Resource based conflict framing among the Kereyu in the Upper and Middle Awash Valley of Ethiopia

Alemmaya Mulugeta

[1] The data for this article was collected using qualitative methods from social anthropology. Individual and group informal interviews and participant observation were employed to collect data. The interviewees were Kereyu elders, old women, young men who are involved in the conflicts, government officials who are close to the conflict and NGO staff working in the area.

This article presents aspects of a research project on so-called «violent resource based conflicts» in pastoral areas. It focuses on the question of how various actors among the main involved parties interpret and «frame» conflicts differently. It is a case study conducted among the Kereyu pastoral community in the upper and middle Awash valley of Ethiopia, a group that relates with other neighbouring groups and shares common resources through both violent and non-violent conflicts. Data collected in this community shows that the different conflict framings of Kereyu and other social actors involved in these conflicts allow different groups to take advantage of different situations. This variation in framing is accepted by the Kereyu and their neighbours as a means to cope with existing realities[1].

The setting

The Kereyu are Oromo pastoralists. In the middle Awash valley, where these data were collected, the Kereyu have five major neighbouring groups, the Afar, Arsi, Ittu, Argoba, and the Amhara. Among these groups, the Arsi and the Ittu are part of the Oromo group. The Afar are pastoralists, while the Ittu, Arsi, Argoba and Amhara are farmers. The Kereyu share both watering points and pasture land with these neighbours. According to discussions with them, the Kereyu share more pasture lands with the Afar than with other neighbouring groups since both are pastoralists and depend largely on the availability of, and access to, water and pastures. This close relationship often results in resource competition and violent conflicts between them (Ayalew 2001: 249).

Conflict framing

According to the Kereyu, all Oromo groups including their neighbours, the Ittu and Arsi belong together. Any competition over water and pasture resources with these groups should not lead to violence or killings. Killing a member of one's own group is a highly condemned act. *Kuppa* is a term used when a Kereyu kills one of his own group or an Oromo. *Kuppa* also refers to the individual who did the killing. Such *kuppa* are highly stigmatised individuals who are segregated from the community until blood compensation is made to the victim's clan. The term used for blood compensation is *guma* and the procedure is generally known as *arrara*.

Arrarra is held to avoid further killings between the killer and the victim's clan. The detailed procedures of *arrarra* may show variation across groups, depending on timing and locality. However generally it could be described as follows: when conflict arises among the Kereyu and their neighbours, and the conflict inflicts casualities, the group responsible for pays blood money. The blood price for an individual killed in the conflict mounts to one hundred head of cattle (Ayalew 2001: 180). Sometimes this compensation includes offering women as wives to the victim's clan in order to complete peace making. Once *arrarra* procedures are completed, the killer is free to engage in his community and also to move freely and to participate in everyday life. No stigma is attached to him after the procedure.

Violence between Kereyu and non-Oromo pastoral neighbours, and particularly the Afar, is, instead, embedded in the concept of *kundala*. *Kundala* refers to a person who kills non-Oromo neighbours at the time of a cattle raid or during conflicts over watering points. A *kundala* is a hero to his community. «People sang and honour a *kundala*. He brings the victim's weapons along with him. The women of the village put charms around his neck and head, specially *kupama*, a jewellery made of silver on the forehead after killing the Afar.» (Kereyu informers of the Fentale district) This jewellery is transferred to sons to remind them that they should do the same and wear it.

While the concepts of *kundala* and *kuppa* are frequently referred to in the community, the Kereyu do not frame conflicts in these terms in public peace negotiations and initiatives where government and NGOs working at the local level are involved. The reason why the Kereyu do not mention the concepts of *kuppa* and *kundala* is that the government is trying to establish formal legal procedures in regard to homicide. Accordingly, anyone who kills an individual is liable to prosecution under national law. The Kereyu, on the other hand, settle murder through blood compensation and want neither government involvement nor any kind of formal legal procedures as this would entail consequences for the person responsible. For this reason, they deny the existence of any form of violent conflict between the Kereyu and their neighbours, particularly the Afar. «Every time, we go crying to the government to do something about the conflict, the government tells us that if we want a solution, we should report the names of our children who take part in the fighting with the Afar. We do not want our children to go to jail. So we often do not report conflicts.» (Roba, personal interview, 2004, translated from Oromiyfa)

