7. Reassessing the Gedeo-Guji conflicts

7.1. Introduction

The study of intergroup relations is both fascinating and challenging because of the fact that relationships are continually changing. The patterns of relations may alter for various reasons: global politics, industrialization, urbanization, social movements, local economic circumstances, national political conditions, government policy, and so on.

Some recent world trends show that there are changing dominant-group orientations towards minority groups. The large migrations of diverse peoples into Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the laws decreed in most of these nations in 1993-1994 resulted in a noticeable increase in deportation. In other places, intergroup relations ebb and flow, as between blacks and whites in South Africa, Hindus and Moslems in India, Moslems and Christians in Lebanon, Arabs and Jews in the Middle East, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and many other groups. All experience varying periods of cordial and conflictual inter relations with one another (Parrillo, 2002:24). Similarly, in this chapter as a final analysis, I will discuss how national level government policy affected Gedeo-Guji relations, and try to revisit our discussion in conjunction with theoretical arguments.

7.2. Changes in Gedeo-Guji Alliances

Gedeo and Guji were engaged in a series of conflicts with their neighboring groups such as the Sidama, Arsi and Borana. The Guji think that they were very fierce fighters. In fact, they are considered aggressive and, therefore, feared by many of their neighboring groups (Van De Loo 1991:16; Tadesse B., 2004:16-17). It should be noted that the Guji
share significant markers of ethnicity with the neighboring Oromo groups of Arsi and Borana---as common among the whole Oromo sub-groups (Baxter 1991:9) ---to a larger extent than what they do with the Gedeo. Nevertheless, as I discussed in chapter five, these shared commonalities could never curtail the long history of warfare between these same groups. On the contrary, the Guji have had a long peaceful and friendly relationship with the Gedeo who may be considered ‘distinct’ on the basis of such criteria (Asebe, 2007). It was also said paradoxical that the Gedeo and Guji fought in alliance against the Sidama (Tadesse, 2009:195), the group with which the Gedeo shares closer linguistic affinities and other cultural and social practices (McClellan, 1988:28).

However, the above assertions by different scholars----- Van De Loo, 1991; Baxter, 1991; McClellan, 1988; and Asebe, 2007----- exhibit the interethnic relationship among the groups before the introduction of federalism in Ethiopia as a new state structuring in early 1990s. Nowadays situations have radically changed. Guji’s relationship with its ‘historical enemies’---Borana and Arsi and the friendly relationship with the Gedeo have also changed as a result. Under the new federal policy and structure, the three Oromo groups (the Guji, Borana and Arsi) who used to consider each other as siddi saddin (the three enemies against one another) and fought each other for economic, social and political reasons, were put together under the Oromia regional state. They became reconciled with each other as Oromo ‘brothers’ and formed new alliances among themselves. But, the dark side of the alliance is, they jointly fought against their ‘new enemies’ such as the Gedeo, Sidama, Garre, and other Somali groups.

Dr. Tadesse Beriso (2009:196-199), the prominent scholar in the area of Guji-Oromo studies, in his recent publication, entitled: Changing Alliance of Guji-Oromo and their
Neighbors: State Policies and Local Factors came up with a quite different analysis. As to him, the new government policy, which acknowledges ethnic identity and ethnic rights, and the growing ethnic self-consciousness, has changed inter-ethnic relations in most parts of the country. The Guji and their adjoining groups (such as Gedeo, Borana, Arsi, Sidama, etc) are some of the people who have been affected by this policy. For example, in the past in the Wondo-Genet area hostility and raids characterized the relationship between the Guji and Arsi. In these conflicts the Guji and Sidama were uniting together against the Arsi, and the Arsi did not differentiate between the two (the Guji and Sidama) in their fighting. But what happened recently is quite different from the usual trends. There was a serious conflict between the Arsi and the Sidama during the early years of EPRDF’s coming to power. The major cause of the conflict was the question of where Wondo-Genet should belong in the new territorial re-structuring of the federal regions. Previously, the majority of Wondo-Genet was under Sidama province, while a small part was under Shashemene province of Shoa. In the new division, the Sidama and their new allies in the area (i.e., Kambata, Hadiya and Wolayta) wanted the whole area to be under the administration of Sidama zone of the SNNPR, while the Oromo groups (both the Arsi and Guji) wanted a large part of Wondo-Genet (up to Bussa) to be under the Oromia regional state. However, the federal government allocated most of the area to SNNPR, which incited conflict between the groups. As a result, to show their grouping with the Arsi, the Guji submitted an appeal to the Prime Minister’s office requesting for the land to be allocated to Oromia.

