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Identity Politics, Conflict, and Peacebuilding: Insights from the Sidama–Guji Community in Ethiopia (1991–Present)

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of identity politics, conflict, and peacebuilding in southern Ethiopia, focusing on the Sidama and Guji communities in Wondogenet and Wondo Woreda. The study aims to identify the primary causes of the Guji-Sidama conflict, driven by the Guji community's identity claims, and explore peacebuilding strategies. A qualitative research approach was employed, combining primary and secondary data sources. The findings reveal that the primary cause of the conflict is the Guji community's identity claims, rooted in territorial disputes and demands for self-governance. These claims are compounded by both communities' aspirations for self-determination, leading to heightened tensions. The conflict is exacerbated by contested referendum outcomes, with both communities asserting ownership of disputed areas, resulting in territorial disputes and increased inter-communal tensions. The study further explores micro-level dynamics, including institutional ownership disputes, boundary conflicts, and socio-economic impacts such as displacement, poverty, and resource competition. The study concludes that sustainable peace can be achieved by integrating traditional conflict resolution systems with formal governance structures and promoting inclusive dialogue at all levels. The study underscores the importance of continued dialogue, collaboration, and inclusive governance to foster sustainable peace in multi-ethnic societies like the Sidama-Guji community.

1. Background context

Identity politics—the mobilization of identity-based groups for political purposes—has become central to global political dynamics, offering marginalized communities a means to assert their rights and redress historical injustices while also risking the exacerbation of social divisions (Fearon & Laitin, 2020; Brubaker, 2019; Kymlicka, 1995, Abbink 2006). In North America, movements such as the U.S. civil rights campaign and indigenous rights efforts in Canada have harnessed identity politics for empowerment, whereas in post-colonial societies across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, ethnic and cultural groups have leveraged these dynamics within national frameworks (Mamdani, 2021). However, when politicized, identity politics can foster zero-sum perspectives that intensify conflicts over resources and power—as seen in Bosnia, Rwanda, and various African nations like Nigeria, Sudan, and Kenya (Horowitz, 2020; Berman, Eyoh, & Kymlicka, 2004; Herbst, 2020).

Ethiopia’s experience with identity politics, particularly through its decentralized ethnic federal system established in 1995, offers a compelling illustration of these dual effects (**Regassa, 2010;** Assefa 2021). Designed to accommodate diverse groups such as the Sidama, Oromo, Amhara, and Somali peoples (Assefa 2019; Aalen, 2011; Clapham, 2023, Abbink 2006), the federal arrangement was meant to provide self-determination and foster inclusion. In practice, however, it has heightened ethnic consciousness and spurred intense competition for resources and political power (Asnake, 2013). This tension is especially evident in the evolving relationship between the Sidama and Guji communities. Historically interrelated yet distinct, these neighboring groups have seen their interactions transformed by the ethnic-based federal arrangement introduced in the early 1990s. The Sidama secured regional statehood through a 2019 referendum to enhance their political autonomy, while the Guji remain under the Oromia regional

state, despite sharing borders, cultural ties, and socioeconomic interactions with the Sidama (Fiseha, 2024; Alemayehu, 2023).

These structural changes have precipitated recurring conflicts driven by resource competition over fertile land, water, and territorial claims. A minor familial altercation in May 2007 escalated into widespread violence across multiple kebeles, resulting in injuries and property damage (International Crisis Group, 2018). The situation worsened with severe clashes in April 2008, marked by numerous fatalities, widespread injuries, and significant displacement. An even more intense conflict erupted in 2010—claiming at least 38 lives, predominantly among the Sidama—and violence has intermittently reoccurred, notably around 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2018).

Compounding these challenges, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which once effectively mediated local disputes, have been undermined by the rigid structures of ethnic federalism and the politicization of ethnic identities. Indigenous practices have lost ground as state-led interventions are increasingly perceived as biased, further eroding trust between the Sidama and Guji (Aalen, 2011; Clapham, 2020). This growing mistrust has not only intensified competition over resources and administrative boundaries in the Wondogenet (Sidama) and Wondo (Guji) woredas but has also complicated efforts to reconcile historical grievances within the current political framework.

