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# Anatomy of a Conflict: Afar & Ise Ethiopia

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*John Markakis*

## **Bloodshed at Galalu**

23 March 2002: Dawn came that day to find a group of about thirty Afar warriors lying in ambush alongside the road to Djibouti. Newly re-surfaced, Ethiopia's sole link to the sea cuts a straight dark line through the desiccated Alligedhi plain. No vehicles were on the road at that early hour. Lorry drivers avoid night travel, preferring to spend evenings in the shantytowns that dot the road, where they find food, drink and women for sale. A bridge nearby takes the road over the dry bed of the Galalu, a seasonal stream that brings rainwater from the Asebot Mountains to the south. Rain had not fallen in many months, and the emaciated animals on the plain were herded to the Awash River, the area's only permanent source of water some distance to the west. A single well on the Galalu streambed keeps water throughout the year, a precious resource for pastoralists in this parched land, and a bone of violent contention in times of drought.

The Afar warriors were young, some still in their teens. Most of them belonged to the Dala clan and had been selected by the elders for the task. They were armed with Kalashnikov automatic rifles worth US\$75 apiece. Their leader, a twenty-seven year old from the Ali Sara sub-clan, had telescopic sights mounted on his rifle. The site of the ambush was cluttered with construction material and tools used in the building of a new district centre for the Afar Borimadaitu district. The old centre in the marshland by the Awash River was isolated by floods and plagued by malaria. Somali pastoralists who also use the Alligedhi plain strenuously opposed the siting of the new centre adjacent to the road. They claim it was intended to bar their access to the Awash River.

Before the sun had shown itself, a group of about fifty Somali warriors approached Galalu. They were from the Ise clan and came from the direction of Gadamaitu, a shantytown 25 kilometres south of Galalu. The Ise are neighbours and traditional enemies of the Afar, eternally feuding over pastureland and waterpoints. 'We are born with it and die with it' said an Ise elder referring to this legacy. Although it lies well within the Afar regional state, Ise tribesmen and traders from northern Ethiopia inhabit Gadamaitu. Afar have no place there and resent it mightily. Gadamaitu has no water of its own. It has to be brought from the Awash River by truck through Afar territory; a hazardous enterprise in times of active hostilities between the two groups. Ise herdsmen also rely on the well on the Galalu streambed, and have to fight the Afar for access in times of drought.

Burnished ebony in colour, with sharp features and lean frames, it is not easy for an outsider to distinguish Afar from Ise at a glance. Closer inspection reveals their skirts

have different patterns, their goats different colours. However, they share many things as well, including women they take in marriage from each other. Nowadays, however, they are prone to stress their differences and the issues that divide them. Also armed with Kalashnikov rifles, the approaching Ise band was led by a Gadamaitu community leader well known to and despised by the Afar. He led the Ise opposition to the establishment of the district centre at Galalu and, according to the Afar, twice before had sent Ise warriors to destroy the buildings there and loot the materials. The Afar warriors were there to repel a third attack, and this morning they believed they saw it coming. The Ise later denied this was their intention, claiming their objective was the well at Galalu that was barred to them by the Afar.

The Afar opened fire when the Ise got within range, catching their enemy by surprise. A battle ensued and continued for several hours, before an Ethiopian army detachment arrived from a nearby base. The Ise quit the battlefield, leaving thirteen of their men dead, including their leader, to be taken away by the soldiers. The Afar did not admit to any losses in this battle. Three Afar herders who happened to come upon the retreating Ise band were killed that day. Fatalities have mounted on both sides ever since.

What is the cause of such bloodshed? Is it an 'ethnic' conflict? a 'resource conflict'? a 'conflict of identities' of 'cultures' of 'values'? It is all these and much more. The account that follows traces the various elements in its complex composition.