Similarly, one other study shows that there is a change in inter-ethnic relations among the Guji-Oromo and their other adjoining groups. It is reported that the three ‘historical
enemies’ (Guji, Arsi and Borana) jointly fought against the Garre ethnic group of Somali region. ‘In a violent conflict that broke out between the Garre and the Borana in 2001, the Guji and Arsi fought on the Borana side against the Garre and their allies (Schlee, 2009). According to Schlee, the changing alliances between pastoralist groups cannot be explained only in terms of pastoralist conflicts, pastoralist systems, pastoralist resources like pasture and water, and the like. As to him, while factors belonging to the sphere of the pastoral economy and ecology do have an effect on how alliances are shaped, factors from outside also play a role. Schlee suggests, among others, that ethnic politics and administrative policies of the states which involve the delineation of district or regional boundaries can be a major cause for conflict and changing alliances (Schlee, ibid).

Similarly, the changes in national political condition brought about changes in the inter-ethnic relationship between the Gedeo and the Guji. As a result of the rights enshrined in the new 1994 federal constitution, both Gedeo zone (SNNPR) and Borana zone (Oromia region) changed the languages used in formal administrative settings and in elementary schools. *Affan-Oromo* (the Guji-Oromo language) and *Gedeuffia* (the language of Gedeo) became the working languages in Borana zone (Oromia region) and in Gedeo zone (SNNPR) respectively. This action strengthened the opinion that only ‘the people of the region’, whose language becomes the working language, would control political power. Thus, the introduction of local languages in elementary schools made the issue more heated. The decision as to where an area is to be allocated, determines whether a Gedeo child would be taught in the Guji-Oromo language or vice versa. As a result of this, the Gedeo and Guji who were allying or having friendly relations changed
automatically to competitive relations. Excessive competition might end up into a conflict.

The new Guji and Arsi-Oromo alliance in the Wondo-Genet area; the Guji, Borana and Arsi alliance in the south; and the changes in Gedeo-Guji inter-ethnic relations are mainly the result of the new government policy, which re-engineered the old administrative structures merely along ethno-linguistic lines. Here we understand that national political systems and state policies can significantly influence inter-ethnic relations and alliances at local level (Tadesse B., 2009).

The influence of ethnic-based political organizations and the related revival of ethnic identities and ethnic nationalism are also responsible for the new alliance between the previously conflicting Arsi and Guji. The inter-ethnic relations between the Guji and their neighbors have therefore shown dynamic changes with the macro-level political changes. On top of these, the ordinary people did not understand (or were not made to sufficiently understand) what federalism meant; some even consider people of different regions as people from different countries. The historical ‘brotherly’ thinking and tolerance of differences, and appreciating the other’s way of life between Gedeo and Guji these days is becoming out of vogue.

It has been stated repeatedly that the major basis of the Ethiopian federalism is ethnicity. Nonetheless, the geographic boundaries of the regional states are not inhabited by homogenous ethnic groups; because in most cases ethnicity transcends physical boundary. Consequently, every regional state has a minority ethnic group, which has survived the influence of the majority for many years. The Guji in Gedeo zone and the Gedeo in Borana zone were/are minorities in our case. The fact that the federal model is
based primarily on ethnicity means by implication it enables every nation, nationality and people to establish its regional/local government and administer its area by itself, use its language, promote its culture, and preserve its history. This was what the Guji in the Gedeo zone lacked and in 1995 claimed to secure self-government and territorial integration. Later, the same claim arose by by the south Gedeo in the then Hagere-Mariam woreda in 1998.