While prior research has predominantly focused on national-level impacts of Ethiopia's identity politics (Fiseha, 2024; Clapham, 2020), significant gaps remain in understanding the localized mechanisms through which identity politics influences inter-ethnic relations and peace-building. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the specific drivers of conflict in Wondogenet and Wondo. It examines the failures of both traditional and modern conflict resolution mechanisms, investigates local perspectives on territorial disputes and resource access, and evaluates perceptions of fairness within Ethiopia's ethnic federal system. Ultimately, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to develop culturally sensitive interventions that promote peaceful coexistence between the Sidama and Guji communities—and to offer guidance for managing ethnic tensions in other parts of Ethiopia.

2. Theoretical Review

Identity politics refers to political positions based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which individuals identify **(Fearon & Laitin, 2000).** As this concept has gained prominence in contemporary political discourse, it has significantly influenced movements centered around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion (Mouffe, 2000). A theoretical examination of identity politics provides valuable insights into its foundations, key debates, and broader implications, drawing on a range of scholarly perspectives.

The study of identity politics in Ethiopia can be informed by several theoretical frameworks, each offering a distinct perspective on how group identity shapes social and political behavior. Social identity theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their group memberships, which can

lead to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics between the Sidama and Guji communities, as loyalty to ethnic identity often supersedes national affiliation. Such group affiliations, as proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), contribute to the formation of collective identities that influence intergroup relations and political mobilization.

In addition to social identity theory, conflict theory provides critical insights into how power imbalances and competition over resources shape inter-ethnic relations (Dahrendorf, 1959). Historically, tensions in areas such as Wondogenet and Wondo Woreda have been exacerbated by grievances over land ownership and political representation. From this perspective, intergroup conflicts emerge as a consequence of structural inequalities, reinforcing the importance of addressing economic and political disparities to foster sustainable peace (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). By analyzing how marginalized groups struggle for access to resources and political influence, conflict theory enhances the understanding of identity-based political struggles.

Furthermore, intersectionality serves as an essential analytical tool in the study of identity politics. Originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), this framework highlights that individuals possess multiple, overlapping identities that shape their experiences of oppression and privilege. The interaction between race, gender, and class, among other factors, influences political engagement and access to power. By emphasizing the interconnected nature of various social identities, intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of how identity politics operates within different societal contexts (Hancock, 2007).

Another important theoretical approach comes from constructivist perspectives, which argue that identities are not fixed but rather socially constructed. Scholars such as Judith Butler (1990) have emphasized that identities are performed and negotiated within specific cultural and historical contexts. This perspective underscores the fluidity of identity and its implications for political mobilization. Rather than viewing identity as an inherent or static characteristic, constructivist approaches highlight the ways in which social, political, and institutional forces contribute to shaping and reshaping identities over time (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

In synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, it becomes evident that identity politics is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various social, economic, and political factors. While social identity theory and conflict theory elucidate the mechanisms through which group affiliations and resource struggles contribute to intergroup tensions, intersectionality and constructivist approaches offer deeper insights into the complexity and fluidity of identity. By integrating these perspectives, scholars can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role identity politics plays in shaping societal structures and political landscapes.

3. Empirical Review

Identity politics has emerged as a significant theme in Ethiopian political discourse, particularly in the context of ethnic federalism and the diverse ethnic landscape of the country **(Gebre & Kassa, 2012)**. Ethiopia's history is marked by a complex interplay of ethnic identities. The introduction of ethnic federalism in the 1995 Constitution aimed to accommodate the country's diverse ethnic groups by granting them autonomy and self-administration (**Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003;** Abbink, 2011). However, this system has also intensified ethnic competition and conflict, as various groups vie for political power and resources (Kassahun, 2016).

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which ruled from 1991 to 2018, implemented a system that institutionalized ethnic identities within the political framework. This approach aimed to empower marginalized groups but has led to increased ethnic polarization (Hafteck, 2019). Scholars argue that while ethnic federalism has provided a platform for representation, it has also exacerbated tensions between groups, leading to violence and unrest (Aalen Muriaas, 2017).

