Assessing causes of inter-ethnic conflict in Ethiopia: Emphasis on Anuak and Nuer conflicts in Gambella Regional State

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Abstract

This study was directed on causes of inter-ethnic conflict in Ethiopia by stress on Anuak and Nuer conflicts in Gambella Regional State of Ethiopia. The general objective of this paper was an assessment on the causes of inter-ethnic conflict among Anuak and Nuer ethnic groups in Gambela regional state. The data was collected based on secondary sources. The researcher employed descriptive and explanatory types of research design. The findings from this study confirm that questions regarding property and land right, language and access to weapons are the major causes of conflict between the two ethnic groups. In addition, the paper found the solution for the Anuak and Nuer conflict would be, development initiatives along the Ethiopia and Sudanese border, full pledged arms control along the Ethiopia and Sudanese border could be an important factor in minimizing conflict and causalities in the future. The two groups could reach similar agreements, provided that they are offered the right opportunity to talk to each other, discuss their problems and apply traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution.

Keywords: inter-ethnic conflict; intra-ethnic conflict, conflict resolution

Introduction

Gambella can be seen as an example for one of the most, if not utmost, complex regions in Ethiopia with regard to contemporary political conflicts. Its status as a border region, its multi-
ethnic composition, its exposure to the Sudanese civil war and the inner-Ethiopian dynamics between centre and periphery, as well as the developments in oil drilling, contributed to the recent extension of the conflict in the area. Each of these causes and events is equally important for the understanding of the region and should never be seen as separate from each other. (Meckelburg 2006: 7)

Gambella National Regional State is located in the south-western part of Ethiopia. The Gambella region borders with Benishangul Gumuz and Oromiya regions to the North, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State and the Sudan Republic to the South, Oromia and SNNPRS to the east and the Sudan Republic to the west. Gambella is rich with various ethnic compositions. The major ethnic groups include the Anuak, Nuer, Mezengir, Opio, Komo and people from Amhara, Tigray, Oromiya and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). Their location also varies according to the ethnic group (Abraham, 2002).

In spite of the creation of ethnic federalism as an endeavor to address inter-ethnic conflictual problems in Ethiopia, many ethnic conflicts have occurrence after 1991. The major post 1991 inter-ethnic conflicts observed in Ethiopia are: the Silte-Gurage conflict, the Wagagoda language conflict, the Sheko-Megengir conflict, the Anuak-Nuer conflict, the Berta-Gumuz conflict, and the Gedeo-Guji conflict, the Oromo-Amhara conflict, the Borana-Gerri conflict, the Afar-Issa conflict, and the Oromo-Somali conflict. From the above mentioned conflicts, I gave the emphasize on the inter-ethnic conflict between Anuak and Nuer in Gambella regional state

There are lot of people who are suspicious of the merit of federalism as a tool of reduction of ethnic conflicts and tensions. The main argument this group raises is that the decentralization of political power to territorially concentrated ethnic groups can inflame separatist ethnic conflicts since it provides potential nationalist leaders with resources that can be mobilized to wage their nationalist movement (Hechter, 2000:p.315).

**Methods and materials**

The researcher employed descriptive and explanatory types of research design of qualitative research as the suitable research method for this study and data are collected from various
secondary sources mainly from journal article, government and non-government organization report, book and others. Secondary research is research based on secondary resources that already exist. This method made it possible for the researchers to assess the causes of inter-ethnic conflict among Anuak and Nuer ethnic groups in Gambela regional state.

**Parties Involved In Anuak-Nuer Conflict in Gambella Region**

The main parties are the two dominant ethnic groups – the Nuer and the Anuak, both endogenous to Gambella. Early in the 1980s because of the resettlement politics of Dergue, dissatisfied Anuak elites established a liberation movement known as the GPLM (Gambella People Liberation Movement) to fight the regime that emerged with more radical, attempting to change the agricultural production system and transform the traditional power structures of rural societies. The resettlement programmes produced joint local resistance to the highlanders and the central state, which became seen as largely identical (Feyissa; 2008).

Allied with major armed groups (EPRDF and others), the Anuak took control over the newly constituted Gambella regional state in 1991. The Nuer then felt marginalized and this motivated them to begin violent conflicts between the two throughout the 1990s. The organized groups in Sudan, groups of armed Nuer mounted counter offensives, which resulted in the destruction of many Anuak villages along the Baro River(Abraham; 2002).