In my view, the revival of ethnic nationalism, particularly after the introduction of ethnic federalism in the country, contributed the lion’s share of the conflicting relationships between the Gedeo and Guji peoples. The incited Oromo-nationalism by Oromo political elites together with the unfair treatment engendered the Guji minorities in Wonago and Dilla areas (in Gedeo zone) to claim for self government and territorial integration. It is said that the Guji in the then Gedeo zone were dominated and marginalized by the Gedeo officials. The Guji were denied their constitutional right to language, culture and employment in government administration and political positions in that zone. It was said that they were treated as secondary citizen in their country. It was this marginal status in the political, economic, and cultural spheres, and in employment opportunities that created discontent among the Guji-Oromo and galvanized them to seek self-government and integration with their other Oromo fellows in Borana zone, Oromia region. This is the fundamental cause for the 1995 conflict. Later, in 1998, the same claim raised by the Gedeo minorities in the then HagereMariam woreda which also should be taken as the fundamental cause of the conflict. This was of course backed by elite mobilization. The Guji elites used primordial ethnic markers as instrument to mobilize the rural mass to vigorously act against the Gedeo. They mobilized the mass for
violent action. As I have depicted in chapter five of this thesis, a group of Guji-Oromo elites even went up to the Prime Mister’s office (in 1994) to appeal their discontent. The role played by these political elites was very important. Besides, it was in connection with the public mobilization for war that the then Guji Abba Qallu and his son were charged and finally sent to jail, where both passed away after a couple of years in prison.

In this regard, Mafeje (1998:68) states that political crisis in Africa has nothing to do with imagined, invented or real ethnic groups. It has to do with struggle among modern African elites for power. The people in the hinterlands are only used as voting cattle or cannon fodder. To achieve their interests, the various elites invoke primordial elements. But the innocent can be misled into thinking that the issue is “ethnicity”. Political elites never refer to their real interests, such as the quest for power and wealth, when they invoke ethnicity.

Similarly, in Ethiopia instrumentalism influences both popular perceptions of ethnic identity and political discourses. The ethno-nationalist movements such as the TPLF, OLF, [GPDO] and SLF seek to instrumentalize the primordial elements of their ethnic constituencies for political mobilization. The introduction of ethnic federalism since early 1990s induced the institutionalization of primordial identity for political mobilization (Vaughan, 2003: 94-95). According to Merera, ethnicity and nationalism as mobilizing ideology can transcend religious, class and other divides, and the basis of mobilization may shift with new demands and opportunities under changing circumstances. Furthermore, ethnicity and nationalism, as ideology of political mobilization, can be used to maintain a given status quo in the name of ‘state or nation building’ political ventures--to defend the political, economic and socio-cultural interests of the dominant elite. The
goal can equally well be to change or remove the existing status quo in favor of the subordinate ethnic groups. In other words, in multi-ethnic societies, an ethnic-based dominant political class can use political mobilization to ensure the continuity of the structure of dominance and its privileges in the name of such national mottoes as ‘nation-building’ and ‘national-unity’. In the same way, marginalized groups can use it to end historical injustice, current exploitative relations and repression---as part of popular struggles for the creation of democratic governance (Merera, 2003).

In the Gedeo-Guji conflict the ruling party (EPRDF) and its ideological children such as OPDO and GPDM were struggling to maintain the status quo (the new state building endeavors of EPRDF---federalism) and worked hard to fulfill the political goal of the ruling party. To attain this goal, they used all possible means ranging from awareness creation and/or confidence building conferences to the use of military force. But it is also reported that there were some high government authorities and party members who played double or ambiguous roles. These officials, on the one hand, publicly talk as if they were safeguarding the ruling party’s policy and programs and seem committed to the mission and visions of the party; but covertly they were mobilizing their respective people so that they would fight to the best of their interests and advantages. For example, in the then Hagere-Mariam woreda some high government authorities were mobilizing the Guji against the Gedeo saying ‘it is only in your hands to defend your territory’; ‘it is only you who is supposed to defend your ancestral land.’ In this way the political elites used ethnicity as instrument to mobilize the mass.

The role played by the opposition parties (OLF and GPDO) is crystal clear. They used ethnicity as instrument to mobilize their respective people by agitating as if every
problem existing in their respective locality was the brainchild of EPRDF, and hence they attempted to mobilize people to struggle and avoid the system once and for all. In this respect, sometimes, the competition seems between the ruling and the opposition parties. But the ones who are sacrificing their life in the war are the innocent Gedeo and Guji peoples who think the war is to free them from ethnic domination, cultural, social and economic discriminations.

