



Ontological Insecurity and Peace Process: Southern Ethiopia's Conflict in the Space-Time Continuum

Fiseha Moreda Obsu^a
Getachew Kassa (PhD)^b
Samuel Tefera (PhD)^c

How to cite this article:

Obsu, fiseha, Kassa, G., & Tefera, S. .
Ontological Insecurity and Peace Process: Southern Ethiopia's Conflict in the Space-Time Continuum . Eirene Studies of Peace and Conflicts, 7(13). <https://doi.org/10.62155/eirene.v7i13.274>

Received :

January 23, 2024

Approved:

May 22, 2024

^aAddis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

PhD student at the Centre for African and Asian Studies, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. E-Mail: fiseha.moreda@aau.edu.et

^bAddis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

Associate Professor at the Centre for African and Asian Studies, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. E-Mail: getachewkn@yahoo.com

^cAddis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

Associate Professor at the Centre for African and Asian Studies, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. E-Mail: samuel.tefera@aau.edu.et

Ontological Insecurity and Peace Process: Southern Ethiopia's Conflict in the Space-Time Continuum

Abstract

This study discussed ontological security in the peace process and its impact on conflict transformation in southern Ethiopia conflicts. By analyzing the Garri and Borana conflict and the peace process, the study demonstrates how ethnic conflicts involving conceptions of self-narratives with ontological asymmetry deter peace initiatives. Ontological security framework and qualitative approach guided the study, which sought to interpret reality from the context of the respondents. The study used Key Informant Interview and Focus Group Discussions as a source of primary data and review of secondary sources. Accordingly, the study revealed that the southern Ethiopia peace process since the establishment of ethnic federalism, particularly between Garri [Somali] and Borana [Oromo], has been characterized by persistent ontological (in) security, conflicting narratives, and recurring violence, perpetuating cycle of insecurity and hindering the achievement of durable peace. Breaking this cycle requires negotiations that address the central narratives embraced by both groups, promoting mutual recognition and transforming antagonistic relationships. Embracing coexistence and constructing transformative strategies can create a mutually acceptable narrative that can challenge the established conflict narrative. The study concludes that a

peaceful, stable, and mutually supportive environment can be fostered by creating a durable framework that addresses the ontological security concerns of both communities.

Keywords: Ontological (in)security, peace process, conflict, and transformative narrative

Inseguridad Ontológica y Proceso de Paz: El Conflicto del Sur de Etiopía en el Continuo Espacio-Tiempo

Resumen

Este estudio analiza la seguridad ontológica en el proceso de paz y su impacto en la transformación de conflictos en el sur de Etiopía. Al analizar el conflicto entre los Garri y los Borana y el proceso de paz, el estudio demuestra cómo los conflictos étnicos que implican concepciones de auto-narrativas con asimetría ontológica obstaculizan las iniciativas de paz. El marco de seguridad ontológica y un enfoque cualitativo guiaron el estudio, que buscó interpretar la realidad desde el contexto de los encuestados. El estudio utilizó Entrevistas a Informantes Clave y Discusiones en Grupos Focales como fuentes de datos primarios, junto con una revisión de fuentes secundarias.

El estudio reveló que desde el establecimiento del federalismo étnico, el proceso de paz en el sur de Etiopía, particularmente entre los Garri [somalíes] y los Borana [oromo], ha estado caracterizado por una persistente (in)

seguridad ontológica, narrativas conflictivas y violencia recurrente. Esto ha perpetuado un ciclo de inseguridad y ha obstaculizado el logro de una paz duradera. Romper este ciclo requiere negociaciones que aborden las narrativas centrales adoptadas por ambos grupos, promoviendo el reconocimiento mutuo y transformando las relaciones antagónicas. Adoptar la coexistencia y construir estrategias transformadoras puede crear una

narrativa mutuamente aceptable que desafíe la narrativa de conflicto establecida. El estudio concluye que fomentar un entorno pacífico, estable y mutuamente solidario requiere crear un marco duradero que aborde las preocupaciones de seguridad ontológica de ambas comunidades.

Palabras clave: (In)seguridad ontológica, proceso de paz, conflicto y narrativa transformadora

1. Introduction

Peace process, peacemaking, and peacebuilding are common phrases within contemporary peace and conflict studies, and peace rhetoric saturates contemporary political discourse. With its deep and complex nature, peace plays an essential role as a guiding principle underpinning current political discussions and decisions. It transcends the domain of abstract theory, evolving into a dynamic and comprehensive framework that integrates many elements, including negotiation, conflict resolution, human rights protection, institutionalization, and cooperative relationships (Richmond, 2023). In contemporary politics, peace is a concrete and developing idea shaping the fabric of policies, international relations, and social justice, all to forge amicable bonds between nations. It aims to preserve human dignity and mitigate conflicts by nurturing collaboration, understanding, and nonviolent means of resolving disputes. This is to create a conducive and peaceful global landscape. However, it is undeniable that conflicts are escalating at an alarming rate and growing progressively complex (Markakis, 2011; Melkamu, 2016; Zerihun & Samuel, 2018).

Given this, various efforts have been made to uncover the underlying causes, drivers, and factors contributing to conflict and the conditions in which specific peace initiatives have fallen short of long-term success. In this quest for deeper understanding, scholars have begun a multidisciplinary examination of conflict dynamics, looking into the social, political, and cultural aspects that underpin conflicts and deter the establishment of durable peace (Falola & Haar, 2014; Galtung & Fischer, 2013). Despite the limitations of transforming theoretical developments in peace studies into concrete methodological tools and practices

(Söderström & Olivius, 2022), a multifaceted approach to conflict analysis has established a comprehensive framework for conflict resolution.

Recent research, however, indicates that ontological insecurity could serve as an additional underlying factor that contributes to the occurrence and severity of ethnic or identity-based conflicts (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Lesnikovski, 2011; Mitzen, 2006; Rumelili & Çelik, 2017). Ontological insecurity is the anxiety and fear individuals and groups feel when their fundamental beliefs, norms, and values are shaken or endangered. This insecurity can stem from various factors, including economic inequality, social injustice, and environmental sustainability challenges. These root causes of insecurity and conflict have become more apparent during the past decade as local and international conflicts have increased. Studies have shown that ethnic identities entrenched in narratives and conceptions of “Self” and the “Other,” and the maintenance of these narratives are widely seen as facilitating and sometimes inducing violent conflict (Grigorian & Kaufman, 2007; Rumelili & Çelik, 2017; Smith, 2007).

Ethnic conflicts often overlap conceptions and narratives, which typically intersect with the fundamental ontological asymmetry. The presence of ontological asymmetry, primarily visible in ethnic and minority conflicts, intensifies the state of ontological insecurity (Rumelili & Çelik, 2017). Minority [political minority] groups often encounter a scenario wherein their identity narratives are unrecognized, and their political approaches are subjected to delegitimization, leading to a notable disadvantage. Conversely, the dominant group tends to have a greater sense of ontological security, mainly attributed to the broader recognition of their identity. This difference in recognition and legitimacy emphasizes the complex dynamics inherent in identity politics. Therefore, the power dynamics between ontologically secure and those with a relatively unsecured status create an atmosphere for tensions and conflicts.

The conflicts observed across different regions are inclined to turn violent when there is a weak government. Prejudice is pervasive when group members fear for their survival, when competing sides demand political dominance over disputed territory, and when narratives of group identity lead the groups to view each other as hostile (Kaufman, 2022). Among

the other nations, Africa has been grappling with ongoing conflicts, which have significant implications for the region and affect various aspects, including political stability, socio-economic development, and humanitarian situations. The conflicts primarily arise from fundamental disparities rooted in identity-related and resource or land causes (Fekadu, 2011; Fukui & Markakis, 1994; Ottoh, 2018; Schlee, 2013). The phenomenon of ethnic conflict has been a prevalent and persistent topic in numerous countries, leading to significant havoc on the social and political life of diverse societies.

This paper contributes significantly to the growing literature on conflict and peace and ontological security studies. This work is grounded on previous studies undertaken by Mitzen (2006), Kay (2012), and Rumelili (2015). It utilizes an empirical investigation approach by considering the conflict between the Garri of Somali and the Borana of Oromo of southern Ethiopia as a case. Therefore, this study aims to enhance the current explanation of the link between identity, security, and conflict resolution by employing the newly developed ontological security theory in the specific setting of a conflict and its subsequent resolution. Accordingly, the study examined the narratives produced and actions that sustain a group's collective self (self-identity) during the conflict and peace process between Garri and Borana.

2. Methods

Qualitative methods were utilized to achieve the study's objectives and interpret reality through the participants' subjective perceptions. The collection of data involved the utilization of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained by engaging in interviews with key informants (KII) and conducting focus group discussions (FGD), while secondary data was acquired by analyzing relevant documents. Due to the study's reliance on qualitative methods, important informants from the study area were recruited using snowball sampling. For the FGD, purposive sampling was used to get their reflection and experiences on various peace initiatives and their experiences during the peace process. A detailed procedure was employed to collect data, involving fifteen interviews with key informants (KII) and Seven Focus Groups Discussions (FGD), one group comprising six

to eight participants. The researcher obtained verbal consent to conduct the study. The data was collected for three years, from 2020 to 2022, as an integral part of doctoral thesis.

3. Historical and Ethnographic Contexts

Garri and Borana live in the country's peripheries, bordering neighboring countries, namely Kenya and Somalia. This community's culture and livelihood are based on mobile livestock keeping or pastoralism as the principal economic activities. Studies showed they have a long history of living together and sharing pastoral resources (Oba, 2013). Historically, both communities were parts of the Imperial time administration district called Borena Awraja, a region that previously fell within the jurisdiction of the Sidamo kefelehager (province) (Asebe, 2016; Fekadu, 2008). Both groups share some ethno-linguistic features and a shared history of conflict and cooperation. The relationships between Borana and Garri are characterized by a relative period of peace and alliance in the nineteenth century to animosity in the twenty-first century (Oba, 2013). Due to this, certain Borana and Garri communities have undergone a process of cultural assimilation, leading them to adopt aspects of Somali or Oromo identities. This has resulted in the Garri community being described as "partly Somali and partly Oromo" (Getachew, 2002). However, due to the implementation of strict territorialization of ethnicity based on ethnic and language identity based "federal" governance framework in post-1991 Ethiopia, the Borana community became part of the Oromo Regional State, and the Garri community were categorized as belonging to the Somali Regional State (Asnake, 2010; Fekadu, 2008). This resulted in Somali and Oromo becoming separate regions with their respective communities, and their borders were essentialized with contested lines.

Geographical locations and Clan structure

Garri

The Garri pastoralists are a group of people found in the Dawa zone of the Somali regional state in Ethiopia. Before Dawa was formed as a separate administrative unit, it was

within the jurisdiction of the Liben Zone of Somali Regional State (Region 5). Previously, the Garri ethnic group also resided in the *Wachille* area, which is situated within the Borana zone (Getachew, 1983; Sato, 1996). However, according to Garri informants, they were compelled to abandon their settlement areas due to the conflict and animosity between the Borana and Garri.

