matched with it to see how it fits. As indicated below, this is not to deny that the construct itself possesses a force of its own. A group's cohesion, however, derives from its members' perception of shared interests, and in the case of the Mursi according to Turton, these are focused on a particular territory, the occupation of which appears to be the foundation of Mursi identity. In Turton's interpretation of Mursi ideology, their ethnic identity is temporal and likely to dissolve into its clan components once this territory is lost. Furthermore, in an advance on the 'tribalization' thesis, Turton suggests that war is not simply a means by which an existing 'tribe' defends its territory, but rather it is the essential means by which such political superstructures have been created and are maintained among the Mursi and their neighbours in the Omo valley. In this sense, ethnicity is not the cause of war, but the reverse.

In his discussion of the Mela, neighbours of the Mursi, Fukui argues that shared culture cannot create a group, unless its members share the 'we consciousness', which is contrasted to the consciousness of 'they'. These perceptions are not fixed, because some who were 'they' in the past are now 'we', and the reverse is also probably true. In his re-creation of Mela ethnogenesis, Fukui unravels a complex pattern of fusion and fission of groups which is designed to ensure clan survival and hegemony. In his analysis of Mela conflict, Fukui finds an equally complex pattern of confrontation, involving a number of groups with varied historical and cultural affinities, as well as economic relations, *vis-à-vis* the Mela. Ethnic, that is, genealogical and cultural, factors are important in defining this pattern, but they are not the only ones that seem to have a role in determining the incidence and intensity of conflict. In essence, Fukui sees conflict as the catalyst in the process of Mela ethnogenesis, and as a mechanism for adjusting population movement to territory. In his study of the Koegu, Matsuda believes he found this miniscule group in the process of 'drifting' across the ethnic boundary, and presumably redefining its identity by repositioning itself between its neighbours. Low-intensity conflict mediated this process and acted as the balancing mechanism of inter-group relations.

Allen in his study of Acholi–Madi relations describes what he

calls 'inside' and 'outside' spheres of moral and social interaction, which cut across conventional 'ethnic' lines. Thus, while at one level the dividing line of the conflict can be perceived by the people themselves to correspond with the Acholi–Madi 'ethnic' divide, at another, less visible level the same people interact positively in networks that cut across 'tribal' lines. Indeed, such networks are relied upon in times of conflict to mitigate its consequences. Like Fukui, Allen found that clan and lineage ties are the threads out of which the networks comprising the 'inside' sphere are woven. This supports Turton's suggestion 'not only that clans are older than many of the political divisions they cut across, but that they are seen as the "stuff" of social life or "natural" by the people themselves' (p. 20). Both Turton and Allen agree with Schlee (1985: 19), who argues that 'a clan is not simply a sub-unit of a "tribe", because it can be represented in more than one "tribe"'. Inter-ethnic clan relationships, Schlee found, are relied upon in times of stress (1989: 7).

What is deduced from the study of marginal groups is that ethnic/tribal identities are essentially political products of specific situations, socially defined and historically determined. Turton and Fukui point to the functional role of conflict in defining and maintaining group boundaries which serve to delineate 'ethnic identity'. Turton, Fukui and Lamphear also point to the role of conflict in creating and maintaining political superstructures, that is, 'tribes'. In other words, seen in historical perspective, ethnicity and its representative structures ('tribes') emerge as the consequence rather than the cause of conflict.

Bringing the spotlight of history to bear on ethnicity — 'collocation' it was called by the editors of *History and Ethnicity* (Tonkin *et al.*, 1989) — is a recent and promising development. For one thing, it has expanded the scope of enquiry into the pre-colonial period, as Lamphear's essay demonstrates. Whenever possible, historically minded anthropologists, a new breed, trace the process of ethnic identity construction and reconstruction into the past, and the results are often illuminating. They suggest, according to one scholar who refers to East Africa, 'that the construction and deconstruction of tribal identities were features of history . . . before there was any major direct European influence on the ordering of identity there' (Willis, 1992: 193–4). Amselle (1990), who has conceptualized the *logique métisse* of structural fluidity and the politics of identity formation in Africa's past, is mostly critical of Western cultural anthropology for its static perception of ethnic identity, especially in the colonial setting.