Identity politics in Ethiopia is closely linked to social mobilization. Ethnic identity often serves as a rallying point for collective action, influencing both political participation and protest movements (**Hodson & Earle 2017;** Tezera, 2020). The rise of youth-led movements, such as the Oromo protests that began in 2015, highlights how ethnic identity can galvanize large segments of the population to demand political change (Beyene, 2019).

Identity politics in Ethiopia, particularly among ethnic groups like the Sidama and Guji, has been a significant factor in shaping social relations, political dynamics, and conflict. This literature review examines the intersection of identity politics, conflict, and peacebuilding within the context of the Sidama and Guji communities in Wondogenet and Wondo Woreda.

Ethiopia's diverse ethnic landscape has a long history of political marginalization and competition. The Sidama and Guji communities, each with distinct cultural identities, have historically navigated a complex relationship characterized by both cooperation and tension (Aalen Muriaas, 2017). The establishment of ethnic federalism in 1995 aimed to empower these communities but also laid the groundwork for ethnic competition (Abbink, 2011).

Identity politics often serves as a catalyst for conflict in Ethiopia. The competition for resources, political representation, and autonomy has led to tensions between ethnic groups. In the case of the Sidama and Guji communities, disputes over land and administrative boundaries have frequently escalated into violence (Hafteck, 2019). Studies indicate that identity-based grievances are central to understanding the conflicts that arise in these regions (Beyene, 2019).

The 2019 Sidama referendum for statehood exemplifies how identity politics can mobilize communities. While the Sidama achieved their goal of becoming a regional state, this success sparked fears of marginalization among the Guji, leading to increased tensions (Tezera, 2020). The resultant clashes have underscored the fragility of inter-ethnic relations in Wondogenet and Wondo Woreda.

In response to ongoing conflicts, various peacebuilding initiatives have emerged at local and national levels. Local peace committees often play a crucial role in mediating disputes between the Sidama and Guji communities **(Worku; 2023).** These committees leverage traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, emphasizing dialogue and reconciliation (Elias, 2018). However, scholars note that such efforts face challenges due to entrenched identities and historical grievances (Woldemariam, 2020).

International organizations and NGOs have also contributed to peacebuilding efforts by promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and community engagement. Programs aimed at fostering economic cooperation between the Sidama and Guji have shown promise in reducing tensions (International Crisis Group, 2020). Nonetheless, the sustainability of these initiatives is contingent upon addressing underlying structural issues related to identity politics (**Kaufman, 2022)**.

The emergence of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has significantly influenced local dynamics in Wondo and Wondogenet. Ethnic-based political structures have often led to increased competition for resources and political representation among different groups, notably the Sidama and Guji communities (Abbink, 2011). The 2019 Sidama referendum, which granted the Sidama a regional statehood, has further exacerbated tensions, underscoring the urgent need for effective peacebuilding mechanisms (Hafteck, 2019).

4. Methodology

4.1. Description of the study area

The Sidama community in Wondogenet Woreda and the Guji community in Wondo Woreda are situated in the southern part of Ethiopia, within the broader contexts of the Sidama Region and the Oromia Region. This study will be conducted by taking Eddo, Kella, Gotuonoma, Wothera-kachama, Bussa, and Entaye kebeles into consideration because of the presence of repeated occurrences of conflict.

Wondogenet Woreda is located in the southern section of the Sidama Region, bordered by Malga to the south and Awasa Zuria to the west. The administrative center, Wondogenet, is renowned for its hot springs and picturesque landscapes, which attract both local and international visitors (Teshome, 2021). The woreda features diverse geographical landscapes, including highlands, valleys, and fertile plains that are conducive to agriculture. The elevation ranges from approximately 1,500 to 2,500 meters above sea level, contributing to its favorable climate characterized by moderate rainfall suitable for farming activities.

In contrast, Wondo Woreda lies adjacent to Wondogenet within the Oromia Region. This woreda shares borders with several others and serves as a crucial link between various ethnic groups. The landscape includes rolling hills and plateaus typical of the Oromia highlands, rich in natural resources essential for both agriculture and pastoralism. Similar to Wondogenet, Wondo experiences a favorable climate that supports diverse agricultural practices.