The Garri are a transboundary group that straddles the tripartite border between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya. Geographically speaking, the Garri population is primarily found within the borders of Ethiopia. In this area, these people have maintained a solid and resilient traditional social structure, strengthened and supported by a clearly defined system of clans that is highly significant to their community and governance. This enduring and deeply established traditional structure is a cornerstone of their collective identity. The Garri pastoralists are organized into two named clans (*reer or goss*), divided into four sub-clans (*maana*) and twenty kinship units (*balbala*) (Fekadu, 2009; Getachew, 1983; Turton, 1970). The Garri structure was founded on cooperative resource-sharing through settlement (*olla*) and neighborhood. The Council of Clans is made up of leaders from all twenty clans, with one paramount chief (the *Sultan or Gob*) at its helm. The Sultan has four advisors representing each sub-clan within the Council of Clans. Decision-making processes are democratic and are made following debates in assemblages. During the monarchical regime, the Sultans held positions as both traditional political chiefs and government-appointed native authority (*balabbat*).

The Garri's are characterized by their firm adherence to the Islamic faith, which places significant emphasis on spirituality. The individual's commitment to the Islamic faith and unwavering devotion to their Sufi sect is fundamental to their lifestyle. This adherence significantly influences their cultural and social interactions. Accordingly, the Garri people deeply believe that grazing land belonged to ancestors, the dead to the living and unborn, and water resources are gifts of Allah, the divine entity who granted them. As this invaluable resource is shared, emphasizing its sacred essence, it cannot be claimed or possessed by any particular community member. They implement a well-established customary rule known as *Xeer-Kerri (Seer-Garri)* to ensure the sustainable management of resources and

social relations. These established rules are a framework that regulates the utilization and distribution of community resources. The Garri community places considerable importance on camels and goats, in addition to the livestock and cattle maintained within their vicinity. Moreover, in addition to their livestock activities, the Garri actively engaged in trade and are known for commercializing their livelihood (Sato, 1996).

Borana

Borana pastoralists are currently found in Borena and Guji, now Borana zones of the Oromia Regional State, which share southern borders with Kenya, on the west by the newly formed regional state of Southwest region, on the north by Guji zones of the Oromia regional state, and the east by Dawa zones of the Somali regional state (Beyene, 2017; McPeak & Little, 2018). The Borana community, also known as the Boran, is a subgroup of the Oromo people who reside in southern Ethiopia (Oromia) and northern Kenya. They use a particular Oromo language dialect, differentiating them from other portions of the Oromo community. The organizational framework of the Oromo groups in Borana is characterized by a patriarchal clan structure that is both meticulous and systematic. They established themselves apart from other Oromo communities as the area's most influential and dominant group. The Boran pastoralists, composed of the *Sabbo* and *Goona* sub-groups, indicate a social organization characterized by multiple named clans within each group, represented by broad kinship units (Asmarom, 2000; Baxter, 1979). The Boran pastoralists rely significantly on *Zebuu* cattle breeding as subsistence, influencing their economic activities and livelihood. The historical viewpoint on camels, which was previously considered taboo, has changed recently, resulting in a rising acknowledgment of the value of camels in the lives of Boran pastoralists (Kagunyu & Wanjohi, 2014; Muluneh et al., 2022).

The Gada, a highly complex social and political institution rooted in a generational hierarchy, holds significant importance in Borana's history and cultural heritage (Baxter, 1979; Helland, 1982). They are known for preserving traditional Oromo institutions deeply rooted in their cosmological order. The gada leader, commonly referred to as Aba gada, is the highest position facilitated through a voting procedure that occurs every eight years.

The *Gumi Gayo*, the highest assembly within the gada system of the Borana people, plays a crucial role in facilitating discussion and debate that is significant to the Borana community (Tigist, 2014). The Borana Oromo community is loyal to their customary leader, the **Aba gada**. Accordingly, every resource and activity, including livestock movement among the Borana, is governed by the *Gada* system.

Based on the cultural beliefs and traditions of the Boran community, the presence of grazing land holds significant reverence as a precious and divine gift granted by their god, referred to as *Waaqa*. The management and supervision of community resources, including land and pasture, are carried out with great care by the traditional authority. These recognized individuals hold considerable power and oversee and control the complex administration of communal resources, guaranteeing their long-term use and conservation for the entire community's benefit (Oba, 2014).

4. Results

4.1 Dominant Narratives

This part discusses the significance of ontological security within conflict resolution, specifically emphasizing the role played by self-narratives and routines. The purpose of narratives is to present events and experiences in a logical order, and language, power dynamics, and societal values all impact how narratives are developed. Identifying dominant narratives within the vast array of narratives is challenging. However, an ontological security lens allows for analyzing conflicts by understanding these dominant narratives and how they are affected by events in conflict processes. This lens focuses on self-narratives and routines, recognizing their role in shaping ontological insecurity.

After establishing the 'modern Ethiopian state,' which coincided with the colonial partition of the Horn of Africa, the state has propagated a dominant narrative, representing the southern frontiers as vulnerable and dangerous to the nation's territorial sovereignty and national state security. Under the reign of the successive Ethiopian governments, the concept of National security vis-à-vis the region has traditionally been viewed narrowly

as territorial security. It has been linked to border security rather than people. As a result, the government approached and treated the borderlands of southern Ethiopia's periphery with an exclusive political culture. As a modern state strategy, securitization of frontiers is used in constructing, othering, and managing specific identity groups, and patronizing one group over the other is marked by condescension. Subsequently, the state in southern frontiers gave more preferences to the Borana, and the state supported them as allies of the central government, primarily because of their status as an ideal political model to control and administer all non-Borana communities for monarchical modernity among the area's residents. The Somali identity, seen as a threat to the Ethiopian sovereignty and territorial integrity, continues to be politicized to serve the Ethiopian state through new orderings.

At this juncture, the state's policies indicate a growing emphasis on the banality of 'securitization' of Somali identity, with a clear preference for the Borana as allies of the state and the defense of its territorial integrity and national security through their appointment to prominent administrative, military, security and intelligence roles. Insecurities of the state were intertwined with a move that justified routinized and institutionalized securitization. This inclination, however, caused tensions between the extended resident groups and those perceived as "settlers/others." This narrative, according to Garri informants, reinforces existential threat and justifies the use of State violence, particularly in areas perceived to be Somali or affiliated. According to one of the Garri informants, the historical context in the area has been marked by extreme state violence in coordination with the Borana. The informants stated the state violence as follows:

During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, not only did the Borana march against Garri and other Somali clans, but the government also conducted raids and aerial bombardments, causing significant destruction of livelihood, grazing, and water points. Furthermore, during the Derg rule, and even before, the authorities ruthlessly persecuted Islam and people with Somali names. As a result, those who suffered people faced a tough and oppressive atmosphere. My own brother was tragically killed as a result of these tyrannical measures. (KII, Moyale: 2020)

The narrative presented entails a description of the historical encounter among the Garri and the level of state violence and oppression against them. Henceforth, the efforts undertaken by the state serve to intensify the already fragile power balance among various social groups in the vicinity.

Following the establishment of Sidamo *Kefelehager* (provincial administration), the Borana politicians working in government offices, with their deep cultural heritage, began their dominion over the region's social, political, and economic spheres. One Garri informant explained this as follows;

The dispute began due to poor administration/governance, in which the government did not treat the people equally. The central government uses the local Borana-pointed leaders to attempt to divide the land and the people. As a result, Borana forms a bond with the central government, imagining that this land belongs to them. (Interview with an elder, Moyale: 2021)

The Borana and Oromo Regional State Administrates, through their propaganda, portrayed the Garri and all other communities, explicitly Somali-speaking Muslim groups, as mere “settlers,” ignited the idea that is known as “*natives vs settlers*.” This settler concept, in turn, gave rise to an ever-expanding and burgeoning ideology firmly based on the belief that they were rightful inheritors of the land they called “ancestral land.” Consistently, the Borana and the Oromia Regional State position transformed, leading to a contentious debate about the distinction between ‘natives and outsiders’, eventually resulting in distinct identities. Therefore, the Borana desire to protect the “sense of self” [ontological security] is a pivotal factor from which the old conflict becomes new. As a result, the Garri and all other groups of Oromo and Somali-speaking Muslim Oromos and Somalis eventually started to fight against central and Regional State supported hegemony and this dominance. Both Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF) and Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) can trace their origins back to these events, which served as the stimulus behind their formation. During this period, the people of the region

were subjected to cruelty and persecution, and the country as a whole paid the price for the region's insecurity.

The state's rigid position of mistrust and discriminating policy towards the Somali as threats to national security and territorial integrity led to the aggravation of existing insecurities and tensions. The Imperial and the military regime (Derg) deployed a large number of armed forces and Borana militia to control and administer the people of the southeast's borders. The Garri who resisted the systematic discrimination and marginalization of the Ethiopian state under the SALF were subsequently labeled as 'potential terrorists' and sympathizers with foreign entities, thereby being securitized. It is not to underestimate the circumstances and conditions of the Horn of Africa; however, the internal aspect of security affects the state's external security. If people are insecure within its borders, it would be natural to expect them to look for an alternative, mainly when their kin are situated across the border, awaiting the opportunity to provide support and a sense of belonging. In the middle of this complex, the securitization and labeling as possible threats increased their internal struggles within the state and generated a rising sense of unity among them. The perception of being labeled as 'terrorists,' 'enemies,' and sympathizers of anti-Ethiopia drove the Garri and other non-Borana groups to form strong military alliances with Islamized Oromo and Somali communities and seek support not only within the Borana region in Ethiopia but across the border in the village, in Southern Somalia and the Diaspora. According to informants, this labeling heightened the sense of identification and shared grievances, laying the foundation for a common victim identity that transcended geographical space.

At the state level, perceptions toward the Garri (Somali) are surrounded by various perspectives reflecting various viewpoints. To delve into this multifaceted landscape, dissecting the historical and contemporary factors shaping the attitudes towards the Garri and those who claim Somali identity is crucial. Historically, the Garri geopolitical settings in southern frontiers have significantly shaped the perspectives towards Garri. The complex historical backdrop of border conflicts, resistance against state discrimination, and resource conflict within the area has substantially influenced attitudes. The framing

of the Garri and securitization of their Somali identity and Muslim has been affected by the construction of state narratives, specifically in the border tension between Kenya and Ethiopia.

Contemporary influences include the continued position of governmental policies, such as executing securitization measures and associated behaviors to protect the border [patronization of one group over another]. The pressure imposed by power relations, both inside the state and at the local level, has a significant role in shaping views about the Garri. However, it is crucial to recognize that these dominant narratives and practices hold substantial weight and are mobilized by political elites to justify violent and repressive measures against Garri. As a result, Borana's ontological security has come to rely on a position of moral righteousness, historic military superiority, and a desire to dominate all non-Borana groups. This position is based on the perception of the Garri as traitors and expansionists, as well as a group that poses a threat to Ethiopian territorial integrity.

These developments hardened the animosity between the two groups' elites' relationship with a negative image, perpetuating a dichotomy where one group is perceived as loyal to the state. At the same time, the other is labeled traitors, enemies of the Ethiopian state. The construction of such contrasting identities further intensified the dynamics of their relationship, influencing how the two communities interact. According to the official discourse, the State holds the authority (power) to empirically (through speculation) determine who qualifies as a 'threat,' what actions constitute a threat, and which acts are merely political violence. The State is perceived as representing an objective reality, and its interpretations of who is a threat are legitimate, thus justifying its actions. However, this state narrative fostered a sense of ontological insecurity among the Garri as the perceived loss of status threatened the group's identity, culture, and historical significance in the region.