In similar vein, Weyesa (2011:49) revealed the same role played by the Borana zone authorities during the violent conflict between the Guji and Borana in 2006. The authorities mobilized the Borana people by alleging that the Borana are to lose their land to the Guji. In this regard the then authorities of the zone are said to have armed the Borana to defend themselves from the alleged attack of the Guji. In Surupha kebele the violent conflict that took place in 2006 was the result of this elite mobilization.

However, some contend that the root cause of the inter-ethnic conflicts in the post 1991 Ethiopia emanated merely from resource competition which in turn is associated with the new federal structure (Hussien, 2002; Tegegne, 2004). It is true that resource competition has created conflicts between groups that used to live in harmony in the past, such as Amhara and Oromo peoples in Wellaga, the Karayu and Itu, and the Afar and the Arsi Oromos in eastern Ethiopia (Tegegn, 2004:2). According to this supposition, ethnic-based geographical demarcation divided ethnic groups between different regional states and limited their access to common resource areas that became cause of conflict (Abdulahi, 2004:4). The followers of this assumption mention ‘the Gedeo-Guji conflicts of the 1990s as fundamentally caused by competition over resources following the new state restructure’ (Hussien, 2002; Tegegne, 2004). But to view the 1990s Gedeo-Guji
conflict resulted merely from competition of resource seems to me to be an underestimation. In all my Gedeo and Guji research sites none of my informants raised the issue of resource competition as a problem. They rather pointed their fingers at the opposition parties and some government authorities who were propagating hatred among ‘brothers’ and instigated people to immerse into a violent conflict. But what one cannot deny is the fact that the 1990s Gedeo-Guji conflicts are not free from resource issue. It has to be not forgotten that the informal migration and the formal resettlement of the Gedeo (during the imperial regime) in the contentious over 36 kebeles of Gedeo inhabited Guji localities (in the then Hagere-Mariam woreda) emanated from population pressure and the consequent resource limitation in the northern part of Gedeo localities, as all my Gedeo informants agree.

But Asebe asks ‘why did resource competition take an ethnic dimension only after 1991 (Asebe, 2007:18)?’ In any ethnically plural society like Ethiopia where nations and nationalities are allowed free expression of political demands, some ethnic conflicts are more or less inevitable. Indeed, such conflicts may be inherent in all pluralistic systems, authoritarian or democratic. Compared to authoritarian systems like that of the imperial and the Derg regimes, a democratic polity are simply more likely to witness an open expression of such conflicts. The former may lock disaffected ethnic groups into long periods of political silence, giving the appearance of a well-governed society. Counterwise, ethnic conflicts are a regular feature of ethnically plural democracies, for if different ethnic groups exist and the freedom to organize is available, there are likely to be conflicts over resources, identity, patronage, and policies (Varsheny, 2000:24-25).
Therefore, taking into account the prevailing political environment\textsuperscript{47} and the new federal government policy in Ethiopia, the proliferation of ethnic conflict after the 1990s should not come as a surprise.

At this point it is also important to note the fact that elites focus on ethnicity or ethnic identity much more than other commonalities like class, association or any other grouping institutions/organizations, for ethnicity is the best zone for them to mobilize people easily. This is simply because people become moving or poignant or sometimes even emotional when acting towards the wellbeing of or safeguarding their ethnicity and/or religion. For ethnic conflicts are grounded in ascriptive group identities, when conflicts concern religion, ethnicity, icons of special historic and cultural importance, they can indeed be deadly. That is why political elites want to use ethnicity and/or religion to mobilize people thereby to achieve their hidden agenda—individual/group political power or economic benefit.

The other thing is, it is argued, that economic/resource conflicts are in most cases less violent than ethnic conflicts. The undying intuition is simply that identities tend to be indivisible, where as a fight over resources is amenable to flexible sharing. If a deal can be struck, splitting shares into a 60-40 or 65-35 arrangement, a peaceful resolution of conflict is possible. Such bargaining, it is argued, is not possible with respect to ethnicity (Varshney, 2002:26).