## **The Setting**

The Awash River Valley in eastern Ethiopia is home to the Afar, a nation of pastoralists who number about one million. The only river in that country that flows eastward, the Awash is the lifeline of the people who inhabit the southern portion of the Afar regional state, providing them with their only permanent source of water and valuable dry season pastureland. The Afar mode of livestock production is based on transhumance, with the herds ranging far from the river during the wet season and returning to it during the dry period. During the year they range from the Asebot Mountain and the Awash National Park in the south, to the foothills of the highlands in the west, and the line of hills in the southeast that separate them from their Somali neighbours. In the outer limits of their roaming the Afar come into contact - and frequently clash - with several neighbouring groups; the sedentary cultivators Ittu. Nole, Argoba, and the mobile pastoralists Kereyu, Gurgura, Ise. Clashes are more frequent during periods of drought, and 2002 was a year of severe drought that ended in famine. Afar conflict with the Ise Somali is the most serious, because the latter are contesting the exclusive claim of the former to the grazing lands of the vast Allighedi plain east of the Awash river.

## **The Legacy of the Past**

Prior to the conquest of their homeland by the Abyssinians at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Afar were loosely grouped into several sultanates whose combined territory ran from the shore of the Red Sea in the east to the foothills of the escarpment in the west, the Dire Dawa region in the south, and the vicinity of Massawa in the north. In the imperialist scramble, in which Abyssinia took a prominent part, Afar land was divided between Ethiopia, Italy (Eritrea) and France (Djibouti). The Afar sultanates were dismantled, with the partial exception of AUSA in Ethiopia that retained a modicum of autonomy until the demise of the imperial regime (1974). The

Afar regard the loss of independence and native leadership as the root cause of their nation's subsequent decline into impoverished obscurity.

Decline was accompanied by considerable loss of territory. Since the beginning of the colonial period the Afar have been pushed northwards by their Somali neighbours who outnumber them three to one within Ethiopia. The spearhead of the Somali expansion, as the Afar see it, is the Ise clan, who now occupy Shinile zone in the Somali regional state. The second largest Somali clan in Ethiopia, after the Ogaden, the Ise are involved in trade, transport as well as livestock production, and are a dynamic and sophisticated group with connections throughout the region. By contrast, the Afar remained isolated, unsophisticated and restricted to raising livestock. Part of the Ise expansion was in the Djibouti enclave, formerly a purely Afar area, where now the former outnumber the latter and are the ruling ethnic group. Within Ethiopia, the Ise pushed the Afar from Dire Dawa northwards to claim the eastern portion of the Alighedi plain and came within sight of the Awash river; which the Afar believe is the Ise ultimate goal. The Afar have neither forgotten nor forgiven the loss of their land, nor have they given up hope of reclaiming it. The ceding of a sizable portion of Afar land in the north to Eritrea when the latter became independent in the early 1990s was a repeat of the colonial partition, and a particularly painful one because it cut off the Afar in Ethiopia from the port of Asab in Eritrea.

## **External Intervention**

In the past, the conflict between the two groups was mainly over water, pastureland and access routes; a purely pastoralist confrontation. However, it was not fought entirely on their own. In fact, forces from the outside intervened to tilt the balance against the Afar.

The first of these was the Djibouti – Addis Ababa railway that was completed in 1919. Began in Djibouti by the French, it employed Ise as transporters, workers and guards, who later settled in the lowland region crossed by the railway and is now the Shinile zone, the Ise home in the Somali regional state. Two decades later came the Italians, who recruited large numbers of Somali, many Ise among them, for their invasion of Ethiopia from the south. The Ise fought for the Italians and received arms and training in return, as well as a lucrative market for their animals. They used the arms against the Afar to gain access into the Allighedi plain for their enlarged herds. In turn, the Afar joined Ethiopia, the losing side, and suffered retaliation by the Italians.

In the 1960s, commercial cultivation was introduced in the Awash valley. It was promoted by the imperial government, which gave concessions on riverside land to foreign and domestic investors who produced mainly cotton with irrigation. The Afar were neither consulted nor compensated. However, the Sultan of Ausa and some elders established their own plantations and became wealthy in record time. The pastoralists lost access to large portions of the river and riverside pastureland on which they depend to weather the dry season. This loss undermined the sustainability of livestock production. In the terrible famine caused by drought in the early 1970s, the Afar lost many lives and the bulk of their livestock.