At this junction, the Garri developed a counter-narrative that re-counts oppression and marginalization they have faced at the hands of Borana, portraying themselves as the victims of injustice and perceived favoritism of the state toward Borana. Remembering the collective suffering in events like the Wachile air attack, the Garri narrative of the Ethiopian

state, particularly during the imperial and Derg regimes, depicts the infliction of “physical and cultural massacre” upon the Garri community. According to Garri informants, this specific narrative rationalizes their alliance in opposition to the Ethiopian state amid the Italian invasion and Somali nationalism by considering the Ethiopian state as a military target, thereby endorsing acts of aggression towards them. Garri’s particular political and societal demands have changed over time; however, the dominant narratives at the social level stress the presence of inequality between the Borana and Garri people.

The Garri emphasized that the Borana, as allies of the Imperial and Derg regime authorities, were entrusted with the privileges and entitlements that come with recognition, whereas the Garri have not been given the right to work with both regimes. Consistently underlined the continued unequal treatment by the state authorities as the root source of tension and conflict between the two groups. The Garri informant emphasized the recurrent exclusion and ridicule that the reports of the Garri encountered, especially in times of heightened resource-based political competition. The Borana narratives often portray a sense of moral, political, and military hegemony. However, when supported by Ethiopian government authorities, this superiority claim gives rise to a plethora of ontological insecurity among the Garri, causing a deep-seated sense of insecurity and uncertainty. This leads to a profound ontological asymmetry, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust, resentment, and hostility.

4.2 Ontological (in)security, State administration, and the peace process

Until the establishment of Ethnic and language federalism in Ethiopia, the Garri-Borana issue went through cycles of escalation and de-escalation. However, there were limited disruptions to the dominant narrative. The state’s narrative remained intact, centered on securing the country’s frontiers from Somalia. Despite Garri and other Somali groups challenging the main assumptions of these narratives, the state marginalized these challenges by framing the issues as a security matter.

In May 1991, following its military victory over the Derg regime, the EPRDF took power, signifying the commencement of a revolutionary process to establish an ethnic and language-based federal administration. The philosophy of federalism, primarily viewed as

emancipatory, was designed to address deep historical injustices and animosities between different socioeconomic groups in the county. However, given its initial promise as a framework for liberation, the state structure eventually failed to address the basic conceptual faults inherent in its application adequately. An ethnic group, formerly marked by a comparatively minimal degree of conflict, inadvertently became entangled in unprecedented forms of conflict in their history.

The Borana and Garri resource and territorial conflict has witnessed an increased frequency of occurrences following the adoption of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. The study argues that the state failed to create substantial ontological security for minorities, primarily due to the reforms being executed within the framework of parochial ethno-linguistic political ethos as a *modus vivendi*. For example, the constitutional framework entailed categorizing different ethno-linguistic groups into their respective ethno-regional territorial states, forming the Oromia and Somali regions in the Garri-Borana case. The problem is not on the regions *per se*, but with the demarcation of the territorial borders between two previously shared communities.

Before the fall of the Derg regime, the Borana and Garri groups lived together in relative harmony under a single administrative province that had been a part of Sidamo *Kefelehager* [province] during the imperial regime and was then called Borana *Awraja* [district] and Borana administrative region. Their shared history of conflict and collaboration dates back to before the establishment of the modern state in Africa. Evidence of shared history witnessed during the 19th-century *Pax-Borana* alliance that transcends mere ethnic affiliations. The alliance constituted various culturally different groups like Borana, Garri, Gabra, Sakuye, and Ajurian. However, post-1991, ethnic, language and identity-based regionalization posed a substantial challenge for people with multiple identities with overlapping ethnolinguistic attributes. The political boundaries and emergence of new political entities in frontier zones gave rise to a transformative social structure within a notably effective institutional vacuum. Accordingly, the border/space was and remains sharply contested, and that dispute engendered profound changes in social definitions of border space. For example, the Garri were forced to weigh themselves with the Ogaden Somali and other affiliated Muslim

Oromo groups such as the Arssi, the Guji, and Gabra, signifying a significant move in their collective identity and definition of space.

The Borana and the Garri, who had lived side by side for centuries, discovered themselves on opposite sides of a contested administrative and state boundary. Accordingly, they began to struggle over who had access to contested space, how it would be used, and how these spaces would be preserved and represented. The struggle resulted in a substantial shift in collective identity conceptions, particularly in forming alternative collectivities and alliances. In other words, new maps of inclusion and exclusion, or self and others in everyday life, came into being. The dominant narrative towards the Garri shift in their alliance was manifested in the discourse constructed by the Borana. The Borana informants viewed the boundary and the shift as a facilitating factor leading to the loss of their “customary territorial and resource lands,” leading to the shrinking of the Oromia region territorial borders as the Garri and other newcomers, along with other Somali-speaking inhabitants of the region, became part of the newly formed Somali Region (Region 5).

Both physical and ontological securities are generated through relational processes, reflecting the groups’ concerns. The Garri presented a heightened concern regarding the legitimacy of their existence within the context of the Somali grand narrative. Conversely, the Borana community, which dominates the area, expresses anxiety regarding potential challenges to their territorial integrity and hegemonic position within the grand Oromo ethno-nationalist discourse. This hegemonic position is a biographical narrative, or a story, made by the informant, which gives a picture of Borana’s identity as protected and dominant, justified through the place attachment. Accordingly, it can be observed that the Garri emphasizes the preservation of their ontological security.

In contrast, the Borana community prioritizes their physical safety, mainly when their ontological security is safe. Despite these claims, the Garri mirrored their shifting alliance, or the decision to identify as Somali was not as narrowly interpreted. Instead, they claim that it resulted from grievance, discontent, and injustices from Imperial/Derg State and Borana or Oromo nationalists against their existence, which goes beyond borders, territory, and resources. Since 1991, the highly discriminatory and biased propaganda of Oromo

ethno-nationalists has influenced their determination of a historic residential claim to the region. By aligning themselves with a Somali nationalist identity, the Garri community challenges the notion of Borana's claim to indigeneity, highlighting the complex interplay between historical, cultural, and social factors that shape one's sense of collective self. The informant from Garri strengthened the above claims and stated their position as follows:

We changed our alliance for many reasons; however, it's crucial to note that this does not reflect a change in our core identity. Some people mistake this change in our alliance as merely an identity negotiation. Before the administrative changes, we lived as Garri beside the Borana, sharing many similarities. This, however, did not make us Borana (Oromo). Our essential identity is still Garri-Somali. As a result, the decision to administratively identify with our Somali counterparts was driven primarily by changes in administrative structure...then historical injustice, and systematic marginalization over successive regimes rather than a shift in our fundamental identity. We used to be Somali, and we still are. (Moyale, KII:2021)

Within this narrative, a complex interaction unfolds among elements of identity, a history fraught with marginalization, instances of violence, and the influence of these interactive processes on the shaping of social identity. The Garri community appears to find a certain level of contentment in the federal provisions for local self-administration established by the current ethno-regional administrative framework enshrined in the 1994/95 Ethiopian constitution. This position differs from the practical dominant settings during the reign of Haile Selassie and the Derg regime. This change was partly influenced by the Garri people's historical hatred for the Borana-dominated government that ruled during the Derg and Imperial periods. According to the Garri informants, the previous regime's policy prevented any social or ethnic group from governing its territory. Eventually, however, the arrival of the EPRDF significantly changed this situation by instituting a system that empowers people to rule themselves and form their territory. This shift marks a noteworthy departure from historical precedents, reflecting an evolving dynamic within the socio-

political landscape. The Garri informants claim that during the Imperial and Derg regimes, there was a clear Ethiopian State bias against Garri in favor of the state client Borana. Their argument underscores the enduring hardships and sufferings they encountered during the long-standing conflict in the area. As one of the Garri informants expressed this hardship:

During the Imperial and Derg regimes, our community endured significant hardships, including forced displacement from our homeland. Additionally, during the Ethio-Italy and Ethio-Somalian wars, our people were caught in the crossfire, mistreated, and often used as hostages, resulting in a lasting impact on our overall livelihood and security. These historical events have left deep scars on our community. So, we were excited when we heard that we could finally have our administration, which the Borana no longer dominated. (Moyale, FGD:2021)

This narrative, unraveling the respondents' lived experiences, provides a profound exploration into the complex realities of their livelihoods and the moral standing of a socio-politically and economically marginalized group in the face of continual top-down adversity. Within this collective victimization, the group's experiences embody the broader power asymmetry between the Garri and the Borana. Through the lens of this voice, the informants unequivocally portray the State as the alienator and the people as alienated. This narrative reflects a scenario in which one side is granted unbridled autonomy and hegemony over the other. At the same time, the other contends with a historical legacy of alienation, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of State denied autonomy. In this complex narrative, themes of the State process of political discrimination and exclusion emerge as enduring foundations of the Garri community, characterized by a prolonged history of suffering.

The cycle of crisis: emigrants from homeland

Many notable challenges and conflicts accompanied the adoption of the new administrative framework. The failure to effectively attend to these critical issues has had a substantial impact, leading to an increase in lethal conflicts among different ethnonational

groups. These conflicts have risen more frequently in recent decades and are pervasive in the Southern frontiers. Over the past three decades, this region has faced many issues, from conflict and violence to illegal trade.

The conflicts in the area occur on multiple levels, exhibiting diverse trajectories and consequences, but they are profoundly interconnected and mutually reinforce one another. According to informants from both the Borana and Garri communities, a significant number of the conflicts they have experienced since 1992 have been primarily driven by contentious territorial border disputes encompassing the newly created ethnolinguistic identity-based Regional State of Oromia and Somali.

These conflicts have undergone a notable evolution in their character, shifting from primarily territorial resource-driven competition to a predominant boundary dispute. This transformation implies a significant change in the relationship between the Borana and Garri communities. As Fekadu (2008, 2011) stated, the border demarcation presented a complex and diverse complication for the area's inhabitants and the two regional governments. The protracted conflicts characterized by claims and counter-claims along the boundaries significantly engaged the regional states, augmenting the situation's complex nature. This scenario is significant as it brings to the solidification of the divide between "us" and "them," intensifying existing differences and instilling a sense of "otherness" in Garri and Borana relations. The absence of clear instructions regarding boundary delineation in the 1992 Proclamation, the 1995 EPRDF constitution, and other legal frameworks significantly prolonged the conflict and negotiations between the two regional states and the Garri and Borana communities.

This absence of legal guidance and ongoing territorial disputes escalated and de-escalated at various stages. Despite the human and economic costs, the conflict further strengthened existing identities, narratives, and routines of armed violence in both the Garri and Borana communities. The Borana narrative, which emphasizes historical ownership and hegemonic rule over other historical resources of the region, has essentially stayed intact at the societal level. However, Garri boldly challenged the fundamental presumptions embedded within this dominant narrative, questioning its validity and generating a pervasive sense

of ontological insecurity. The Garri challenged the premises embedded within the Borana dominant narratives, representing a bold assertion of their identity, agency, and aspirations as they defy imposed constraints and reclaim their voice in shaping their collective destiny.