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\textsuperscript{47}The institutionalization of ‘Formal Ethnicism’ and the ethnic based political mobilization launched by ethnic entrepreneurs after 1991 tempted many groups to try to regain their human and democratic rights after a century of ethnic domination, marginalization and discrimination.
political mobilization. The introduction of ethnic federalism since early 1990s induced the institutionalization of primordial identity for political mobilization (Vaughan, 2003:94-95). For instance, ‘the 1990s violent conflict between the Gedeo and the Guji peoples has to do with the roles played by elites (from both groups) in accentuating minimal cultural differences rather than expanding shared elements that have underlined the peaceful co-existence between the groups since long. Over politicizing ethnic differences and drawing ethnic boundaries, the new government’s federalism policy contributed to the proliferation of the Gedeo-Guji conflict of the 1990s. As stated above, the question for self-government among the Guji, and later the same claim by the south Gedeo were the fundamental causes of the conflicts, but this claim is from the beginning organized and initiated by the political elites. The elites instigated, organized and led the conflict. The elites’ role in this particular conflict should not be seen as secondary. It is rather fundamental one.

In order for the masses to be mobilized and to pay the necessary sacrifices for a given cause, there must exist what Merera calls ‘convergences of the interests of the elite and the masses’ in any nationalist enterprise. In the Gedeo-Guji case the converging interest between the elites and minorities (both of the Gedeo and the Guji) in the pre-1995 Gedeo zone, and for the Gedeo minorities (in the then Hagere Mariam woreda) is the issue of ‘self government’. For both of the minority groups this is the common interest that made them to be easily mobilized by the opposition parties and government authorities who supported the conflict in secret. The hidden interest of the opposition parties is coming to power through ethnic conflict by disintegrating the overall system. For EPRDF and its supporting political elites their interest was to maintain the status quo upon which their
survival depended. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that this convergence of interests of the elite and the masses led to a more effective political mobilization. In line with this Susane (1989:50-54) states some important points which deserve mentioning here:

it has long been evident that cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious factors have readily given some political movements a stimulus for solidarity and provided one of the bases for mobilization at one moment of their development....Ethnicity plays as a dependent variable in the social formations of the third world and not as a product of vaguely defined primordial sentiments....Ethnicity is the construct created by social theories to catalogue phenomena and social groups and the elements it provides to the ideological discourse of the ruling classes for directing and justifying specific policies and practices. On the other hand, ethnicity is encountered as it is actually lived, as a dynamic process with a specific present, entailing a singular mode of social experience. Thus ethnicity may be understood as a dependent variable whose dynamics are subordinated to the diverse ideological and practical needs and interests of the hegemonic and subordinated sectors.

However, Hussein argues that individual leaders may have their own motives to take advantage of the process of popular struggle for freedom and equality. Nevertheless, in reality, it is unfair to claim that political leaders do always strive for their own sake and that the people just follow them naively. It is one thing to assume the possibility of the elite manipulation in organizing and mobilizing the people, but quite another to boil down popular causes and movements to personal or elite privileges. Hussien goes on to say that elite manipulation, wherever it exists, could influence the intensity and magnitude of an ethnic conflict; but, it cannot be a cause for the conflict by itself. As to him, ethnic conflict is in essence the outcome of oppression and exploitation of one ethnic group by another. It is not something that political leaders could engender mechanically (Hussein, 2004:14). What Hussien argues here has nothing wrong; of course it is not fair to claim that political leaders do always strive for their own sake and the people just follow them blindly. But what I want to underline here is objective reality
matters. We are not to generalize without looking into specific cases and without having empirical evidences.

Similarly, Wolff advises that for a proper understanding of the dynamics of different ethnic conflicts, it is necessary carefully to analyze the different factors and actors that are at work in each conflict and the way in which they combine to lead to violence (Wolff, 2006:3). For that matter, there is a growing consensus among the academic around the position that holds “elite competition for state power and resource control” to be fundamental to ethnic conflicts across societies (Nnoli, 1995b; Markakis, 1996; Lemarchand, 1993 in Merera, 2003:28). At this point it is imperative to see how Merera (2003:34) depicts the causal relationship between the role of elite and the dynamics of ethnicity and nationalism as an ideology of political mobilization:

Political mobilization is an essential part of the politics of ethnicity and nationalism. It is no exaggeration to say that as a rule the elites are more than a catalyst, usually they are the factual political engineers of ethnic nationalist movements. It is very difficult to conceive ethnicity and nationalism without some active role of the elites in them and a certain level of mobilization. Put differently, the role of the elite is critical in synthesizing the ideology of nationalism, setting the agenda, organizing the nationalist movement and providing the necessary leadership to achieve the set goals. Most studies in the field note the centrality of the elite in such projects. For instance, they are ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ for Esman (1994) and Erikson (1993), ‘inventors of nations’ for Gellner (quoted in Hann, 1996:106), and ‘political gladiators’ for Milazi (1995) (Merera, 2003: 34).