In the early 1970s, the Siad Barre regime in Somalia trained a guerilla force for the eventual invasion of Ethiopia. The Western Somalia Liberation Front had several divisions, one of which was intended to occupy and annex Djibouti, and was composed mainly of Ise clansmen. The Djibouti part of the plan was abandoned, but

when the invasion of Ethiopia came in 1977, the Ise, well armed and trained, once again pressed their advantage to push further into Afar territory

The Ethiopian counterattack and expulsion of the invaders the following year was enthusiastically supported by the Afar, but proved only a temporary setback for the Ise, who were pushed southwards to the railway line. They were soon to establish a strong presence on the southern portion of the road to Djibouti that traverses the Afar region. The road was built in the early 1970s. Several of the construction camps along it evolved into truck-stop hamlets devoted to providing services for the traffic. The military camps that dotted the area provided additional custom for traders, tavern and hotelkeepers and prostitutes. Until then the only settled site in the region was Gewane, an Afar settlement dating from the Italian period. Ise clansmen initially employed by the German construction company settled in two of these hamlets; Gadamaitu and Adaitu. They became involved in the truck-stop trade, in smuggling goods across the border with Djibouti and Somalia, as well as raising livestock in the vicinity. Ise herders used these towns as gateways to roam northwards towards the Awash River. Meaningfully, the Ise call Gadamaitu *Garba Ise* ('Shoulder of the Ise', i.e., support to lean on). Few Afar settled there, and they departed when hostilities between the two groups broke out. A third Ise truck-stop hamlet, Undofo, appeared in the mid 1990s.

The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has ruled Ethiopia since 1991. In order to defuse conflicts that undermined previous regimes, it restructured what was a highly centralised state into a federation whose self-administering constituent units are ethnic groups. Each state is subdivided into zones and districts. The Afar got their own regional state as did their Somali neighbours. The boundary that divides these two regions was not defined at the time, mainly because both groups have conflicting claims in the Alligedhi plain and on stretches of the road to Djibouti. It was left for the administrations of the two regions to resolve the issue, but they failed to do so. The issue remains unresolved and a potent source of conflict.

## Contributing Factors

Asab on the Red Sea was the main seaport for Ethiopia until 1998, handling most of the import-export trade, with Djibouti playing a secondary role. The war with Eritrea that erupted that year deprived Ethiopia of Asab, making Djibouti the landlocked country's sole outlet to the sea. The road to Djibouti that crosses the Afar region and the railway that crosses Ise land became vital links, and traffic on them multiplied manifold. The road became a new and valuable source of revenue, and the truck-stop hamlets on it became beehives of activity. Many highlanders settled there and engaged in the service and trade sectors.

Contraband, an old trade, now acquired new dimensions, given the collapse of state control of the borders between Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somaliland and Somalia, the result of the political upheavals of the late 1980s and early 1990s. A veritable common market emerged along the eastern and southern sections of the Ethiopian periphery, where people and goods move freely without benefit of passports, visas or customs checks. The few customs posts that exist are easily evaded. Contraband trade flourished, bringing manufactured goods from many parts of the world, especially China, through the ports of Djibouti, Berbera in Somaliland and Bossaso in Puntland.

Not surprisingly, it is Somali people, and especially Ise, who became involved in this trade, since they can move freely among their own kin throughout the region. They control the camel caravan trade in contraband, renting animals and their services as guides, porters and guards, to bring the goods to the towns they control on the road to Djibouti, especially Gadamaitu, from where they are channeled to the highlands by vehicle and the railway. They work closely with highlanders, many of them Tigrayans, who operate in the same towns. Rumour has it that the third party in this trade are the military who are stationed in the area and whose job is to control illicit commerce.