In 2004, the Federal government commenced a process, initially a referendum, with the declared intention of ending the conflict. However, this proposed referendum encountered significant opposition from the Borana community, resulting in a prevailing sense of ontological insecurity. The lack of security stemmed from the failure to recognize the distinct socio-economic realities of pastoralists, whose livelihoods rely on mobility that extends beyond the border. The Borana pastoralists contended that the concept of a ‘referendum’ disregarded their deeply ingrained “customary rights” to the historically inhabited lands, which hold profound significance for their identity and livelihood. The Borana wanted to routinize their ‘biographical narratives’ in a sustainable social environment. One of the Borana informants expressed his discontent as follows:

The government had several alternative options to determine land ownership. For instance, they could have examined historical records to understand how different communities historically used and managed specific lands. However, they chose a different path and used a referendum to address land ownership issues. (Moyale, KII:2022)

This narrative shed light on the underlying sentiment prevalent within the Borana community, revealing a profound desire for the Garri people to distance themselves from what the Borana consider their “ancestral land.” It encompasses both a literal and metaphorical longing, reflecting a deeply ingrained belief among specific Borana individuals that the mere presence of the Garri poses a threat to their ownership and deep-rooted connection with the land. This sentiment is rooted in a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and territorial pro-Borana State polity and political dynamics. From the perspective of the Borana, the Garri are seen as “outsiders,” “intruders,” or “encroachers” on what they perceive as their exclusive ancestral territory. However, this territorial claim often overlooks or dismisses

the historical coexistence and interdependence of diverse communities that have shared this geographical space for generations. Perpetuating this narrative, the Borana produced a ‘collective biography’ and ‘routines’ reinforcing their exclusive entitlement to the land, disregarding the rich and diverse history of inter-group conflict and peaceful coexistence and interconnections that have shaped the region’s inhabitants over the centuries.

The rigid territorial stance upheld by the Borana community engenders a state of ontological insecurity, evoking existential concerns within the Garri community. The denial of their historical presence in the area delegitimizes their existence. It disrupts the continuity of their biographical narrative, which complicatedly weaves their presence into the region’s social fabric. This denial challenges their claims to the land and undermines their sense of identity, eroding the foundations of their cultural tradition and ancestral ties to the area. One of the Garri informants stated their grievance as follows;

...it is evident that our suffering stems from two factors. Firstly, being Garri has subjected us to marginalization and discrimination, as our presence and rights have been historically overlooked and undervalued. Secondly, the broader context of being Somali has further compounded our struggles, as we have faced systemic biases and prejudice based on ethnic identity. One significant issue we encounter is the government’s perception that the land always belongs to the Borana community, and it has persisted over generations, even during the Derg regime, where the dominance of Borana interests continued to overshadow our own. (Moyale; KII, 2022)

In this narrative, the Garri informants express their grievances, highlighting their challenges regarding ontological insecurity, as their sense of self and collective identity is constantly under threat.

The Garri community emphasizes that their marginalization and discrimination stems from being Garri, indicating that their cultural and social identity is not adequately recognized or valued by the dominant groups. This lack of recognition and validation undermines

their ontological security, eroding their safety in their existence and worth within the social fabric.

The Garri and Borana narratives presented conflicting perspectives and reactions within these communities regarding the proposed referendum. The referendum triggered concern and skepticism among the Borana community, particularly among the elders and societal actors. This opposition likely stemmed from the perceived threat to their territorial claims and the potential upheaval it could bring to their established routines. On the other hand, the Garri and other groups such as Digodia, Merihan, and others largely supported the referendum. They saw it as an opportunity for change and a means to legitimize their claims to the land and gain better representation within the area. The differing reactions toward the referendum by the Borana and Garri communities shed light on their distinct perspectives and aspirations. The Borana community resisted the referendum proposal, driven by concerns about potential disruptions to their established biographical narratives. In contrast, the Garri community, seeking legitimacy and a sustainable social environment, embraced the referendum as an opportunity to bring positive change and justice to their claims. Therefore, the ontological asymmetry inherent in the Garri-Borana issue influenced the respective group's willingness to pursue change and peace.

After a period marked by territorial conflict and sporadic violence, the long-awaited referendum finally took place in November 2004. The main goal of the referendum was to actively involve the public in the 'democratic' procedure, allowing them to utilize their fundamental entitlement to cast their vote and decide their political fate. It also had implications for resource allocation and their ethnic identification with the newly created Oromo vs Somali Regional State. The overall outcome of the referendum was successful in most of the region, with 422 Kebeles experiencing a relatively smooth process. However, the referendum did not materialize as intended in eight remaining kebeles, particularly those centered around Moyale. As a result, these areas found themselves in a complex situation where the Somali-Oromo Regional administration and competing jurisdictions between the two regions became a source of contention. The overlapping claims and conflicting authorities further worsened the existing divisions, posing challenges to peace and stability in the area.

Some informant from the Borana community voiced their discontent regarding what they perceived as the formed Somali Regional State appropriation of their land. They contended that the Garri had taken control of the land that the Borana had initially shared for collective use, treating them as “guests” and “new arrivals.” However, over time, the Garri began asserting their ownership rights over these valuable resources, transforming their status from Borana’s claimed label of “guests” to a legitimate social group, reclaiming their historic and long-fought permanent entitlement to the land. As the Borana informants explained the profound extent of their territorial loss,

The loss we experienced goes far beyond a mere plot of land; it encompasses the irreplaceable grazing areas we relied upon and the invaluable wells like Goff and Lae. These wells hold significant cultural and historical importance to the Borana community, as our ancestors thoroughly dug them and have been integral to our livelihood for generations. The impact of losing these wells is deeply felt, as it strikes at the core of our cultural identity and social heritage. It not only disrupts our way of life but also severs a vital link to our past, carrying profound emotional and psychological implications for our community. (Miyo, Interview with NGO worker: 2021)

Another Borana informant from the government office further stated their strong attachment to the now-transferred land as follows;

...loss of that land, or the threat of its loss, implies the loss of self...it symbolizes a fundamental aspect of our existence...these resources encompass areas are rich in water wells, grazing lands, and valued ritual sites. (Moyale, Interview: 2022).

Based on the above narrative, the ontological insecurity experienced by the Borana community goes beyond immediate material concerns. It is linked with cultural identity,

traditional heritage, and emotion to connect with their ancestral traditions. Thus, the demarcation of the new territorial border transcends a mere demarcation line; it symbolizes access to essential resources critical to their livelihoods and cultural practices. The sentiment was articulated with deep frustration, highlighting a fundamental transformation in the power dynamics that had evolved gradually. This change in status, wherein the Borana community had initially embraced the Garri as “guests” but now perceived them as owners, emerged as a significant source of conflict between these two communities.

In contrast, the Garri informants expressed similar dissatisfaction with the referendum results and consistently held onto their claims of ownership over specific areas. They boldly dismissed the claims put forth by the Borana elites, asserting their historical claims in the following manner;

Historically, our presence in this area has been deeply rooted and long-lasting. We have actively participated in extensive and protracted battles in unity with our fellow (Borana and others), combatting common enemies. Moreover, during the border negotiations between the British and Ethiopian governments, our community safeguarded the land under dispute. Our involvement in those negotiations was evident, with the Garri Sultan and elders representing the Ethiopian government's interests. So how could we be considered newcomers or guest in this place...the Borana, however, still claims the entire land belongs to them. (Kededuma, KII: 2022)

This scenario reflects the area's complex historical narratives and disputes over land and resources, which continue to have far-reaching ramifications for the ongoing conflict. As represented by informants on both sides, the produced narratives revolve around a single theme: contentious resource border issues, including claims and counterclaims over territory along the border. However, both communities' contradictory claims indicate the difficulties of integrating different historical narratives and managing the complexities of ownership in the contested border place.

Finally, the referendum that intended to resolve conflicts had an unintended and adverse outcome, further worsening tensions and leading to increased inter-group violence between the Borana and Garri communities and inter-regional Somali and Oromo State conflicts. The escalation of the violence embroiled in four devastating conflicts occurred between them from 2008 to 2018, causing large-scale population displacement and loss of life and livelihoods. The proximity of the conflicts on the borders of Ethiopia-Kenya and Somalia states further intensified the situation's gravity, making it look like a regional/international conflict. The porousness of the border, along with the instability of Somalia and northeastern Kenya, facilitated the influx of firearms, further escalating the local disputes to a more lethal level and inflicting significant harm to an involved state party, local communities in the volatile border inhabitants. In addition, informants from both the Borana and Garri communities have voiced their concerns regarding the involvement of the federal army in the ongoing conflicts in the region. They noted a worrying pattern where the army arrived after significant casualties. Strangely, these interventions sometimes aggravate conflicts instead of resolving them. Accordingly, the escalation is often fueled by the perception that the army has taken sides, leading to a sense of injustice and further deepening animosity. Both the Garri and Borana communities have accused each other and criticized the government, alleging consistent bias in favor of one side or the other in most conflicts dating back to 1992. Therefore, the aftermath left an eroded trust and deep-seated hatred, challenging the path to recovery for all the affected communities and challenging most of the state-sponsored peace initiatives.

The State Sponsored Peace Processes

Efforts have been made along the Somali-Oromo ethno-nationalist politics divide to foster peaceful coexistence and to address the local conflicts between the Garri and Borana communities arising from boundary disputes and resource competition. Numerous initiatives, including central and regional governments' military involvement, have been undertaken to tackle these challenges, from local institutions to the state level. In the past, measures were taken to ensure harmony and equitable access to grazing lands. During the

reign of the Emperor, a Tribal Convention (Tribal grazing area) was established around 1945 to effectively regulate grazing rights and facilitate the peaceful coexistence between the Borana and Garri communities. Despite the Imperial and Derg government's proactive yet Borana-favoring interventions to mitigate tensions and promote cooperation, its long-term effectiveness was limited due to the omission of traditional institutions and State biases toward one group of people.

To address inter-ethnic conflicts, the post-1991 government has implemented several measures. These include establishing local-level ethnolinguistic identity-based administrative frameworks and peace committees with the mandate to facilitate the resolution of such local conflicts. Additionally, an administrative decentralization policy has been put in place, empowering "citizens" and allowing for decision-making at lower levels of governance in the form of a referendum. While these efforts have yielded some short-term positive outcomes in resolving specific issues, it is essential to acknowledge that numerous conflicts persist, particularly in the issue of the contested claims to Moyale town. A return to the territorial status quo ante, demanded by the Borana, would alienate the Garri. At the same time, a referendum, desired by the Garri, would further upset the Borana claims to the area.

The post-1991 *Negelle Borana Peace Conventions* were developed through collaborative efforts involving representatives from various social groups residing in the Borana, Guji, and Liben/Dawa pastoralist Zones of the Somali and Oromia Regions. These conventions aimed to promote peace-building and conflict transformation within the region, with the active involvement of representatives from both the regional and federal governments. The conventions encompassed a range of interventions focused on enhancing cooperation and fostering peaceful dialogue among the ethnically diverse communities in the area. These interventions sought to facilitate constructive engagement and collaboration among the conflicting ethnic groups, creating an environment conducive to sustainable peace and harmonious coexistence.