4.2. Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach, chosen for its suitability in exploring complex social phenomena within specific contexts. Case studies are particularly effective for answering "how" and "why" questions, allowing researchers to investigate the relationships between identity politics, inter-ethnic relations, and peace-building processes in Ethiopia's ethnic federal system **(Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).** As Yin (2018) highlights, case studies enable a detailed examination of phenomena where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear, making this approach ideal for understanding the dynamics between the Sidama and Guji communities.

4.3. Research design

The research design integrates multiple qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis, to ensure triangulation and a robust understanding of the research questions. By combining these methods, the study aims to capture a range of perspectives, contextualize findings, and validate conclusions, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, selecting participants based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to ensure that participants can provide rich, meaningful data (Patton, 2015). Approximately 48 interviews were conducted, with equal representation from the Sidama and Guji communities. Further Six FGDs were organized, comprising three groups consisting of 7-10 participants from each community (elders, women, and youth).

Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic background to capture a wide range of perspectives. This is crucial in a study of identity politics, where different demographic groups may have distinct experiences and insights.

Participants' size and composition

Category	Interviewees (Sidama)	Interviewees (Guji)	FGD Groups (Sidama)	FGD Groups (Guji)
Traditional Leaders	2	2	-	-
Elders	5	5	1	1
Women	5	5	1	1
Youth	5	5	1	1
Government Officials	5	5	-	-
Civil Society Representatives	2	2	-	-
Total	**24**	**24**	**3**	**3**

4.4. Data collection methods

- **In-Depth Interviews-** Interviews were conducted with community leaders, local government officials, elders, youth representatives, and civil society actors engaged in peace-building. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for qualitative research because they balance the structure needed to address specific themes with the flexibility to explore emergent issues during the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).
- **Focus group discussions (FGDs)** - FGDs were conducted to explore community-level perspectives and collective experiences. By facilitating dialogue among diverse participants, FGDs are particularly effective for revealing shared understandings and contested viewpoints (Kitzinger, 1995). Separate FGDs will be organized for elders, women, and youth from both ethnic groups, as these categories often experience identity politics and conflict differently.
- **Document analysis-** To complement primary data collection, the study analyzed policy documents, legal frameworks, historical records, and media reports. Document analysis is essential for contextualizing qualitative data, as it provides insight into how institutional narratives and external representations shape inter-ethnic relations and peace-building initiatives (Bowen, 2009).

4.5. Data analysis- Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. It involves a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and synthesizing data to uncover key insights relevant to the research questions (**Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022)**.

4.6. Research Ethics

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this study. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the College Research Review Committee (CRERC) at Hawassa University (Approval No. CLG-CRERC-006/2026). All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the research procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Written informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants were informed of their right to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. Given the sensitivity of issues related to identity politics, conflict, and peacebuilding, particular care was taken to minimize potential harm and emotional discomfort. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the removal of identifying information and the secure storage of data on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Hawassa University and internationally recognized ethical principles for social science research.

5. Results and Discussion

The Guji–Sidama conflict in southern Ethiopia epitomizes the intricate interplay of historical, sociopolitical, and cultural dynamics that fuel identity-based disputes in multiethnic societies. This

study, which draws on extensive primary data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) in affected kebeles (including Entaye, Bussa, and Gotu Onoma in Guji as well as Eddo, Wotera Kechema, and Kella 01 in Sidama), provides a comprehensive analysis of the causes, consequences, and potential resolutions of this conflict. At its core, the crisis is rooted in contested identity politics and the challenges imposed by Ethiopia's ethnic federalism—a system designed to empower diverse groups but which, in practice, has often exacerbated competition over administrative boundaries, resources, and political representation.

5.1. The Nexus of Historical Coexistence and Post-1991 Political Transformation

The relationship between the Guji-Oromo and Sidama communities is historically rooted in a long and sustained period of peaceful coexistence, which was fundamentally reconfigured by the political changes following 1991.