Nevertheless, as Amselle recognizes, identity formation in the colonial setting becomes subject to new pressures and limits. A key factor introduced in this period is the administrative imperative of grouping Africans according to 'tribal' categories based on a variety of criteria, which included geography, language, names, political relationships, etc. The tendency is to create new fixed identities and to freeze existing ones. Allen contends that 'both the Acholi and Madi ethnic labels were colonial creations' (p. 123). This is a reference to the names assigned by colonial authorities to an assortment of groups for purposes of administrative convenience. However, as time passed and circumstances changed, the label came to designate a level of social interaction which can also function as a group in conflict situations. Africans found it was convenient, if not advantageous, to belong to a recognized 'tribe' when dealing with the colonial state. The 'invention of tribes' in the colonial setting, therefore, is not simply an administrative expedient employed by alien rulers, but also a native response to a drastically altered socio-economic and political environment. For this reason, Allen cautions against the dismissal of ethnic/tribal labels, on the grounds that they do represent social reality, despite the genealogical and cultural lacunae in their make-up.

The gestation of this reality in the colonial setting is a notion argued persuasively by many scholars, including Young (1976) and Nnoli (1989). Most consider the colonial urban setting to be the cradle of contemporary ethnicity, a phenomenon commonly regarded as the political manifestation of group competition that began in the colonial state. There seems to be a consensus that the coalescence which gives rise to 'tribes' and 'ethnic identities' occurred as a response to novel pressures in a changed environment, in which basic units — clans, lineages, villages — could not cope. If ethnicity, then, is essentially a political phenomenon of recent provenance, ethnic conflict must be examined in the context of the contemporary state.

In *Warfare among East African Herders* (1979) there is little mention of the state. The fact that the state's presence was lightly felt in the pastoralist regions of the Horn — the contemporary 'tribal zone' — until then, and that the herders carried on with their bloody feuds without regard to its authority is the main reason why the state does not appear as an actor in that collection. The fact that the narrow focus of social anthropology did not encompass the role of the state was another. An opening in this respect was made in the *Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* (James & Donham, 1986). In contrast, the state's visible presence is evident

in all the essays of the present volume. The state does not simply affect warfare in the tribal zone by its presence, or merely intervene in conflicts between third parties. The state itself is both the arena and a major contestant, when it is not the very object of violent conflict.

What has happened to propel the state into the centre of conflict? To begin with, the tribal zone does not exist any more, in the sense it can be said to have existed even in the anthropologist's imagination. Concern for territorial integrity, political security, smuggling and banditry led the post-colonial state in the Horn of Africa to establish a presence in the periphery of its domain, if only through military means. Furthermore, drought and famine in recent years have destroyed the last vestiges of self-sufficiency of most groups, and made them dependants of aid organizations operating under state control. However, these developments account for the heightened presence of the state, not its manifold involvement in war with its subjects. In order to account for the latter, we need to consider the nature of the state in the Horn of Africa.

This is the theme of Markakis's contribution to this volume. He points first to the expansionist trend associated with the modern state in this region, which began with the colonial partition of the Horn and continued in the post-colonial period. The state incorporated regions that were never fully integrated even administratively into its structure. In this periphery, inhabited by a *mélange* of alien and alienated groups, the state was able to maintain only a military presence. With memories of past autonomy still fresh, and lacking meaningful ties to their present rulers, some indigenous people engage in conflict in an attempt to regain autonomy. As Kurimoto says in this volume of the Pari, one reason for their aggressive actions is 'their wish to remain autonomous without government' (p. 100).

Another feature of the state in this region is what Mazrui (1975) calls 'ethnocracy', meaning the monopolization of state power by certain ethnic groups, and the consequent exclusion of the rest. The ruling groups have a proprietary attitude towards the state, and what they promote as the 'national' identity is the mirror image of their own ethnic ego. Consequently, the process of 'national integration' promoted by the state verges on assimilation. The target groups of this process often react by invoking their own cultural attributes in opposition, as Baxter describes in the case of the Oromo. Cultural oppression, then, is another source of confrontation, and tends to make ethnicity the ideological catalyst of the conflict.

In most instances, exclusion from state power correlates with exclusion from access to material and social resources controlled by the state, a correlation most evident in the periphery. This tends to perpetuate and aggravate disparities which have ecological and historical antecedents. Given the dominant role of the state in the production and distribution of material and social resources, it is not possible to redress such disparity without access to its power. Therefore, the struggle for scarce resources is waged on the political level, and the state is the focal point of it. Markakis notes that the areas of the Horn most lacking in development are also the ones where conflict has flourished.