However, the peace process between the Garri and Borana communities has ultimately fallen short of achieving its intended objectives. The failure of the peace process can be attributed to many factors, each playing a significant role in impeding progress. One key

factor contributing to the lack of success is the long-standing, deep-seated hatred and mistrust between the two communities and the respective leaders involved over time. Historical conflicts that were unresolved land and resource allocation issues have intensified these tensions, further complicating the path to reconciliation. Besides, the absence of sustained engagement and commitment from both sides and the lack of commitment of central, regional, and local government authorities to bring about a peaceful resolution have hindered the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. Without a genuine willingness to address grievances and work towards a shared understanding, the prospects for meaningful resolution remain limited. External factors, such as political interference by the Regional States forces and limited resources allocated to conflict resolution initiatives, have imposed further obstacles to peace.

Furthermore, the recent development of the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor, which aims to enhance regional economic connectivity, has introduced an additional layer of complexity. Establishing the business corridor, particularly in the Moyale area, potentially will further competition for prospective benefits from the regional project in a way that aggravates tensions between the Garri and Borana communities in Ethiopia and Kenya. The competition for resources and economic opportunities associated with the project may intensify competition for economic resources, land, and business opportunities existing grievances, further fueling the conflict dynamics.

5. Discussions

5.1 Theoretical discussion on Ontological (in) security

Ontological security is healthy routines, a sense of certainty, and continuity at a group and individual level. As defined by psychiatrist Laing (1965) and developed by Giddens (1984, 1991, 2013), ontological security refers to an individual's or a group's ability to exercise physical autonomy within a given context. It is internal to the individual or a particular society. Giddens defines ontological security as “a sense of continuity and order

in events,” including those not directly inside the individual’s perceptual environment (Giddens, 1991). For him, being human entails constantly being aware of what one is doing and why one is doing it. Essentially, being ontologically secure means having a sense of one’s identity and the reality around it and being able to act and react to that reality, which is essential in being a human.

Wendt (1999) defines ontological security as human beings requiring reasonably stable expectations about the natural and primarily social environment around them. In addition to the need for physical security, this drives human beings toward conservatism, homeostasis, and the need to seek recognition of their status from society. One must understand the world around them to act and react to it; to have this understanding, one must first understand who they are and their identity. Stable cognitive environments, characterized by one’s awareness of continuous existence, its significance, and the surrounding reality, engender a knowledge of appropriate actions and reactions to reality and a sense of order in events. Establishing a consistent routine and habitual conduct is crucial for fostering a stable environment and a sense of connection to reality.

Stable environments facilitate the formation of ingrained social connections with others, which in turn shape specific behaviors that are necessary for the preservation of one’s sense of self-identity. We can solidify who we are as social beings by our everyday routines and practices and through a “futuristic sense” of social existence in which one can establish predictable expectations for the future (Giddens, 1984, p. 62). Within the context of the social environment and community order, routines are established. The fundamental determinants of predictable routines are continuity and stability in the form of shared knowledge; any disruption to this information engenders an environment of ontological insecurity. When the institution’s order challenges the routines that make up the order of the community, this makes room for ontological insecurity. According to Giddens, individuals must establish a framework of ontological security through the use of routines of different kinds. This framework allows individuals to “bracket out questions regarding themselves, others, and the object world,” which are necessary to perform daily activities and to maintain a consistent biographical narrative (Giddens, 1984, p. 37).

On the group level, identity is formed and sustained through relationships. Because of this, having routinized relationships with significant persons is essential for ensuring ontological security. To accomplish these goals, a social group will utilize narratives to develop and maintain a consistent collective identity and base and establish routinized action that reflects these narratives. However, when these narratives no longer reflect the community's identity, it can wreak havoc on the group's collective sense of self. As a result, the actor will strive to maintain their identity by reproducing routines (Steele, 2008). Anxiety would ensue if the narratives and routines that support the self were disrupted, given that they are emotionally invested and crucial to group well-being.

Two fundamental elements offer a profound response to how to obtain and sustain ontological security. First, we use narratives that communicate who we are or who we perceive that we are our identity and everything we connect to our identity (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017). These narratives go beyond the boundaries of mere language, as they encompass the very fabric of our identity, interwoven with our experiences, beliefs, and values. Narratives are vital for establishing intersubjectivity, which is essential for differentiating or associating our identities with others and understanding this intersubjectivity to enhance communication between ourselves and others. Second, in the context of human existence and experience, we engage in an action that reflects who we are and do them daily, making them routinized, becoming ingrained in our daily routines, thereby assuming a significant role in our lives. This particular aspect of routinization is critical, as it facilitates establishing a deep-rooted connection between these actions and our cognitive faculties.

Consequently, this enables us to create a sense of continuity within ourselves and our perception of reality. These factors apply similarly to ethnicity or social groups where routinized narratives and actions are used to establish and maintain the collective self-identity. In the study of ontological security, it is crucial to analyze the narratives produced by a social group and the actions taken by their actors. Since a security dilemma between ethnic groups can be interpreted as a rudimentary relationship to establish stability, ontological security theory applies to this investigation.

5.2 Overview of Ontological insecurity, conflict, and peace process

The concept of ontological security underlines the value of maintaining a framework with its established meanings, practices, and routines. In contrast, ontological insecurity refers to the disruption of this framework and the anxiety that results from it. The concern with ontological security is not the security of a particular ontology. Without emphasizing any specific narrative or routine, ontological security emphasizes the significance of the security that results from their maintenance (Rumelili & Çelik, 2017).

Ontological insecurity, conversely, is defined as the disruption of a previously developed framework with its well-established meanings, practices, and routines. The condition of ontological insecurity, characterized by group uncertainty regarding the fundamental nature of reality and existence, engenders profound and heightened sensations of anxiety (Kinnvall, 2004). The experience of anxiety is triggered by the group's need to confront existential questions that were previously disregarded or ignored. These questions concern the fundamental essence of being, the objective of life, and the significance of one's existence. Groups are confronted with the task of harmonizing their collective understanding of reality with the inherent unpredictability and vagueness that ontological insecurity entails.

Moreover, the prevailing condition of insecurity undermines groups' capacity to develop and sustain a cohesive narrative about their actions, behaviors, and identity. Ontological insecurity gives rise to a deep-seated feeling of anxiety and confusion, as it undermines pre-existing cognitive structure and poses a challenge to their capacity to construct a cohesive narrative regarding their being. Additionally, ontological crises can be more than just critical situations; they can be long-term and irresolvable contradictions within dominant identity constructions. The breakdown of epistemic security, or knowledge safety, leads to the erosion of trust and impacts society (Rumelili & Çelik, 2017).

There has recently been an effort to forge a link between the concept of ontological security and the subject of critical security studies (Kay, 2012; Rumelili, 2015). Rumelili, for example, discussed the concept of ontological security and how it relates to conflict resolution and peace anxieties (2015). It explores how individuals and social groups

experience insecurities and concerns about their sense of self and identity in various settings. Malksoo (2015) also highlighted how the securitization of memory as the temporal basis of a state's biographical narrative creates new security dilemmas and a reduced sense of security among competing actors in public remembering issues.

Moreover, as shown by the academic works of Rumelili (2015), Rumelili and Celik (2017), and Kay (2012), researchers have attempted to include ontological security theory in the body of literature on conflict resolution (2012). This research has consistently highlighted the formation of a socio-psychological attachment to conflicts and narratives that perpetuate conflicts. In his study, Kay (2012) explains how ontological security is essential to understanding sectarian conflict and conflict resolution. Further, it contends that while high-level, official peacemaking may be explained by rational actor models, the limits on peace-building are ontologically driven, and this is a crucial point of differentiation between the two types of peacemaking. Scholars committed to the study of ontological security have proposed that conflicts serve as a framework that enhances an individual's sense of security (Rumelili, 2015).

Additionally, there is an argument that conflict narratives serve the purpose of encountering existential anxieties by differentiating distinct sources of fear and constructing significant frameworks that separate friends from enemies. Individuals or groups may compromise both their physical security and ontological security due to the potential trade-offs that conflicts may generate regarding ontological security. Conflicts' sense of ontological security may cause parties to remain attached to them, although they may cause physical and economic harm (Mitzen, 2006). States or groups, according to Mitzen, seek ontological security, or security of the self, in addition to physical security, by routinizing connections with significant persons; as a result, actors develop attachments to those relationships (2006). However, peace processes that promise physical security can inadvertently lead to ontological insecurity by undermining the established conflict narratives.

Furthermore, there is a wide acknowledgment that the presence of ontological security significantly hinders the peace process and its initiatives (Rumelili, 2015; Rumelili & Çelik,

2017). Ontological insecurity erodes trust and intensifies the perception of widespread threat. These scenarios may create a conducive environment for political actors to manipulate the distrust to serve their interests. As a result, ontological insecurity has the potential to impede the peace process by inducing parties to bypass mediation formulae and escalate small unresolved components of the agreement to existential concerns, thereby giving rise to additional sources of contention that were not initially addressed (Rumelili & Çelik, 2017). Protecting one's sense of identity might be the impetus for the re-emergence of long-dormant disputes.

Ontological insecurity, indicating deep uncertainty regarding the essence of one's existence, significantly complicates and undermines the effectiveness of peace processes across multiple domains. However, it is critical to emphasize that disrupting firmly established routines and deeply embedded narratives is instrumental and essential for achieving peace by accepting the transformative change that occurred. While societal reconciliation is necessary, peace processes continue to be susceptible to being reversed if, in the end, they fail to re-establish ontological security. According to Rumelili (2015), interventions into conflicts should aim to re-establish a new framework of ontological security based on newly constructed identities and routines. Kay (2012) emphasizes the need to address "the ontological foundations of the conflict," which require reconciliation at the micro-level. Also, Browning and Joenniemi (2017) propose changing the narratives that define the relationship between identity, territory, and sovereignty to bring about a fundamental shift in the ontological foundation upon which the conflict is based. Alternatively, Rumelili and Celik (2017) further claim that it is crucial to reconstruct an alternative narrative to resolve ontological asymmetry in intergroup conflict. The narrative reconstruction is suggested as an alternative approach for confronting and potentially resolving the conflict's core problems and inequalities.

5.3 Ontological Asymmetry

The concept of ontological asymmetry refers to the unequal recognition, value, or legitimacy given to the identities, perspectives, or narratives held by different groups.

This problem becomes particularly evident in the complex fabric of multi-ethnic societies (Fekadu, 2011; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Lesnikovski, 2011). Within heterogeneous environments, different groups frequently encounter complex power relations, wherein certain groups' viewpoints and cultural narratives are given greater significance and support than others.

The concept of ontological asymmetry emerges as a significant factor within the framework of ethnic conflict, playing a role in the escalation of hostilities and the fostering of animosity between rival groups. From a practical standpoint, ontological asymmetry explains the different treatment of various communities regarding the recognition and legitimacy given to their identities and worldviews (Rumelili & Çelik, 2017). Consequently, certain groups from government authorities enjoy better treatment, while others experience marginalization or the denial of their ontological security. This unequal treatment not only contributes to profound feelings of insecurity within the marginalized, excluded communities but also cultivates a sense of anger. This problem becomes particularly evident in the complex fabric of multi-ethnic societies (Fekadu, 2011; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Lesnikovski, 2011). Within heterogeneous socio-cultural environments, different groups frequently encounter complex power relations, wherein certain groups' viewpoints and cultural narratives are given greater significance and support than others.