### **Proximate Factors**

As in the past, the Afar remained aloof from non-pastoralist affairs and realised scant benefit from the activities, licit and illicit, on the road that traverses their territory. Nevertheless, they became increasingly concerned about the tightening Ise grip on the three towns, and their role in supporting Ise herder incursions west of the road towards the Awash River. This concern led to increasingly frequent clashes between Afar and Ise herdsmen over waterholes, a resource that has become scarcer with time, and these clashes became deadlier through the use of automatic weapons. There is no traditional conflict resolution mechanism that binds the two groups, and the involvement of the regional officialdom proved ineffective. As a result, grievances accumulated on both sides and tension rose steadily during the 1990s.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean war (1988-2001) was fought partly in northern Afar and caused havoc among the population there who had to abandon their land and move south with their animals, increasing the burden on already congested and desiccated pasturelands. The subsequent abandonment of Asab as the main port for Ethiopian trade affected adversely the Afar, if only because the road to the port crosses their territory. On the other hand, Ethiopia's trade shifted to Djibouti, and the road to that port also crosses Afar territory.

In 2000, Saudi Arabia imposed a ban on animal imports from the Horn; the second one in recent years, due to the outbreak of Rift Valley fever. The ban hit the Ise particularly hard, because they are major exporters of sheep and goats to the Arabian market. It caused overstocking and overgrazing in Shinile zone, and compelled Ise herders to range deeper into Afar territory towards the Awash River, where they met increasingly hostile reception on the part of the Afar.

The Afar regional administration came under increasing pressure from two sides. On one side, the federal government demanded that it put a stop to the violence and reach an agreement with its Somali counterpart for a final resolution of the issue that divides them. The issue itself is the demarcation of the border between the two regions. When the federation was formed in the mid-1990s, the territory of each region was roughly but not precisely, nor officially, delineated. As in the case with other contested boundaries throughout Ethiopia, it was left for the regional authorities themselves to settle. They proved unable to do so. For one thing, both regions were in continuous political turmoil until the EPRDF intervened to impose a single party formula. While the Afar region gained a degree of political stability in the late 1990s, the Somali region has still to do so.

The Afar regional administration came under pressure on the other side by the people who demanded the expulsion of the Ise from their land and the marking of the

boundary between the two regions. The Afar base their case on history, claiming land that now hosts quite a few Ise, most significantly the three hamlets – Gadamaitu, Adaitu, Undofo – on the road to Djibouti. The Somali counter with a demand for a referendum, with the obvious expectation that the three hamlets would become part of their region. They moved to preempt the issue by claiming administrative control of these settlements by integrating them into districts of the Shinile zone, although they lie within Zone Three of Afar region. They appointed residents of these towns to the district councils in Shinile zone.

As long as it did not pose wider security problems, the federal government allowed the situation to fester. The war with Eritrea and the loss of Asab in 1998 turned the road and railway to Djibouti into lifelines for Ethiopia, and it was then that the federal government paid attention to the problem. It appealed to both sides to refrain from hostilities, promising a resolution of the issue after the end of the war. Conferences were held, committees were formed representing both sides, and agreement was reached to maintain the status quo until the end of the war. When the war ended, the federal government was distracted by the split in the ruling party, the TPLF, and no action was taken until serious bloodshed leading to the closing of the road to Djibouti occurred in the spring of 2002.

### **Trigger Factors**

Under pressure from the people and elders in Zone Three, the Afar regional administration sought to reinforce Afar claims on the road to Djibouti by moving some district capitals in Zone Three from the vicinity of the river onto the road itself. The intention was to checkmate the Ise and block their access to the river. Accordingly, it was decided to move the capital of Borimadaitu district from the marshland near the river to a site adjacent to the road. The site is on the Galalu, a seasonal stream that provides water from shallow holes in the dry season, and also supports a well with a permanent supply of water. The justification given for the move was the isolated and malaria-ridden marshland of the previous site. Galalu is a few kilometres from Gadamaitu, and the Ise leaders of this town protested what they considered a violation of the agreement to maintain the status quo.

What followed is difficult to describe precisely, since the versions of the parties involved differ diametrically. What is certain is that the Ise resolved to prevent the construction of the district administration headquarter at Galalu. The Afar, on the other hand, determined to proceed, and gathered a force of about thirty armed men to protect the site. Asked why this task was not given to the police, the Borimadaitu district administrator said this was an ‘affair of the people’ not of the administration. At dawn on 23 March 2002, a group of about 50 armed Ise arrived at the site and fell into a well staged ambush, with 13 killed and 10 wounded before the battle ended several hours later.