To sum up, the state is the point of reference for an analysis of the conflict at several levels. At one level, the conflict is a struggle for recognition and power between those who control the state and those that seek a share of state power, or, alternatively, autonomy and even independence. At another level, it is a struggle for scarce resources, in which the state appears both as a protagonist and as the prize. At yet another level, it is a resistance struggle against a state-directed process of deracination of subordinate groups. By definition, in the 'ethnocratic' state there is a correlation between the patterns of social, economic and ethnic stratification. In this context, where cultural ('ethnic') differences coincide with socio-economic and political divisions, ethnicity inevitably becomes the ideological essence of the conflict.

In the same context, the process of 'tribalization' accelerates, as illustrated by several contributions to this volume. Baxter's account of the Oromo is illuminating. Not a compact group, they comprise what Lamphear calls in a different context a 'cultural confederation'. Finding themselves in a situation that demands ethnic political solidarity, not found in Oromo tradition, Oromo intellectuals strive to 'create' a national identity by invoking shared cultural elements, such as language. Likewise, Allen notes the reinforcement of Acholi ethnic identity through the propagation of a conjectured historical tradition. The regionalist movements discussed by Kurita also seek to forge political solidarity among groups which can best be described as 'cultural confederations', by emphasizing shared culture as well as interests. In contrast, the Uduk described by James, a marginal group that strives desperately to keep a low profile, have an ethnically defined political identity imposed on them by circumstances entirely beyond their control, and by external agents, that is rival forces battling for control of the state, missionaries and relief agencies.

Enough has been said to make the point that the 'ethnic' label invests the parties to the conflict with a corporate essence,

presumably deriving from genealogical and cultural factors, that simply does not exist. As indicated, ethnicity is the ideological form, not the substance, of the conflict, and like all ideologies it is not a cause but a symptom of social disorder. The reasons for its contemporary prominence must be sought in the situation that produced it. Like all ideologies, ethnicity aims to reduce complex phenomena into simple and related propositions in order to promote political mobilization. Those who respond to its appeal constitute the 'ethnic group' at a specific conjuncture. They are not, by any means, all those who would presumably qualify under the 'ethnic' criteria mentioned above. Nor are their motives uniform and their goals the same, as the ethnic ideology might imply.

The range of variation in motivation is wide. In the discussion at the Osaka symposium, the familiar divergence between the materialist and socio-cultural perspectives inevitably surfaced. The exposition of the former by Markakis highlights group competition for scarce resources and state intervention in this process. While rejecting this perspective, Turton marks the centrality of territory in the calculus of conflict, and Fukui refers to the demographic dimension of it. Indeed, the main variables of the materialist category — environment, demography, technology, political economy — appear in nearly all contributions as empirical factors linked to motivation.

Other factors, not as obvious, were identified. It was noted earlier that the conflict is fought at several levels simultaneously, ranging from lineage to state. Very often these levels overlap, and the question of motivation then becomes quite complex, as some of the studies in this volume illustrate. Kurimoto unravels an intricate pattern in the case of Pari adherence to the rebel cause led by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and the contrasting attitude of their closest neighbours. Among the factors involved is the antagonism inherent in the Pari age system between the ruling age grade and the youth. Mohamed Salih discusses the Dinka perception of the SPLM, in which they are the dominant group, and the apparent contradiction between Dinka traditional ideology with its parochial focus, and the SPLM's radical and universalistic aspirations for a new Sudan. Kurita adds several twists to this theme in her treatment of regionalist movements in Sudan. She notes the manipulation of regionalist popular aspirations by the leadership of regional movements — earlier in order to consolidate its local bases of power, and more recently in order to integrate itself into the ruling class at the centre. She underlines the irony of the latter

trend coming at a time when the central government, seeking local support in its battle for survival, is in effect restoring the tribal pattern fashioned during the colonial period.

The analytical virtues of this collection will interest the specialist. The insights it offers into the chemistry of the conflict will interest the expanding polyglot community of peacemakers, aid workers, and development experts who confront the consequences of the conflict in the Horn of Africa. For the layman whose attention has been drawn to the unending human drama in this region, it offers a collated picture of uncommon suffering and destruction composed of many images, often drawn by the people themselves. Extreme as it may seem, the odyssey of the Uduk people, recounted here in their own words, is the tragic fate of many millions in this region. Beyond gaining the reader's sympathy, it is hoped this volume will enhance his or her understanding of what is the real nature of 'ethnic conflict' in the Horn of Africa.

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