Against the primordialists’ notion that sees inherent ethnic dichotomies justifying action, the change in Gedeo-Guji relationship was not fundamentally attributed to primordial ethnic differences. ‘The mere existence of ethnic diversity does not necessarily lead to ethnic conflict’ (Alemayehu, 2009; Asebe, 2007; Varshney, 2002; Jeong, 2000).

The Gedeo and Guji lived in harmony with those markers of primordial differences for several decades, and as confirmed by informants of both groups, still there is an interest
to live together through mitigating differences, developing tolerance, and growing common interests of the groups. Typically, conflict between ethnic groups has nothing to do with ethnic differences, but with outside instigation. Power and wealth are among the hidden interests the instigators/mobilizers, but they band with people and choose sides along ethnic lines. It is not until conflict has begun that ethnic differences enter the equation, adding fuel to the fire while being used as tools by leaders to fan the flames of conflict and sustain hostilities. Rarely do the differences by themselves become the actual root cause of the conflict. True ethnic conflict---warfare between distinct unified ethnic groups---is extremely rare, but devastating. Many ethnic groups live in harmony within small areas and co-exist peacefully for centuries. For example, eastern France is home to the Alsatians, Bretons and Provencals. Great Britain is home to the Scottish clans and was the home of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Celts. Some of the world's most ethnically diverse states, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, though not without internal conflict and political repression, have suffered little interethnic violence, while countries with very slight differences in language or culture (the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Rwanda) have had the bloodiest conflicts. There are numerous other examples around the world and throughout history. Differences in ethnic identification and custom do not instantly equal conflict.

Ethnic divide or diversity can even greatly enrich societies. Multiethnic states are often vibrant and dynamic places that are strengthened by the varied contributions of their inhabitants. But such states can also be fragile, especially in the face of internal upheaval or external threat. In fact, differing linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds can become fault lines that result in open antagonism between ethnic
groups. Sometimes societies with long histories of ethnic tolerance and integration can rapidly become engulfed in ethnic conflict—hostilities between different ethnic groups or communities (Giddens, 2001:257). In Africa ethnic identity by itself has never posed a problem to human survival. But it is only the activation of such identity in the struggle to expand political spaces, displace others, appropriate resources, mobilize power, or engage in extra legal agendas that has given ethnicity and ethnic politics its negative connotation (Julius Olhobvnere, 2001:69). The salience of group identity is awakened by socially derived inequalities in material well-being or political access. Racial and ethnic distinctions are deepened by the denial of political participation as well as lack of physical and economic security. Discriminatory treatment along with repressive state control generates group grievances. Political and material demands reflect their efforts to seek justice for members of their group.

In sum, the Gedeo-Guji conflict is the result of the interplay of different factors. The state policy in different regimes which included mainly the resettlement schemes of the Gedeo people on the Guji customary land (without prior consultation of the Guji or without having national policy regarding resettling people from one area to another); the institutionalization of the Abyssinian administrative system at the expense of traditional institutions; differential opportunities (in educational, occupation, administrative and political positions) for the Guji in Gedeo zone and marginalization and discrimination upon the Guji for similar opportunities, and the same problem upon the Gedeo minorities in the previous Hagere-Mariam woreda (particularly in Ella-Fereda and other several rural kebeles where the Gedeo are numerous) have had profound impact on reversing the cordial and symmetrical relationship between the groups. The revival of ethnic
nationalism in the country, particularly the incited Oromo-nationalism by Oromo political elites played a prominent role in instigating ethnic sentiment among the Guji in the area. The role played by political elites of both groups in using ethnicity as instrument in mobilizing the people in order to immerse them into violent conflict had immensely contributed to Gedeo-Guji conflicts of the 1990s.