Clearly, the Afar had surprised their enemy with novel military tactics. An Ise elder later complained this was ‘unprecedented’, not the sort of fighting they are used to wage with the Afar. Inevitably they suspected outside intervention. The Afar, in turn, claimed to have captured Ise fighters with Djibouti identity cards. They did acknowledge having sought assistance from Ugogomo; a shadowy Afar armed organisation based in the Danakil Depression. Afar youth went there earlier to be trained and returned along with members of that organisation to Zone Three to train others.

Following the fight at Galalu the road to Djibouti was closed on several occasions, and at least one truck driver was reported killed, prompting his colleagues to stage a strike that caused a shortage of fuel in Addis Ababa. This moved the government to action.

## State Peacekeeping Action

In 1998, the federal government had held consultations with the political leadership of the Afar and Somali regions in an effort to contain the problem and keep the road to Djibouti open. The Afar leadership was divided. The regional vice chairman and two zonal administrators asked for a regional boundary between the Afar and Somali regions to be drawn, something the federal government was unwilling to consider at the time. The Afar regional chairman sided with the federal government, and the other three officials soon found themselves eased out of their posts.

In the end, an agreement was reached to arrest and bring to justice known killers from both sides and to return looted livestock. Elders were recruited to assist. The conflict subsided for a time afterwards, though each side accused the other of not fulfilling the terms of the agreement. On 1 May 2000, Neina Tahiro, a popular Afar politician elected to the federal House of Representatives, was murdered on the road. Afar blamed Ise, and went on a murderous spree in Gadamaitu and Gewane killing 19 Ise.

The federal government now decreed the establishment of so-called 'Integrated Security and Peace Committees' at district, zonal and regional levels, involving administrators from both regions, selected elders from both sides, local security officials and military officers. Security officials chaired the committees at district level, while an army captain from the local garrison chaired the committee in Zone Three, the focus of the conflict, in Afar region. Tahiro Hamadu, the father of Niena Tahiro, was appointed a salaried adviser, and Niena's wife was sent to the federal House of Representatives as his replacement.

Replica committees, composed of Afar and Ise, federal security and military personnel, were set up to administer the hamlets of Gadamaitu, Undofo and Adaitu. Courts were set up to administer justice there, and police were hired to assist them. The committees were also tasked with bringing criminals to justice and arranging for compensation and return of looted livestock. It was agreed that both Afar and Ise should have open access to the Allighedi plain until the regional border was finally defined. The zone committee met many times in the following two years, and arranged for the return of looted animals and the arrest of some culprits. Even so, each side continued to accuse the other of not fulfilling their obligations, and the court in Gadamaitu never functioned.

A flurry of meetings followed the outbreak of violence in March 2002. They were held in Awash and Dire Dawa under the chairmanship of the Minister of Federal Affairs, and in Addis Ababa under the Prime Minister. Afar and Somali administrators and elders, military and security officials, as well as central government representatives attended. These meetings proved inconclusive. The rival parties restated their claims, and government pleas for restraint were repeated. The federal government faced the dilemma of having to choose between the contrary solutions demanded by the rival parties. A return to the territorial *status quo ante*, demanded by the Afar would alienate the Somali, while a referendum, desired by the Somali, would further upset the Afar. Moreover, current EPRDF policy is to lower barriers between regions and ethnic groups rather than to raise new ones.



The only specific measure taken concerned security on the road to Djibouti, the government's main concern. It was forbidden for armed persons to come near or to cross the road. If challenged, they must lay down their arms. If they refuse, they would be shot. The army was ordered to enforce this measure.

Since then, a number of people have lost their lives in the vicinity of the road. Many more have died in numerous clashes between Afar and Ise herders at various places in Zone Three. In the four months that followed the battle of Galalu, the Shinile zone administration recorded some 50 Ise deaths and many wounded. As the drought persisted into 2003, half the Afar population was menaced by famine, and many people were forced to move outside their homeland with their remaining livestock. As a result, violence spread and intensified throughout the region. In January 2003, a clash between Afar and Kereyu inside the Awash National Park left 40 dead. Conflict has not only spread and intensified, it has also become unconventional. For instance, women and children are no longer spared, as in the past. In November 2002 peasant highlanders massacred 38 Afar women and children as they returned from the market, in retaliation for the murder of a highlander by Afars.

