

Socio-Political, Cultural, Economic, and Linguistic Conflicts of the Metekel Zone in the North-West Part of Ethiopia

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Abstract: In an ethnically heterogeneous area like Metekel, federalism is not a solution to end ethnically diversified conflicts. The finding of this study also confirms that the indigenous and non-indigenous divide poses a great challenge to the principles of federalism in Metekel and it appears incompatible with the provisions of the FDRE constitution. This has been generating disunity or controversy since every Ethiopian citizen is entitled to equal rights wherever she or he resides in the country. The constitutional division coupled with exclusionary political practice on non-indigenous ethnic groups is seriously threatening the notion of unity in diversity in the region's political environment. The main purpose of this study was to explore the current existing socio-political, cultural, economic, and linguistic conflicts of the Metekel zone in the North-West part of Ethiopia. The study is a pure qualitative investigation that mainly employed interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions made with key informant participants of elders and a few elites who are living in the area. Through these instruments of data collection, it was tried to triangulate and crosscheck the results obtained from each instrument. The findings of the study indicated that the political interference and the politically interested groups around the Great Renaissance Dam escalated the conflict and the threat increased after the establishment of the dam in the area from the perspective of its future service around the dam. Besides, it was concluded that since Metekel is a fertile area, the demand increased through pretending to the heterogeneous nature of the geographical nature, social structure, and the sociolinguistics aspects of the people. The other threat used by the politicians was interested groups from the "minority in number (i.e., Shinasha and Gumuz) people that were used as an instrument for escalating the demand to take over the area into its former province called Gojjam. Furthermore, it was found that Pawe woreda is administered by "settlers of Amhara or Hadiya and Kenbata as a vice administrator in the woreda". However, since the area is very fertile and huge, the study recommended that either ethnically or geographically, it has to be reunite to its previous province since it could not stay being as a lid, and/or it has to be an independent region.

Keywords: Socio-Political, Economic, Cultural, Linguistic Praxes

1. Introduction

The part that follows deals with the background of the study, statement of the problem, objectives and significance of the study.

1.1. Background of the Study

Over the past year, Metekel Zone has been one of the most unstable and unsecured area in the country. Since 2018,

ACLED has recorded 1,052 fatalities occurring in the region because of political violence, and this is likely a conservative estimate. Most fatalities are linked to attacks mounted by unspecified ethnic militias on ethnic Amhara civilians who wanted to save Ethiopia and believes in Ethiopianism ideologies.

The Benishangul-Gumuz region incorporated different ethnicities including the Mao, Komo Gumuz, Berta, Shinasha, Amhara, Agew, Oromo, Hadiya, Kenbata and

Fadashi [1]. The area has had tensions with the Highlanders of Amhara and Agew, and the Oromo migrants of Wollega province crossing the Nile River via Wonbera. The Tigrayans, Kenbta and Hadiya peoples were also settled during the Derg regime due to the drought that happened five decades ago. In Metekel Zone, there are people who want to constitute minority ethnic groups with some Amhara groups calling for Metekel to be incorporated into the Amhara region, which was its original part.

The Gumuz Liberation Front that has staged attacks against those seen as “settlers” in Mandura, Debati, Bulen and Dangur woredas were the most disastrous mass killings that occurred in the area [14-18]. In 1993 in September, the Gumuz also massacred huge numbers of Amhara, Agew, Kenbata and Hadiya people in Felege-Selam Market on Saturday, which was led by the former Ethiopian Prime Minister Tamrat Layne.

Local officials admitted and then apologized for orchestrating ethnic killings as a way to push back against the ruling Prosperity Party which was alleged to be planning to eliminate self-rule for the country’s ethnic groups [15]. The Chairman of an Amhara group called Fano, Solomon Atanaw, said in March 2020 that *Fano* would not disarm without Metekel zone being part of the Amhara Region. Metekel Zone, which is attributed to the violence to an Oromo Liberation Army group OLF and/or the Abiy’s bread name called “Oneg-Shanne”, an armed group cultivated, controlled and managed by the Prosperity Party itself and the Fano group who stands only for their National unification, dignity and pride are the two antagonistic groups. However, the government is highly encouraging the revenger group (OLF/Shanne) to massacre and kill the innocent Amhara and Agew people of Metekel residents [14, 15, 17]. However, local officials and the preponderance people of the area reported that more than a million Amhara and Agew people were massacred in Metekel zone after the so-called prosperity party came to power. This happened a few days after disarming the people of Amhara and Agew people; these people were unable to protect themselves from the attacking groups of OLF, Gumuz and TPLFs armed collaborators.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The area, Metekel, is prone to various groups who wanted to run their own Socio-political, economic, linguistic/language expansion issues in the region. Geographically, the area is in nearby the great Renaissance Dam and interested groups are eager to launch their own economy strategically in the long run as the Egyptians do around the Aswan Dam [13]. These interested groups also wanted to expand the Afan-Oromo language in the area and this, in turn, planned to outshine the predominantly existing language (i.e., Amharic) in the schools and as an official language in the region. The Highlanders dominated the culture and the structural aspects of the society, and the majority of these highlanders were originally from there since their administration/province was under the Gojjam ruler of Tekelehai-manot’s era [11-13].