Pre-1991: A Legacy of Interdependence and Shared Social Fabric

Prior to 1991, the Guji and Sidama of areas like Wondo Genet coexisted within a framework of mutual interdependence and cultural synergy. Their relationship was characterized by shared primordial ties, including a common Cushitic ancestry and cradle land, which fostered a sense of kinship that often transcended rigid ethnic boundaries (Abraham & Dagne, 2019). This harmony was not passive but actively cultivated through deep socio-cultural integration. The communities participated in each other's pivotal life events, such as funerals, weddings, and inter-marriage ceremonies, weaving a robust fabric of familial and communal bonds. Critically, their alliance extended to military cooperation, with the Sidama consistently allying with the Guji against common rivals like the Arsi Oromo, demonstrating a relationship built on strategic trust and mutual defense (Abraham & Dagne, 2019).

This social cohesion was underpinned and protected by effective, community-owned traditional institutions. The Guji's Gadaa system and the Sidama's hierarchical institutions like Luwa (age-grade), Woma, and Garo served as the primary mechanisms for governance and conflict resolution. These systems emphasized restorative justice, reconciliation, and reintegration. A powerful embodiment of their shared commitment to peace was the Ficha customary practice—a joint conflict resolution mechanism where elders from both communities mediated disputes. The process involved rituals of purification and communal feasts to symbolize reconciliation, with its authority upheld by the shared oral law of Seera, which could impose powerful social sanctions like ostracism on violators (Abraham & Dagne, 2019). In this era, identity was fluid and relational, managed successfully through these localized, culturally resonant institutions.

Post-1991: The Disruptive Shift to Ethnic Federalism

The advent of the EPRDF government in 1991 and its implementation of ethnic federalism under the 1995 Constitution marked a radical rupture in this historical dynamic. The new political order intentionally reorganized the state along ethnolinguistic lines, politicizing ethnic identity as the sole

legitimate basis for political representation and resource allocation. The former Wondo Genet area, once administered under broader provincial structures, was demarcated and incorporated into the Sidama Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) (Abraham & Dagne, 2019).

This administrative re-territorialization had two immediate, disruptive consequences. First, the Guji, now a minority within a Sidama-majority administrative unit, expressed profound dissatisfaction, claiming they were politically marginalized and faced discriminatory practices in the distribution of resources, services, and political power (Abraham & Dagne, 2019). Second, the new system empowered educated elites from both groups, who began to instrumentalize ethnic identity as a tool for political mobilization, often for personal gain, thereby eroding the historical social capital between the communities.

A key informant from Entaye Kebele poignantly captured this transformation: “The very source of the conflict is the Guji’s identity question, not wealth or resources. The question is, ‘Who am I?’” (Interview, Entaye Kebele, December 2024). This statement reflects how the constitutional framework, while designed to empower groups, instead created a crisis of recognition for minorities within new administrative boundaries. The Guji’s demand for self-governance under Constitutional Article 39 became a direct response to this perceived institutionalized marginalization.

Empirical studies affirm this shift. Scholars such as Abbink (2011) and Kassahun (2016) argue that while ethnic federalism aimed to redress historical injustices, its implementation often laid the foundation for interethnic discord by rigidifying group boundaries. The state’s top-down conflict resolution mechanisms, such as the 2008 referendum, which reallocated kebeles between the regions, proved inadequate. These measures were often perceived as win-lose impositions that failed to address underlying grievances, further undermining the authority and effectiveness of the traditional Ficha and elder-led systems (Abraham & Dagne, 2019).

In a nutshell, the conflict between the Guji and Sidama is not a story of ancient hatreds but a rupture of a historically functional coexistence. The pre-1991 era was characterized by a shared social fabric maintained by adaptive traditional institutions. The post-1991 period, however, introduced a state-level political ideology that rigidified identities, dismantled old administrative structures, and transformed ethnicity into a site of zero-sum political competition. The path to sustainable peace, therefore, requires not only addressing contemporary political grievances but also recognizing and revitalizing the historical ties and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms that were successfully marginalized by the new political order.

5.2. Identity Politics as a Catalyst for Conflict

Identity politics forms the cornerstone of the grievances raised by the Guji community. For nearly two decades, repeated appeals for recognition and the protection of cultural rights have been largely ignored by federal authorities. One respondent from Gotu Onoma Kebele explained, “For the last 18 years, our identity questions were raised to the federal government but ignored, leading to oppression and the denial of our basic rights” (KII, Gotu Onoma Kebele, December 2024). The frustration over lost

opportunities to preserve traditional governance—embodied by systems such as the Gadaa—and cultural practices has reinforced a collective sense of injustice.