The occurrence of a sense of marginalization within particular ethnic or cultural communities carries significant implications, as it generates a profound sense of insecurity and fosters sentiments of hatred. According to Rumelili (2015), it can be argued that all parties involved possess an equal ability to establish a stable sense of collective self. Therefore, the group begins resolving the conflict, first rooted in ontological security, whereby their identities are secure and affirmed internally and externally. Nevertheless, the dynamics have the potential to rapidly shift, once more in a collective manner, towards a condition characterized by ontological insecurity. However, it is essential to acknowledge that many conflicts demonstrate a distinct ontological asymmetry. These conflicts frequently entail parties that possess well-defined and consistent self-narratives, which are internally consistent and externally recognized. These parties

reflect significant differences from other players who, from the beginning, have a lower level of ontological security. A gap in security arises from the contradiction resulting from multiple contradictory narratives or the inadequate recognition of their identities (Lupovici, 2012). This phenomenon further complicates the complicated nature of these conflicts by materializing in the form of resistance or acts of violence directed at securing their rights and identities (Mitzen, 2006).

The consequences of ontological asymmetry are most apparent in societies characterized by ethnic diversity since the state authorities' unequal recognition of different ethnic identities often leads to mutual distrust and long-standing hatred. The central focus of many ethnic conflicts around the world revolves around the pursuit of recognition and the desire to address ontological insecurity, which are the fundamental driving forces behind these conflicts (Abushov, 2019; Kaufman, 2023). This phenomenon is notably widespread in conflicts that involve ethnic and minority groups, wherein significant inequalities often exist due to the lack of recognition of minority groups' narratives regarding their identity and the denial of their political strategies, which are frequently labeled as "terrorists" (Toros, 2008). As a result, minority groups experience a continuous condition of ontological insecurity, while people belonging to the majority group benefit from a more privileged position (Bilali et al., 2014), characterized by a stable sense of ontological security.

The significance of ontological asymmetry is crucial in influencing the strategies employed by dominant and marginalized groups to confront conflicts and adapt to transformative conditions. The emergence of ontological insecurity exposes minority groups to heightened vulnerability, leaving them more vulnerable to the distractions and challenges presented by actors that undermine peace processes. Paradoxically, the lack of acknowledgment of the firmly formed narratives of minority groups creates ontological insecurity, thereby giving them further authority in their quest for societal transformation and peace. In contrast, the majority groups maintain relatively solid and consistent self-narratives that are internally and externally recognized. Therefore, the conflict holds less significance in their pursuit of ontological security. However, while individuals may possess an inherent feeling of

ontological security, this does not always result in a stronger tendency to actively participate in resolving conflicts.

In many cases, the dominant social groups in society or countries of multi-ethnic, who possess a greater sense of ontological security, hesitate to adopt transformative measures that may activate their underlying concerns. Asymmetric ethnic conflicts entail higher risks and costs for the dominant group, primarily due to the urge to disrupt the existing status quo to remediate perceived injustices (Jensen, 1997). The high-power group will lose a more significant portion regarding status and advantages. On the contrary, the low-power group stands to benefit more than it loses by challenging the status quo.

Conflicts characterized by ontological asymmetry reflect a lack of comprehensive stability and successful resolution. In contrast to the idealistic concept of ontologically symmetric stable conflicts as defined by Rumelili (2015), peace processes within ontologically asymmetric conflicts are generally characterized by a relatively easy initiation phase but a significantly harder path toward a successful resolution. This challenge develops due to ontological insecurity experienced by one of the parties involved in these conflicts. Although it may promote a tendency towards active engagement in conflict, ontological insecurity also confers an increased perception of personal agency in pursuing transformative initiatives. This perspective is based on the optimistic belief that initiating change can finally achieve the desired goal, mainly through productive negotiations or dialogues (Malley, 2023). Conversely, the challenges associated with reaching peaceful resolutions in conflicts characterized by ontological asymmetry are heightened due to the necessity of carefully designing interventions that effectively address the different interests and concerns of both ontologically secure and insecure parties.

Like many other ethnic conflicts, the Garri and Borana issue is characterized by a significant ontological asymmetry. The difference can be attributed to narratives deeply embedded throughout Borana's cultural and political actors, which are firmly established within various institutional frameworks and hold significant respect and legitimacy within their social sphere and among the previous State Administration. On the contrary, Garri society and political actors are required to prove their distinct social identity

and actively construct their existence. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this ontological asymmetry is not inherently absolute. In the last three decades, the dominant Borana discourse, which emphasized the myth of indigeneity, has experienced a slow decline as a result of both internal and external factors. From an internal perspective, the decline can likely be attributed to the changing societal dynamics, evolving cultural values, and shifting political center/policies (Asnake, 2010; Markakis, 2011; Tache & Oba, 2009). Externally, increased trade connectivity and exposure to diverse cultures and ideologies have shaped the gradual decline (Eunice & Maj Geoffrey, 2016; Sowa, 2023). Concurrently, there has been a growing recognition of the Garri community's assertions on their quest for political representation, distinct ethnic identity, and historic presence and claims to the region. However, the discussion above emphasizes the importance of persistently challenging the dominant narratives that grant Borana a feeling of ontological security.

5.4 Dominant Narratives: From Historical Perspectives

Mitchell (2015), in his seminal work, expressed concern about the excessive attention paid to dominant narratives, emphasizing marginalized narratives across different social groups. However, it is necessary to recognize that these dominant narratives serve as essential and durable milestones. They significantly impact shared identity development and foster a more precise grasp among individuals. To gain a deep understanding of conflicts, employing an ontological security approach, which includes a detailed examination of ontological asymmetry, is essential. This approach refers to the pattern in which some narratives, as discovered in this study, supported by a specific group, are continuously marginalized and ignored. Still, the power dynamics and societal support constantly reinforce 'Otherness.' Many scholars agree that for a peace process to succeed, it is imperative to address the root causes of the conflict (Kay, 2012; Rumelili, 2015; Rumelili & Çelik, 2017; Zerihun & Samuel, 2018). Therefore, recognizing and understanding complex dynamics is critical when engaging in conflict resolution/transformations and laying the framework for long-term peace-building.

The border issue between the British colony of Kenya and Imperial Ethiopia, the colonial presence in the Horn, and the independent Somalia's government's irredentist position influence the Ethiopian state's perception of the area (Belete, 2008; Fekadu, 2008; Galaty, 2016; Oba, 2017). This narrative centers on the portrayal of all Somali-speaking and Islamized groups as the leading cause of conflicts, characterizing them as 'newcomer' 'settlers' and 'expansionists' who, along with external enemies of the Ethiopian state sovereignty, provide a substantial challenge to the territorial integration of the country. Similarly, the legacy of colonial conquest, partition, and presence in the Horn has influenced the Ethiopian government's long-standing view of the region and its indigenous inhabitants, often resulting in a distorted perception of the frontiers' diverse ethnic and cultural groups. As a result, the government approached the southern periphery with an exclusive political culture. As a modern State strategy, securitization of frontiers (Belete, 2008) was used in constructing, othering, and managing specific identity groups and patronizing one group over the other marked by condescension. As Abdilahi (2015) argued, the center's securitization calculus is the fundamental ingredient and central issue for all Ethiopian administrations.

The government's perception of the Somali collective as a potential threat to the territorial integrity and national unity has been shaped by historical tensions and conflicts between Ethiopia and Somalia and the complex dynamics of regional politics (Asebe, 2016; Asnake, 2010; Fekadu, 2008; Markakis, 2011; Zerihun & Samuel, 2018). In his seminal work, Markakis (2011) stated that Ethiopia has experienced frontier-making throughout its history, and it has been shaped by political and economic motivations, with the state seeking to consolidate power and accumulate wealth using different models of state-building. This perception, in turn, shapes the government's policies and actions concerning the southern and southeastern international borders. Then, the state established a comprehensive system that would bring order in the complex fabric of ethnic diversity in the peripheries. Accordingly, the state's quest for ontological security and institutionalized securitization was a significant factor in the Borana's empowerment as [and rise to positions of] significant political power and influence in the southern

frontiers. The prevailing mistrust towards ethnic Somalis and Muslim Oromos can be partially traced back to the enduring consequences of historical events that shaped the perception, including instances where these groups alleged for collaborating with Italy (1935-1941) (Getachew, n.d.) and Somali nationalists (1960s) against Ethiopian state. These historical associations have left a lasting imprint, contributing to the existed mistrust and suspicion under federals structure.

In post-1991 Ethiopia, the historic legacy impacted the ethnic-based federal arrangement significantly. Zerihun and Samuel (2018) explained that the effects of ethnic federalism led to the ethnicization of resources, further aggravating ethnic tensions. In their discussion, they claimed that the country's restructuring along ethnic lines transformed resource-based conflicts into territorial conflicts. Ethnic regionalization posed a substantial challenge for people with multiple identities who share overlapping ethnolinguistic attributes. For example, the Garri faced the complex task of negotiating their sense of self and belonging. Accordingly, the Borana informants viewed the boundary and the shift as an obstacle to losing their "customary lands," leading to the shrinking of their territory as the Garri (newcomers), along with other Somali-speaking inhabitants of the region, became part of the newly formed Somali region (See Fekadu 2010, Asebe 2011 and Dereje 2010).

The main argument presented by these Borana informants revolved around a claim that in the early 1990s, the Garri had strongly emphasized their Garri identity, neither Oromo nor Somali (Moyale: FGD, 2021). It was due to formerly referred to as Somali Abo, proactively organized a political coalition under the name Oromo Abo Liberation Front (OALF). However, Asnake (2010) postulates that this was because the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) occupied a significant and influential stance within the political sphere of Ethiopia during this period. Accordingly, the Garri Sultan Mohammed Haji Hassan Gabaab as a regional representative of Moyale, was appointed in Addis Ababa by OLF leaders. However, due to strict primordial claim against his identity by the Borana elders in the Addis Ababa discussion, the substantial political changes in Ethiopia after 1991, and the OLF's withdrawal from the EPRDF alliance, the Garri decided to break ties with their strategic Oromo accord. Instead, they chose to identify with the new Somali Regional State. Scholars

interpreted this shift in their alliance as a “strategic move” and “identity negotiation” to adapt to the changing political dynamics and power structures within the country as well as the Horn (Fekadu 2010, Asebe 2011, Asnake 2010). Scholars have argued that although the change held considerable promise and possibility for historically excluded ethnic groups in Ethiopia, it fell short of adequately resolving critical governance concerns in border regions (Abdiwasa, 2015; Asnake, 2010; Melkamu, 2016).

Scholars have noted a significant transformation in the Borana and Garri communities’ conflicts by documented records highlighting more than ten significant conflicts occurring in the border areas between 1992 and 2016 (Odhiambo, 2012). As Fekadu (2008, 2011) stated, the border demarcation presented a complex and diverse complication for the area’s people and the two regional governments. The Borana pastoralists contended that the concept of a referendum disregarded their deeply ingrained “customary rights” to the lands they have historically inhabited, which hold profound significance for their identity and livelihood (Fekadu, 2011). Accordingly, the Borana, who pursued maintaining the status quo and the existing power dynamics and solidifying their narrative, encountered resistance not only from the Garri but also Digodia, Merihan as well as Guji and Arssi Oromo. This situation aligns with the arguments by Rumelili and Çelik (2017), who argue that maintaining dominant narratives and power structures can perpetuate insecurity and marginalization of vulnerable groups. The failure to acknowledge Garri’s and other hitherto marginalized Oromo and Somali-speaking groups’ legitimate grievances and provide avenues for their participation perpetuated a sense of exclusion and marginalization. As noted by Lavers (2018) and Bayu (2022), the contestation of historical ownership of land and deeply in-built assumptions can create a sense of existential threat, inhibiting the establishment of a sustainable and inclusive environment.