Occasionally, the Kereyu also stress that the causes for the age-old hostility between them and the Afar are due to ignorance and absence of value given to human life on the one hand and scarcity of water and pasture resources on the other. This, according to their own account, results in violent conflict over water points and grazing land. «Where there are water points, you see all the cattle, camels and goats gathered around them. When this water source dries up, we have to go far away and then we confront the Afar. We have to carry arms all the time on our way, especially when we go further and have to cross boundaries.» (Kereyu clan elder)

«I buy a weapon for my son and send him with the cattle. However, I tell him not to go far to places where he might meet the Afar. If there was enough grass and water around our own locality, I would not send him far. I will not send him to kill. However, he needs to take the cattle and camels where there is enough grass and water. If a fight arises, then he has to defend himself» (an elder, personal interview, May 2004).

Most civil society organisations and scholars share the opinion that conflicts such as the Kereyu have with their Afar neighbours are intrinsically due to resource depletion and land alienation. This is so because most scholars and development workers tend to overemphasise issues of development policy and underestimate the importance of local context in the framing of conflict. Albeit over-

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emphasised, the issue of development policy in fact contributes to the increase in violence between pastoral groups. In the development history of Ethiopia, the Kereyu are a group of pastoralists that have been pushed from the land they previously owned (Ayalew 2001: 190). As they often stress, their land was taken from them by consecutive governments for the purpose of large-scale agricultural enterprises and the expansion of a national park. This has diminished the resource base of the Kereyu because their grazing land and water sources shrank as the enterprises expanded.

The solution to such violent conflict, according to them would be the creation of alternative economic activities and a change in policy. Although the Kereyu secretly believe that their gradual eviction by the government from their primarily owned land aggravates the conflicts they have with their neighbours, in most peace conferences they know that government representatives are present. Therefore, discussions around eviction and expansion of owned land by the government are silenced because they do not want to take the risk of suffering retaliation as a result of statements made. Therefore, they participate in attributing the causes of conflicts to their own ignorance and to the lack of value given to human life.

Concluding remarks

The Kereyu pastoralists evidently face violent conflicts with neighbouring groups, particularly with the Afar. The explanations given to the causes of these violent conflicts vary widely and depends on who gives the explanation and the form of communication. The Kereyu themselves, on the one hand, admit that killing a person who is labelled as a known enemy is a heroic act and has social value within the community. On the other hand, conflicts are vices that are caused by ignorance and lack of value attributed to human life, and need to be mitigated through civilisation and educa-

tion. Non-governmental institutions, including indigenous institutions and scholars, are still inclined to believe that growingly diminishing resource bases due to wrong policy interventions have resulted in fierce competition and thus violent conflicts over scare resources. This variation in framing the causes of the same conflict has become a coping mechanism in existing conditions; it has also been the main challenge confronting the existing mitigation approach. The understanding of the communication genre, or framing, significantly helps to understand the pattern of the conflict as well as to create consensus among the conflicting parties to come up with a better mitigation approach through reframing. This should be considered in future studies. Most importantly, however, the social anthropologist's role should be to explore the local context of conflict framing by key parties in order better to understand the conflict itself with out disregarding the larger context.

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Author

Alemmaya Mulugeta is a social anthropologist in Ethiopia who obtained her MA in Ethiopia at Addis Ababa University. Currently she is conducting her PhD research in social anthropology (at the University of Basel, Switzerland) on the potential of local institutions in transforming resource based conflicts in pastoral areas of Ethiopia, based on a case study among the Kereyu and Afar pastoralists of the Rift Valley. Her research is funded by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South in Switzerland. Her work experience and interest is mainly in pastoralism and pastoral conflicts. This PhD project aims to gain understanding of these violent pastoral conflicts, with a special focus on assessing the potential of locally based institutions for transforming them. (PhD project title: *The Potential of Local Institutions for Conflict Transformation in Pastoral Areas of Ethiopia: A Case Study among the Pastoralists of the Upper-Middle Awash Valley*)

allemmaya_mu2002@yahoo.com