The Guji-Sidama conflict in southern Ethiopia stands as a vivid example of the complex interplay of historical, socio-political, and cultural dynamics in multi-ethnic societies. Rooted in identity politics, this conflict underscores the broader challenges posed by Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and its constitutional guarantees of self-determination. While ethnic federalism was initially designed to empower ethnic groups, it has inadvertently exacerbated territorial competition and resource disputes, especially in the context of the Guji-Sidama conflict. Central to the Guji grievances is the demand for self-governance, grounded in the constitutional principles of Article 39, which has largely been overlooked in practice. This conflict, driven by a sense of identity politics and territorial claims, has sparked tensions that are challenging to resolve.

The literature confirms that Ethiopia's history is marked by a complex interplay of ethnic identities, with ethnic federalism deepening existing divides. For instance, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime, in power from 1991 to 2018, institutionalized ethnic identities to empower marginalized groups. However, this approach also intensified ethnic polarization, as dominant groups increasingly controlled shared administrative zones (Hafteck, 2019; Aalen & Muriaas, 2017). Identity politics in Ethiopia is not only about representation; it also serves as a rallying point for social mobilization, as evidenced by the widespread protests and youth-led movements that have emerged since 2015 (Beyene, 2019; Tezera, 2020).

5.3. Administrative Restructuring and the Role of Referenda

The evolution of administrative boundaries through referenda has played a crucial role in deepening the Guji–Sidama conflict. The restructuring of Sidama woredas in 1998, which led to the formation of Wondo Genet and Melga woredas, triggered identity-related disputes when the Guji community challenged the historical inclusion of their territories. For example, the Guji have repeatedly demanded an independent Woreda administration—Guji Wondo Woreda—with Kella as its administrative center instead of Basha (KII, Sidama, December 2024). Such administrative decisions, often based on disputed referenda, have become emblematic of the broader contest over territorial identity.

A key flashpoint emerged during the referendum process in response to the crisis in kebeles such as Basha, Eddo, Wosha, Shesha, and Kella 01. Instead of employing a simple majority (50+1) system, the referendum was conducted on a kebele-by-kebele basis. The Sidama side argues that if the simple majority approach had been applied, they would have secured a majority in all contested areas. Yet, the process itself became mired in controversy, with the Guji community alleging that procedural irregularities—such as the temporary absence of voters during a lunch break—compromised the legitimacy of the outcome. These contested results have had lasting implications, with the Guji asserting that historical voting processes and administrative decisions have consistently marginalized their identity and political voice.

Furthermore, a second wave of boundary redrawing emerged two years after the initial referendum when Guji leaders called for a reconfiguration of territorial lines along the main road dividing key towns. These calls, although contradicting previous outcomes, have exacerbated tensions and led to renewed distrust in the state's capacity to manage interethnic disputes. Local officials on both sides have contributed to the volatile situation: while some Sidama leaders have attempted to foster reconciliation through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, certain Guji officials have been accused of stoking divisions by obstructing access to key infrastructures such as roads (FGD, Sidama, Eddo Kebelle, December 2024).

5.4. Micro-Level Dynamics: Institutional and Resource Disputes

At the micro-level, the Guji–Sidama conflict is characterized by disputes over institutional control, resource management, and administrative boundaries. One poignant example is the case of the Wondogenet Forestry College and the Entaye Health Center, both situated in areas claimed by the Guji but administered by Sidama authorities. A respondent from Entaye lamented, "Institutions in our kebeles are controlled by Sidama officials, undermining our rights and access to resources" (Interview, Entaye, Bussa, and Gotu Onoma Kebeles, December 2024). This misallocation of institutional oversight not only affects service delivery but also symbolizes the broader erosion of Guji cultural and political autonomy.

The ambiguity of administrative boundaries further complicates the situation. Conflicts over resource management are especially acute in disputes concerning irrigation water and grazing lands. In Wotera Kechema Kebele, for example, respondents reported that Sidama officials routinely block irrigation water as a punitive measure against Guji farmers during periods of tension (Interview, Bussa Kebele, December 2024). Such actions underscore how control over natural resources can be weaponized to reinforce ethnic hierarchies. Studies by Elias (2018) support these observations, indicating that resource competition, when coupled with unclear territorial demarcations, often escalates interethnic conflicts.