These people were using horses and mules for transportation purposes to arrive at the main town of Metekel (currently named Chagni). In this town, the people were exchanging goods and shopping for their basic needs like salt, sugar, etc. in the market coming from Debati, Wonbera, Bulen, Mandura, Pawe, Dangur, and Guba Woredas despite these woredas do have their own small market centers during the then times. For this, the witnesses are the Gumuz and the Shenasha people themselves without further searching for evidence to check. Moreover, these woredas were paying taxes for the Gojjam province before TPLF came to power [10, 12].

However, the problems escalate after the arrival of the TPLF, which separates and creates a session between the Amhara region and the Benishangul Gumuz region, which was done without considering ethnic federalism, multilingualism, and other criteria of the federalism ideologies [9].

Besides, the Egyptians and TPLF’s agreement to distract the Tana-Belus project from the Italian Salini Project’s goal that was won and taken by the international bid distributed through preforms by the United Nation in collaboration with the Derg Regium. As a result of starvation in the early 1980s was the main problem that aggravates the conflict of interests in the area and East Africa at large [5-7]. The project was launched in Pawe, a town that served as the capital city of the newly established region (region six) during the transitional government of the early TPLF (EPRDF’s government). The project was launched in the fertile land of the horn of Africa, which was expected to serve the horn people in general [1, 4].

As a result, the conflicts of interest still existed and increased due to the high demand of the Oromo leaders’ interest for their future “great oromia nation-building”, and the establishment of the “great Tigray nation”, which is inconceivable in the horn of Africa in general. The Tigray leaders tried to resettle their young people in the Metekle areas of Dangur, Pawe, and Guba woredas brought from the Tigray region for expanding and changing the demographic nature of the surrounding environment in Metekel.

Moreover, the problem/conflict zone increases when the Metekel/groups were raising the question of re-uniting Metekel to its previous region (i.e., Amhara region) which is wrongly given to the newly established through taking fertile lands of the Amhara (Gojjam province) region and Asossa and Kamoshi zones from Oromia (Wollega province).

Thus, the high conflict escalated groups do have their hidden agendas to take the fertile land of Metekel for their economic growth and/or development, expanding their language (socio-linguistic interests and the issues of highlanders and the highlanders’ domination on the so-called “indigenous” ethnic minorities in the area.

Therefore, the basic research question that this research intended to fill was what looks like the sociolinguistic, political, cultural, and economic issues of the Metekel people and the interests behind these themes.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

1.3.1. General Objectives

The general objective of the study was to explore the current existing socio-political, cultural, economic, and linguistic conflicts of the Metekel zone in the North-West part of Ethiopia [10].

1.3.2. Specific Objectives

To this end, the specific objectives of the study were to:

- 1) Examine the socio-linguistic issues of the Metekel people,
- 2) Investigate the socio-cultural issues of the Metekel people,
- 3) Identify the socio-political issues and the root causes of the conflict that escalates in the Metekel zone, and
- 4) See whether Metekel is the future economic threat of the great Renaissance Dam or not in the region.

1.4. Scope of the Study

The study is delimited geographically and thematically. Geographically, the study is delimited to the Metekel zone and thematically the study is delimited to socio-linguistic, political, cultural and economic issues of the Metekel zone.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The study may have concrete significance for the policymakers to take as evidence for the national unification decision, and for the council of reconciliation and negotiation purposes for the peace-building committees in the area.

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1. The Research Design

The research design is a pure qualitative research design and a qualitative that mainly focuses on the main thematic issues related to the socio-political, cultural, and economic issues that were considered to arrive at valid and reliable conclusions.

2.2. Instruments of Data Collections

The study employed various tools of data collection to get valid responses from the desk review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions.

The desk review was done by taking various documents of the previous Gojjam province receipts of tax paid for the land, payments made previously, and research works conducted in the area. Mainly, elders who settled there considering their ethnic backgrounds from the Gumuz, Agew, Shinasha, Oromo, and Amhara people were among the key informant participants who took part in responding to the study.

The interview was conducted face-to-face with these elders and professional languages translators for Afan Oromo and Shinasha elders (key-informant) interviewees were made painstakingly.

Whereas for the Gumuz, Amhara and Agew speakers (key

informants) since the researcher has got four experts who are rich in these languages to speak write, read, and listen, they interviewed them face-to-face after briefing them on the purpose of the study.