## Comments

Unravelling the fabric of this dispute, we become aware that many threads are woven to form an intricate pattern. Tracing some of them to their origin, we venture not only outside the present time, but also to places and events beyond the pastoralist domain. We realise that that external forces play a significant and sometime decisive role in events within the pastoralist zone, conflicts included. To paraphrase Marx, the history of the pastoralists is not all their own making.

To grasp this point, one needs to look at some of the contributing factors to the conflict described above. The transport routes that have become bones of contention for the Afar and the Ise are not of their own making, nor were they made for them. They are not traditional resources, nor are they linked to livestock production. Yet, they represent resources essential to pastoralist welfare and are worth fighting over. Trade, licit or illicit, was always a pastoralist economic sideline. In this particular case, however, contraband trade has become an economic mainline for the Ise. While contention over familiar resources such as land, water, and access routes still figures prominently in pastoralist conflict, newly introduced resources have become additional bones of contention. These may involve local administrative status, the siting of livestock markets, abattoirs, veterinary services, schools, hospitals, off the range employment opportunities, as well as transport routes, trade and related services.

The multifarious nature of resources that become objects of contention, as well as the extraneous origin and control of some of these, pose a serious obstacle to conflict resolution efforts. One problem is to identify them all and trace their extensions beyond the pastoralist domain, that is, to define the context. Past that lay the problem of reconciling conflicting claims on resources whose ownership and right of control are vested in institutions outside the pastoralist domain and beyond its jurisdiction; more often than not, the state.

Ultimately, conflict prevention and management is the responsibility of the state. By and large, the state in the Horn of Africa has failed to meet this responsibility. A basic reason is that it does not have adequate resources in place for the task. State presence in the pastoralist zone is generally nominal, except in areas where state security

requires a higher profile. Moreover, there is no political incentive for greater involvement, since pastoralist communities carry little political weight at state level. As a result, conflict within and between these communities is often ignored and allowed to run its course. Unless, that is, it impacts on wider state concerns, such as border security, movement on major transport routes, control of trade, livestock epidemics, or it connects with and reinforces threats by armed opposition movements to the state or regime. When it takes place, state intervention focuses on symptoms not causes and is not sustained.

Conflict resolution attracts non-state actors – NGOs, churches, international aid agencies – with experience and resources in the pastoralist zone. Because conflict usually is linked to resource scarcity, whether as a cause or consequence, efforts to resolve it tend to focus on relieving scarcity through the traditional pastoralist mode of production: by developing water resources in order to expand pasture, providing veterinary services, improving access to markets, and the like. However, as shown above, certain resources that sustain pastoralist welfare are not necessarily linked to livestock production, moreover, in some instances these are increasing rather than diminishing.

However varied the contested resources may be, they have a common denominator. They represent material values that enhance peoples' security and welfare. Competition over material values undoubtedly is the root cause of conflict in the pastoralist zone. Does this mean that values embedded in identity and culture are not involved? Undoubtedly they are, and because of the distortion inherent in labels such as 'ethnic conflict', it is important to delimit the role they play.

In the case examined here, the use of the 'ethnic' label distorts the issue by raising the level of the dispute above its actual setting. The confrontation is between one Somali clan and several Afar clans in the Allighedhi plain, and the reasons for it are outlined above. Both sides are involved in collateral conflicts with third groups, including ethnic kindred, for similar reasons. The role of the ethnic factor is illustrated by the intervention of Ugogomo on the Afar side, undoubtedly motivated by ethnic solidarity. It should be noted that Ugogomo is a modern political movement (one of its top leaders resides in London) whose frame of reference is the Afar nation. Its intervention, especially if it provokes a similar reaction from the Somali side, could turn what is a dispute between two pastoralist groups into a veritable 'ethnic conflict.' As shown above, however, ethnicity is not among the causes of the dispute.

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