**Causes of Conflict between the Anuak and the Nuer People in Gambella Region**

We need to be wary of taking Collier’s theory on greed at face value. The greed aspect should not be limited to rebel leaders and loot able commodities, as Collier and Hoeffler (2004) want us to believe; rather it is related to the tendency by the political elite to monopolize power and resources. Greed, understood as economic opportunity or the potential for it, and grievance, perceived mainly as the experience of society as a whole, not only trigger conflict but are inherent causes of it. The following are some of cause of conflict between Anuak and nuer ethnic groups

**Property and land related questions**

The new regional leaders, the Anuak GPLM, immediately claimed that Gambella is Anuak land and the Nuer should not be allowed to live there, let alone engage in regional politics (Dereje 2003, Kong 2006). The Anuak typically viewed the region as a whole, particularly
Gambella town, as their own territory, and the Nuer as interlopers and Sudanese; indeed the area of the town inhabited by the Nuer continues to be known as ‘New Lands’. The Anuak believe that they were outnumbered by the Nuer from the Sudan, which gave the Nuer an opportunity to raise the question of representation and power sharing.

The historical root of the Anuak-Nuer conflict can be traced back to the eastward expansion of the Eastern Jikany Nuer groups – Gaajak, Gaajok and Gaagwang – who were forced by the Shilluk to abandon the Sobat River before 1840. The Anuak were already settled along the banks of the rivers that drained into the Sobat, such that the Gilo and Baro also occupied the area around Nasir (Johnson 1986; James 2003; Berhanu 1973). In 1887 the Mahdist forces from Sennar on the Blue Nile raided the Baro downstream as far as Nasir. These forces returned to the Blue Nile through Baro, raiding a section of the Nuer on the Pibor, and forcing the Anuak to flee the Baro. The Nuer seized the opportunity given by this retreat to occupy parts of the Baro for themselves and this marked the beginning of the major Nuer encroachment onto Anuak land (Berhanu 1973)

During the wet season the Nuer herd their cattle to upland settlements to escape flooding, whereas during the dry season they move closer to the river banks, where the moisture provides important pasture. The Nuer pattern of movement thus involves migrating with their cattle to areas inhabited by Anuak during the dry season, which gives rise to competition and conflict over both land and water resources (Abraham; 2002).

In traditional Anuak terms, one issue is land, there is no such thing as private property, since all land belongs collectively to the tribe. These clashes with the government’s policy, according to which all land belongs to the State, which is free to use it for its own purposes as well as lease to which it wants (Abraham; 2002). This is, for example, at the heart of the Highland settlers/Anuak clashes, since the Anuak claim as the settlers “occupy” the land from them, while the settlers say they hold legal government leases (Feyissa; 2008).

**Language Related question**

Both groups claim that their own language should be taught in schools in Gambella region. Since 1995, both languages have been taught. Eventually, however, Nuer teachers are said to
have left the teaching profession to join other government posts. Due to this, books in Nuer language are no longer produced. Currently, only the Anyuaa language is taught up to grade 10. The Nuers, on the other hand, argue --- quoting the 1994 population census showing their majority representation in the total population --- that their language should be taught in schools (Toung; 2006)

Access to arms
As a border area, people in Gambella region have easy access to arms. This is considered to be one of the major reasons why the conflict has escalated with heavier causalities compared to conflicts fought with traditional arms such as spears. Arms are easily accessible owing to the SPLA presence on the other side of the border adjacent to Gambella region and due to frequent movement of people from Southern Sudan into Ethiopia.

Suggested mechanisms of conflict resolution between Anuak and Nuer
As a long-term solution throughout Gambella region, it is of paramount importance that peace and stability be re-established in Southern Sudan. Development initiatives along the Ethio Sudanese border would contribute to minimizing uncontrolled influxes of people from Sudan into Gambella town. Meanwhile, strict arms control along the Ethio-Sudanese border could be an important factor in minimizing conflict and causalities in the future (Feyissa; 2008).

The Nuer have to accept Anuak ownership of new lands. Traditional right over land is understood as right of use, not absolute ownership. Then, the Anuak must accept that rival groups and their animals have an inalienable right to survival. The two groups could reach similar agreements, provided that they are offered the right opportunity to talk to each other, discuss their problems and apply traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution.

Conclusions
The Anuak and the Nuer are variously positioned in the distribution of these key natural resources and they practice different livelihood. The Anuak areas are better endowed with natural resources since their major settlements lie along the banks of the rivers with lower population densities.
Violent conflicts have broken out between the two ethnic communities in which education and jobs have usually been the points at issue. Which language is taught in which district has come to signal political ownership of the district under contestation and the region in general (Dereje 2003).

The solution for the Anuak and Nuer conflict would be, development initiatives along the Ethio Sudanese border, strict arms control along the Ethio-Sudanese border could be an important factor in minimizing conflict and causalities in the future. The two groups could reach similar agreements, provided that they are offered the right opportunity to talk to each other, discuss their problems and apply traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution.

References