The respondents' were willing to provide their responses freely without considering the existing conflicts in the area. Moreover, these key informant interviewees did not participate in the FGD since the researcher wanted to triangulate and crosscheck the response gained from the interview and the FGD, which was done out of the first interviewee participants. Furthermore, since these people are found in the seven different woredas, it was impossible to get them gathered and conduct an FGD together. Therefore, the FGD was done in the seven woredas of Wombera, Bulen, Debati, Mandura, Pawe, Dangur, and Guba (Gublack) taking participants from five to ten in number in all of the above-mentioned woredas.

The medium of discussion was flexible since the majority of these discussants were multi-lingual in Amharic, Oromigna, Gumuzegna, and Shinashigna languages. For a few of the participants who were unable to listen to and speak a particular language, the researcher and other language translators were used to facilitate the discussion and avoid confusion in the discussion theme.

2.3. Methods of Data Analysis

Before analyzing the data collected, it was sorted out thematically in line with the basic research questions of the study. The research was analyzed thematically based on the based research questions of the study. Mainly the document reviews were supported by key informant interviewees' responses and the focus group discussions.

3. Data Analysis and Discussions

The part that follows deals with the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained from key informant interviewees and the document analysis collected from elders, tax officials, and the focus group discussions made. In line with this, the key informant interviewees were told to feel relaxed, and they were given free time to express what they felt about the existing realities of the Metekel people. The basic research questions posed to answer were:

- 1) How the socio-linguistic issues of the Metekel people look like?
- 2) What looks like the socio-cultural issues of the Metekel people?
- 3) What are the socio-political issues and the root causes of the conflict that escalates in Metekel zone?
- 4) Is Metekel the future economic threat to the Great Renaissance Dam and the region?

The sociolinguistic issue of the Metekel people was raised and it was found that the preponderance of the discussants confirmed that the area is heterogeneous to various speakers of the language and these people are ready to add gas-oil on fire.

The area is fertile and dominated by Highlanders (Amhara

and Agew) these people very much know how to cultivate crops like sesame, sorghum, maize, etc. for their basic consumption, and a few of them for surplus production. Due to the fear that these highlanders would take their rented land, the Gumuz, usually are under an inferiority complex. The area is good for the Gumuz nation to plow the land using a simple hoe without the demand of many efforts.

In relation to the socio-linguistic issues, it was found that the majority of the Metekel people speak Amharic followed by Awigna and Gumzegna languages in the third place. This, in turn, depicted that the predominant language speakers are the Amhara community followed by the Agew nation in the second place. However, a key informant participant said that,

“I suggest not being part of the Amhara region due to the high demand of land that is available in the region. So Metekel should be under the Benishangul Gumuz region, or it has to be an independent region or a special zone so that we can sustain peace and security in the area through promoting our indigenous knowledge and skills that make us stick together and live in harmony”.

The desk review obtained confirmed that the indigenous and non-indigenous divide poses a great challenge to the principles of federalism in Metekel and it appears incompatible with the provisions of the FDRE constitution [2, 3, 8]. In the very beginning, the area was under the Gojjam province (the current Amhara region) and the number of ethnically majority speakers of the language speak Amharic as their ways of everyday communication. This has been generating disunity or controversy since every Ethiopian citizen is entitled to equal rights wherever she or he resides in the country. In relation to this, a key informant interviewee in Pawe woreda confirmed, “every government considers Amhara as a threat to their power and always the hammer lies on this ethnic group which is the majority in Ethiopia”. According to this person, the majority ethnic group in Ethiopia is Amhara, not Oromo, which is an assignment to be considered by the government generally and the Central Statistical Agency specifically.

In relation to the sociopolitical issue of the Metekel people, Pawe woreda has significant discrimination among settlers of the Derg regime, and in this regard, a key informant interviewee in Pawe woreda stated that,

“Settlers of the woreda (i.e., Amhara, Kenbata, Tigre (in village 127), Kemisie oromos (village 45), and Hadiya) should be an administrator. Out of these settlers and ethnic groups, even any Amhara out of settlers or Agew will not be allowed to administer being as a main and vice-chairperson of the woreda. This, in turn, created mal-administration and the expansion of corruption in the woreda. He added that newly graduated students from the university are not also recruited in this woreda unless they are from the settlers of the above-mentioned ethnic groups.

From the above scenario, one can realize that even among the highlanders themselves there is the oppressor and the oppressed between the same ethnic groups like the division of ethnic Amharas of settlers and indigenous Amhara people.