At this particular juncture, the political shift that occurred post-1991 brought about a significant transformation in the southern frontiers of Ethiopia. This period witnessed a dynamic reconfiguration of the political landscape in the region. The transformative period gives rise to a significant shift in the relationship between the Center and the Periphery. Previously, the Borana had been loyal and most trusted clients and allies of

the Ethiopian governments, both during the Imperial and Derg regimes, in their efforts to counter Somali and other dissident inhabitants rival and Somalia government irredentist policy (Asebe, 2016; Fekadu, 2008; Galaty, 2016; Geberu, 2000; Oba, 2013). However, following the EPRDF's rise to power, the Borana community encountered a radical shift in how they were perceived, with the EPRDF regime harboring significant suspicion toward them, as they had been supporters of the Derg Regime for a long time. Scholars characterized this shift as a critical turning point in center-periphery relations, signifying a distinct departure vis-à-vis the peoples of the southern frontiers (Asebe, 2019; Asnake, 2010; Fekadu, 2011).

Previously, the Ethiopian government extended military, political, and economic assistance and support to the Borana community, particularly in their efforts to combat secessionist movements such as Somali Abo and ONLF. However, as of 1992 and with the increasing presence of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the region, the TPLF/EPRDF-led central government's perception of the Borana area underwent a significant shift. Suspicions began to arise within the government, perceiving the Borana inhabited area as a potential stronghold for anti-government guerrilla fighters and a breeding ground for individuals opposed to the state's interests (Asnake, 2010). In the past, conflicts between the Garri and Borana were primarily localized, and elders would gather to resolve them before they escalated and caused further harm (Asebe, 2016; Oba, 2013). The Borana community found a renewed sense of ontological security as the conflict witnessed a re-escalation. This revitalization of security was strengthened by the change in government in 2018, as it validated their historical claims to ownership and recognized their grievances. Taking advantage of their perception that the new government was predominantly Oromo-led, certain elites or groups sought to advance their interests. The primary struggle transcended conventional resource allocation and became an ethno-nationalist identity-based regional political contest. However, the involvement of both ethno-linguistic Somali-Oromo regional states in the conflict between the Garri and Borana communities has trapped their issues within a security dilemma (Takele, 2022).

Garri-Borana conflict is multifaceted, involving historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors and ontological insecurity, which have fueled tensions and perpetuated cycles of violence. However, the peace process mainly concentrated on the immediate conflict cause rather than the deeply rooted problems on which peace may be predicted. This malaise leads to a fragile peace risk, where conflict resurfaces, and violence reignites, allowing the opposing narratives to remain intact. The peace process and its initiatives often lead to the re-articulation of dominant narratives rather than fostering meaningful dialogue. The lack of creative agency to transform the “us/them” dichotomy further complicates the situation. Scholars also agree that the absence of a transformative narrative as an alternative can obstruct the establishment of ontological security, which is crucial for sustainable conflict transformation (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017; Kay, 2012; Rumelili & Çelik, 2017).

Emerging development

The 2004 referendum’s failure and the subsequent collapse of the Garri-Borana peace process can be attributed to three key developments. Firstly, the inability of the Borana and Garri communities to negotiate and find common ground on their historical narratives has been a significant obstacle in the peace process. The Borana, supported by the newly formed Oromia Regional State and their former rivals but now new allies, the Guji and Arssi supports, has held a rigid position, firmly entrenched in their historical narrative, asserting their impounded “historical ownership” of the southern frontiers of northern Kenya and even southern Somalia. This narrative has shaped their perception of the Garri community and several groups as mere “guests” in the region, undermining the prospects of a mutually acceptable resolution. The historical narrative plays a crucial role in shaping the identities and claims of communities involved in conflicts (Galaty, 2016; Takele, 2022). It is a deeply ingrained set of beliefs, values, and interpretations of the past that often reflects a community’s sense of identity, history, and connection to the land.

In the case of the Borana and Garri, these historical narratives have become critical points of contention, exacerbating the already complex dynamics of the peace process.

The Borana community's insistence on aligning the peace process with their established narrative produced ontological insecurity among the Garri, stemming from the lack of recognition of their territorial claims and historical presence in the region. As noted by Lavers (2018) and Takele Bayu (2022), contesting historical ownership of land and deeply ingrained assumptions can create a sense of existential threat for marginalized communities, inhibiting the establishment of a sustainable and all-inclusive environment. Accordingly, the Borana, who pursued maintaining the status quo and the existing power dynamics and solidifying their narrative, encountered resistance from the Garri and their recognized adversaries, the Guji, Arssi, Digodia, and Marihan. This situation aligns with the arguments by Rumelili and Çelik (2017), who argue that maintaining dominant narratives and power structures can perpetuate insecurity and marginalization of vulnerable groups. The failure to acknowledge Garri's grievances and provide avenues for their participation perpetuated a sense of exclusion and marginalization.

The second development to the failure of the peace process between the Borana and Garri communities was a power shift. The rise of the TPLF/EPRDF into power in 1991 marked a significant turning point in the reconfiguration of the Ethiopian state, particularly in center-periphery dynamics concerning southern Ethiopia. Previously, the Borana had been loyal allies of the Ethiopian governments. However, following the EPRDF's rise to power, they encountered a shift in how they were perceived, with the EPRDF harboring significant suspicion toward them in supporting the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). This shift in the government's position toward the Borana brought about a notable change in the local power dynamics, seemingly tilting the balance in favor of the Garri. Therefore, the transfer of power towards the Garri instilled insecurity within the Borana, leading them to view the initiative with skepticism and doubt. This response, from the uncertainties surrounding the power shift, significantly impacted the peace process's progress and the overall relationship between the two groups. Accordingly, this situation created a dual effect on the Borana and Garri communities. The Borana experienced a heightened sense of physical insecurity, while the Garri community faced an increased ontological insecurity. The Borana's perception of their status and the state's position further fueled this sense of insecurity,

adding to the uncertainties already faced by the Garri. This prevailing state of widespread insecurity created a conducive context for spoilers to emerge on both sides, resulting in a renewed cycle of intensified violence. Therefore, the prevalent lack of sensitivity towards the “Other” nurtured within this securitized environment became apparent during a severe conflict between the Garri and Borana from March to May 2018.

The third development involves a significant shift, like the conflict between the Garri and Borana communities, as it has transformed from a local conflict to a broader regional Oromo-Somali ethno-nationalist identity-based conflict. This transformation has undermined traditional institutions that transcended ethnic boundaries. In the past, according to Garri informants, conflicts between the Garri and Borana were primarily localized, and elders would gather to resolve them before they escalated and caused further harm (Moyale: KII, 2021). However, more recently, the nature of the conflict has changed, expanding into an inter-ethnic dispute involving the participation of regional forces. The involvement of these regional forces, bound by strict territoriality, has generated insecurity among the Garri and Borana communities, making them more susceptible to the influence of spoilers.

Recently, the Borana found a renewed sense of ontological security as the conflict witnessed a re-escalation. This revitalization of security was strengthened by the change in government in 2018, as it validated their historical claims to ownership and recognized their grievances. Taking advantage of their perception that the new government was predominantly Oromo-led, certain elites or groups sought to advance their interests. The primary struggle transcended conventional resource allocation and became a political contest. However, the involvement of both regional states in the conflict between the Garri and Borana communities has trapped their issues within a security dilemma (Takele, 2022). This dilemma arises from what can be broadly described as a perceived ‘threat posed by the dominance’ of the majority group. Amidst the asymmetrical nature of the conflict, the peace initiatives and discussions between the group found themselves at a crossroads. The prevailing tension and dynamics at play hindered the formation of a solid foundation for rebuilding the “us/them” divide through mutual accommodation.

6. Breaking the cycle: Bringing Transformative narrative

Garri-Borana conflict is multifaceted, involving historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors and ontological insecurity, which have fueled tensions and perpetuated cycles of violence. However, the peace process mainly concentrated on the immediate conflict cause rather than the deeply rooted problems on which peace may be predicted. This malaise leads to a fragile peace risk, where conflict resurfaces, and violence reignites, allowing the opposing narratives to remain intact. The peace process and its initiatives often lead to the re-articulation of dominant narratives rather than fostering meaningful dialogue. The lack of creative agency to transform the “us/them” dichotomy further complicates the situation. Scholars also agree that the absence of a transformative narrative as an alternative can obstruct the establishment of ontological security, which is crucial for sustainable conflict transformation (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017; Kay, 2012; Rumelili & Çelik, 2017).

Since 2018, the Somali-Oromo conflict has become more intense, resulting in increased violence and significantly reducing the chances of productive discussions and engagement between the two ethnic groups. Despite the efforts to address the conflict, it is evident that the absence of a transformative narrative between the conflicting groups has contributed to the failure to generate ontological security. An alternative conflict transformation strategy should be enhanced by proactively engaging stakeholders, including civil society, actors, and customary institutions, to break the cycle of continuing hostility and recurring conflict. First, to promote significant and far-reaching transformation, it is essential to thoroughly examine the conflict’s underlying causes and historical context with its specificity while recognizing the various complexities present. Considering the Garri-Borana issue within the context of the broader Oromo-Somali ethnic dichotomy might deter the underlying causes and driving forces behind the conflict. Such an approach can potentially obscure the existing situation’s complex dynamics further. Therefore, to achieve durable peace, it is necessary to handle the conflict between the Garri and Borana in a way that recognizes the context in its specificity, as their problems cannot be reduced or limited to ethnic categorization alone.

Second, attaining a sustainable solution is impossible by prioritizing one group's ontological security while disregarding the other. Hereafter, adopting a holistic strategy that promotes open dialogue towards reconciliation is imperative to collectively redefine their shared history and attain mutual ontological security. Instead of pushing for consensus on a singular narrative, the emphasis should be on fostering the development of multiple, transformative, and mutually supportive narratives. Despite their differences, both groups desire peace, security, and a future characterized by harmony. Therefore, these narratives must address existing divides and animosities, which can convert the "Other" from an enemy into a companion. For this, transformative narratives can bridge the divide and provide a strong foundation for collaboration and constructive dialogue by presenting shared goals.

7. Concluding Remarks

This research drew upon the existing literature on ontological security and conflict resolution by utilizing the conflict and peace process in the Garri and Borana areas of southern Ethiopia as a case study. It examines the forms of ontological (in)security among the people and the levels of support for the peace process. Instead of critiquing the peace process, this study aimed to suggest future areas of attention for conflict resolution.