Recently, this dichotomy brought the indigenous versus non-indigenous divide to the front was the so-called deportation of Ethiopians within Ethiopia by the act of some political actors in the region [8]. Cultivating the spirit of promoting unity in diversity in Metekel is being checkmated by complicated ethnic identity formation in which rights and entitlements of some groups are being shaped down by the political actors who can use the ideology of difference to undermine ethnic group rights of others so that theirs could be enhanced.

This constitutional labeling has become a potent instrument for the negative mobilization of peoples' sentiments and feelings in ways that undermine Metekel's political objectives of promoting unity in diversity and the evolution of a harmonious political community. In fact, at this juncture, everyone could understand that constitutional dichotomy alone is not affected the ethnic unity of Metekel, but the constitutional division coupled with exclusionary political practice on non-indigenous ethnic groups is seriously threatening the notion of unity in diversity in the region's political environment [8].

Since September, the zone has been under the stewardship of a federal command post. Still, this could not prevent the death of hundreds of civilians. Military operations can minimize casualties but cannot bring lasting solutions to political disputes in Metekel zone. That can only come through dialogue and compromise. It is tragic to hear about the ethnically targeted killing of innocent Amahara and Agew people day in and day out in Metekel zone. The whole region has seen ethnic-based violence since 1984. On 23 December 2018, in a small kebele named Bakuji in Bulen Wereda in Metekel, more than 307 civilians, including children and pregnant women, were slaughtered. People were burned in their homes and attacked based on their skin color. A Gumuz armed group reportedly did the killing, which arguably amounted to ethnic cleansing. It was reported that the victims were mostly from the Amhara, Agew, and Shinasha ethnicity, and Shinasha is one of five so-called “indigenous” groups according to the regional constitution. The victims were Amhara, one of the region's most-populous groups, albeit categorized as “non-indigenous despite these people being originally there, and as it was noticed from the document reviews, the people of Metekel were paying taxes for the Gojjam province [10, 12].

However, the prevention of the representation of non-indigenous in the regional executive council in Benishangul Gumuz has been perceived as one major source of regional disunity. In a divided society, fair representation of people in the political system is not limited to the legislative and executive organs of the government. But different government institutions which run political and non-political matters shall also reflect the existing ethnocultural dynamics of that political community to enhance the sense of unity among various communities (Muluneh, 2020). In this context, another key issue hindering the effective representation of various ethnic groups in the legislative council at different levels of government in Ethiopia in

general and the region, in particular, is the adopted electoral system.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

The Egyptian and Sudanese interest in the fertile land of Metekel and the fear developed (the way forwards fear) is the main reason behind the chaos of the Metekel zone [19]. The chaos in the Zone seems to be gyrating out of control. The 'so-called' Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has visited to assess the chronic violence of the Metekel zone; despite the fact that he has hidden agendas to expand the oromo language and the ideology of 'Oromuma' in the area, the war would continue for protracted times.

The highlanders who are speaking both Amharic and Awigina languages that are also highly spoken by the Shinasha and Gumuz people predominantly outshined the sociolinguistics issues raised. However, the interference of the politicians along with the interests they want to pose is a serious and "chronic viral disease" that disturbs the innocent people who were living in harmony.

The society can live in harmony if the so-called politicians stay calm and lead the area freely without taking agendas everywhere given by inside and outside bodies who have various interests. However, agriculture and trade activities are almost null in the area. It was concluded that unless the Amhara Special Forces (since the Amhara and/or Agew ethnic groups follow a balanced approach) are fully engaged and involved in the security and sustainable-peace development activities, the area would be vulnerable to instability and chaos for long period. Unable adequately to accommodate non-indigenous ethnic groups particularly in the regional legislative and executive organs and Woreda executive organ of the government in its part also challenged the unity of the region. Furthermore, since Metekel was under the Gojjam province, the current National Reconciliation Ad hoc committee should consider the area to reunite into its previous regime, Gojjam province; unless the area will be more prone to conflicts.

4.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that,

- 1) Metekel should be a region independently through promoting unity in diversity. This can be enhanced through the inclusion of unity in a diverse environment in the education of pre-primary, and primary schools curriculums. Thus, children would be emerged who have the ideology of building a unified nation and/or state boulders in the area. If not, it has to be reunited with its previous province, Gojjam.
- 2) Socio-political, economic, and cultural stabilities would be secured and safe if the Amhara and Agew ethnic groups are represented based on their majority rule minority rights principles in the legislative and

executive organs of the regional council.

- 3) The Amhara and Agew (i.e., the majority in the region as well as in the Metekel zone) ethnic groups should be represented in the regional legislative and executive organs up to the woreda and Kebele levels to bring the unity of the region.
- 4) The second policy option this study will recommend is referendum should be conducted on two main points. These are either to be an independent region, or to reunite into the former province/region (i.e., the Amhara region) through independent bodies, who are carefully selected, international humanitarian actors.

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