The study explored the concept of ontological security through an analysis of the Garri (Somali) and Borana (Oromo) conflicts, focusing on how ontological security is significant for the peace process and impacts conflict transformation. The study highlighted how conflicts become intertwined with self-perceptions and narratives concerning the 'Other' over time and how maintaining these narratives becomes vital for ontological security. By analyzing the Garri and Borana conflict and the initiated peace process, this study showed how ethnic conflicts involving the conceptions of self and narratives with ontological asymmetry hamper the peace process. When the majority group depends on established historical and biographical narratives to routinize their ontological security, the political

minority group constantly faces insecurity and vulnerability. This dynamism influenced the peace initiative, where the majority group resisted change, and the minority were vulnerable to conflict entrepreneurs. These asymmetries often arise due to the state's pursuit of ontological security in the face of contested status. Therefore, the study suggests that peace processes become significantly challenging in ontologically asymmetric conflicts.

Furthermore, the study has drawn that ontologically asymmetric conflicts between the Garri and Borana groups often give rise to a societal security dilemma, where the ontological security status of one group poses a threat to the other. This dilemma perpetuates a cycle of insecurity and deters the prospects of achieving durable peace between the two groups within the framework of their conflicting narrative. Due to this, finding a durable resolution to the conflict becomes increasingly challenging.

Therefore, to break the cycle of antagonism and resentment between the two groups, engaging in negotiations that address the central narratives embraced by both groups is critical. Mutual recognition can shape perceptions and interactions in a way that can transform antagonistic relationships. The transformative narrative involves embracing coexistence and engaging in constructive dialogue that acknowledges shared histories, grievances, and aspirations. It involves finding common ground, promoting inclusive decision-making processes, and allowing multiple narratives to coexist that can challenge the established conflict narrative. This approach emphasizes that peace is about accepting differences, not imposing a singular peace narrative that creates ontological insecurity, while respecting the rights and values of all parties concerned.

Generally, the implicit ontological insecurity in the conflict between the Garri and Borana is a significant challenge to restoring ontological security for both groups. It is essential to recognize that achieving ontological security cannot be effectively accomplished by prioritizing the security of one group above the other or vice versa. Instead, considering the complex interplay of needs and concerns within both communities, a transformative and emancipatory strategy is decisive. By adopting a transformative narrative, we can focus on creating a durable framework that effectively addresses the ontological security concerns of both the Garri and Borana communities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the research participants and advisors for their invaluable support and guidance. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the UK Research Innovation (UKRI) in partnership with the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) for helping the writeshop.

Availability of Data and Materials

Qualitatively collected data using KII and Focused Group Discussions are organized and thematically arranged manually, but bulky in contents. They are digitalized and selected data have been interpreted into English and Included in the Data Analysis Section. For more information, Harvard Dataverse section, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8GWLUB>. Thus, the qualitative raw data during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request anytime.

Reference

- Abushov, K. (2019). Refining the Line of Distinction between Ethnic Conflict and Security Dilemma: Towards a Theory of Identity Driven Ethnic Conflict. *Civil Wars*, 21(3), 329–361.
- Asebe, R. D. (2016). Competing orders and conflicts at the margins of the State: Inter-group conflicts along the Ethiopia-Kenya border. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 16(2), Article 2.
- Asmarom, L. (2000). *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System*. Red Sea Press.
- Asnake, K. (2010). Federal Restructuring in Ethiopia: Renegotiating Identity and Borders along the Oromo–Somali Ethnic Frontiers. *Development and Change*, 41(4), 615–635.
- Baxter, P. T. W. (1979). Boran Age-Sets and Warfare. *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 3, 69–95.
- Belete, B. (2008). *An agrarian polity and its pastoral periphery: State and pastoralism in the Borana borderlands (Southern Ethiopia), 1897-1991*. PhD Thesis, Boston University.
- Beyene, F. (2017). Natural resource conflict analysis among pastoralists in southern Ethiopia. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12(1), 19–33.

- Bilali, R., Çelik, A. B., & Ok, E. (2014). Psychological asymmetry in minority-majority relations at different stages of ethnic conflict. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 43(Part B), 253–264.
- Browning, C. S., & Joenniemi, P. (2017). Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52(1), 31–47.
- Eunice, N., & Maj Geoffrey, M. (2016). *Cross-Border Conflict and Gendered Implications for Local Communities: The Case of the Kenya-Ethiopia Border*. International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC).
- Falola, T., & Haar, H. ter. (2014). *Narrating War and Peace in Africa*. University of Rochester Press.
- Fekadu, A. (2008). Negotiating Identity: Politics of Identification among the Borana, Gabra and Garri around the Oromo-Somali boundary in Southern Ethiopia (Synopsis of a PhD Dissertation). *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(1–2).
- Fekadu, A. (2011). Overlapping nationalist projects and contested spaces: The Oromo–Somali borderlands in southern Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 773–787.
- Fukui, K., & Markakis, J. (1994). *Ethnicity & Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. James Currey Publishers.
- Galaty, J. (2016). Boundary-Making and Pastoral Conflict along the Kenyan–Ethiopian Borderlands. *African Studies Review*, 59(1), 97–122.
- Galtung, J., & Fischer, D. (2013). Positive and Negative Peace. In J. Galtung & D. Fischer (Eds.), *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research* (pp. 173–178). Springer.
- Geberu, T. (2000). The Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977 Revisited. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33(3), 635–667.
- Getachew, K. (n.d.). From Jigir to Somali Abbo Liberation Front (SALF) pastoralists involvement in the politics and conflict of the Horn of Africa: A case of Borana region 1935–1978. *University of Tsukuba, Mimeograph*.
- Getachew, K. (1983). *A short history of the Garri up to 1941* [BA Thesis History Department]. Addis Ababa University.
- Getachew, K. (2002). An Overview of Root Causes of Problems that Currently Affect Borana Pastoralists of Southern Ethiopia. In B. Mustafa H. M. (Ed.), *Resource Alienation, Militarization and Development: Case Studies From East African Dry Lands*. Organization for Social Science Research in East and Southern Africa. OSSREA.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. University of

California Press.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford University Press.

Giddens, A. (2013). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. John Wiley & Sons.

Grigorian, A., & Kaufman, S. J. (2007). Hate Narratives and Ethnic Conflict. *International Security*, 31(4), 180–191.

Helland, J. (1982). Social Organization and Water Control among the Borana. *Development and Change*, 13(2), 239–258.

Jensen. (1997). Negotiations and Power Asymmetries: The Cases of Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Sri-Lanka. *International Negotiation*, 2(1), 21–41.

Kagunyu, A. W., & Wanjohi, J. (2014). Camel rearing replacing cattle production among the Borana community in Isiolo County of Northern Kenya, as climate variability bites. *Pastoralism*, 4(1), 13.

Kaufman, S. J. (2022). The roots of ethno-political conflict. In *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding and Ethnic Conflict*. Routledge.

Kaufman, S. J. (2023). Ethnic Conflict. In *Security Studies* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Kay, S. (2012). Ontological Security and Peace-Building in Northern Ireland. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33(2), 236–263.

Kinnvall, C. (2004). Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security. *Political Psychology*, 25(5), 741–767.

Kinnvall, C., & Mitzen, J. (2018). Ontological security and conflict: The dynamics of crisis and the constitution of community. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21(4), 825–835.

Laing, R. D. (1965). *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Penguin Publishing Group.

Lavers, T. (2018). Responding to land-based conflict in Ethiopia: The land rights of ethnic minorities under federalism. *African Affairs*, 117(468), 462–484.

Lesnikovski, L. (2011). Macedonia's Ontological Insecurity and the Challenges of Stabilizing Inter-ethnic Relations. *Eurasia Border Review*, 2(1), 61–71.

Lupovici, A. (2012). Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel's unilateral steps towards the Palestinians. *Review of International Studies*, 38(4), 809–833.

- Mälksoo, M. (2015). 'Memory must be defended': Beyond the politics of mnemonical security. *Security Dialogue*, 46(3), 221–237.
- Malley, M. J. (2023). Narratives and Justice in Reconciliation Research. In *Encountering the Suffering of the Other: Vol. Band 7* (pp. 69–86). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Markakis, J. (2011). *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd.
- McPeak, J. G., & Little, P. D. (2018). Mobile Peoples, Contested Borders: Land use Conflicts and Resolution Mechanisms among Borana and Guji Communities, Southern Ethiopia. *World Development*, 103, 119–132.
- Melkamu, S. (2016). *Addressing the Moyale Conflicts in Southern Ethiopia: Challenges and Prospects* [Thesis, Addis Ababa University].
- Mitchell, A. (2015). Ontological (in)security and violent peace in Northern Ireland. In *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*. Routledge.
- Mitzen, J. (2006). Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), 341–370.
- Mulneh, B., Shiferaw, D., Teshome, D., Al-Khaza'leh, J., & Megersa, B. (2022). Constraints and incidence of camel calf morbidity and mortality in Borana rangeland, Southern Ethiopia. *Journal of Arid Environments*, 206, 104841.
- Oba, G. (2013). *Nomads in the Shadows of Empires: Contests, Conflicts and Legacies on the Southern Ethiopian-Northern Kenyan Frontier*. BRILL.
- Oba, G. (2014). *Climate Change Adaptation in Africa: An Historical Ecology*. Routledge.
- Oba, G. (2017). *Herder Warfare in East Africa: A Social and Spatial History*. White Horse Press.
- Odhiambo, M. O. (2012). *Impact of conflict on pastoral communities' resilience in the Horn of Africa: Case studies from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda* [Analysis]. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
- Ottob, F. O. (2018). Ethnic Identity and Conflicts in Africa. In S. O. Oloruntoba & T. Falola (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Politics, Governance and Development* (pp. 335–351). Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Richmond, O. P. (2023). Defining peace. In O. P. Richmond (Ed.), *Peace: A Very Short Introduction* (p. 0). Oxford University Press.

- Rumelili, B. (Ed.). (2015). *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*. Routledge.
- Rumelili, B., & Çelik, A. B. (2017). Ontological insecurity in asymmetric conflicts: Reflections on agonistic peace in Turkey's Kurdish issue. *Security Dialogue*, 48(4), 279–296.
- Sato, S. (1996). The Commercial Herding System among the Garri. *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 43, 275–294.
- Schlee, G. (2013). Territorializing ethnicity: The imposition of a model of statehood on pastoralists in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(5), 857–874.
- Smith, T. (2007). Narrative boundaries and the dynamics of ethnic conflict and conciliation. *Poetics*, 35(1), 22–46.
- Söderström, J., & Olivius, E. (2022). Pluralism, temporality and affect-methodological challenges of making peace researchable. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 22(5), 411–433.
- Sowa, K. (2023). “Little Dubai” in the crossfire: Trade corridor dynamics and ethno-territorial conflict in the Kenyan–Ethiopian border town Moyale. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 17(3), 424–444.
- Steele, B. J. (2008). *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. Routledge.
- Tache, B., & Oba, G. (2009). Policy-driven Inter-ethnic Conflicts in Southern Ethiopia. *Review of African Political Economy*, 36(121), 409–426.
- Takele, B. B. (2022). Is Federalism the Source of Ethnic Identity-Based Conflict in Ethiopia? *Insight on Africa*, 14(1), 104–125.
- Toros, H. (2008). ‘We Don’t Negotiate with Terrorists!’: Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts. *Security Dialogue*, 39(4), 407–426.
- Turton, E. R. (1970). *The pastoral tribes of Northern Kenya 1800-1916*. [Phd, SOAS University of London].
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zerihun, B., & Samuel, T. (2018). Does Federalism Reduce Ethnic Conflict? Evidence From the Ethiopian Experience. *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 14(1), Article 1.