The ramifications of these disputes extend into everyday life. Overlapping claims on grazing lands—such as the Honse grazing area traditionally managed by nine Sidama kebeles—have led to localized yet potent conflicts. Although the Guji possess alternative grazing areas, their persistent demands over Honse have symbolically challenged the existing resource management systems, further entrenching divisions between the communities.

The micro-level dynamics of this conflict reveal several key issues, including disputed referendum outcomes, institutional ownership disputes, and boundary and resource conflicts. The allocation of Kebelles and the contestation over areas like Eddo Kebele highlight the systemic struggles over administrative boundaries and control. The failure to adopt a simple majority system in the referendum, in which the Sidama side could have won, continues to fuel resentment, particularly as the Guji community now seeks to redefine the boundaries, often citing the main road as a dividing line. This ongoing dispute exacerbates existing challenges and prevents the establishment of a clear, unified territorial arrangement. Furthermore, these territorial and political struggles have been compounded by resource conflicts, which include competition over land, water, and economic opportunities.

5.5. Socioeconomic and Cultural Impacts of the Conflict

The prolonged conflict has inflicted significant socioeconomic and cultural costs on both the Guji and Sidama communities. Displacement, property destruction, and the disruption of livelihoods are among the most visible consequences. One interviewee from Gotu Onoma Kebele poignantly noted, “For years, we have lost lives, homes, and economic stability due to this conflict” (Interview, Gotu Onoma Kebele, December 2024). The violence has resulted in the burning of approximately 360 houses, widespread looting of livestock, and the destruction of schools, libraries, and other critical infrastructures. These losses have not only strained the affected households but have also disrupted the broader socioeconomic fabric of the region.

Culturally, the conflict has undermined the Guji community’s ability to maintain and celebrate its traditional practices. The forced curtailment of cultural expressions—such as the Arefa tradition and the practice of traditional governance under the Gadaa system—has led to a palpable sense of cultural suppression. Many community members view these restrictions as a violation of their constitutional rights and a direct consequence of the imbalanced administrative power structures that favor the Sidama majority.

Social fragmentation is another enduring impact of the conflict. Over time, mistrust and suspicion have fractured long-standing intercommunal bonds. While certain social rituals like weddings and funerals continue to provide occasions for communal gathering, the pervasive undercurrent of resentment makes full reconciliation elusive. The persistence of ethnic polarization not only hinders peacebuilding efforts but also stifles the potential for economic cooperation and collective community development.

Political exploitation of the conflict has further compounded these issues. Political actors from both sides have, at times, leveraged the conflict to advance personal or group agendas. Guji politicians, while publicly advocating for peace, have been implicated in covert activities that exacerbate violence and undermine reconciliation. In contrast, Sidama officials have generally refrained from such activities, which has, in turn, deepened the sense of alienation among the Guji population. Such political manipulation reinforces the narrative that identity politics is being used as a tool for territorial dominance rather than for fostering inclusive governance.

The impacts of the conflict have been far-reaching, with displacement, economic losses, and property destruction becoming central features of life for many Guji households. The socio-economic disruptions caused by the conflict have entrenched poverty and loss of livelihoods, making it even more difficult for communities to recover. The escalation of violence and insecurity, particularly in Kebelles like Eddo, has worsened the situation. Despite the presence of peace-building initiatives, these measures have often proven ineffective or insufficient in addressing the root causes of the conflict. The existing peace processes, while vital, have lacked the necessary depth and inclusivity to foster long-term stability.

5.6. Evaluating Peacebuilding Initiatives and Traditional Mechanisms

Efforts to resolve the conflict have come from both formal state interventions and longstanding traditional mechanisms. On the formal side, federal military deployments have contributed to periods of relative calm in certain kebeles, such as Eddo, by imposing order through physical security measures. However, the reliance on military presence rather than addressing the structural roots of the dispute raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of peace. Moreover, the handling of the referendum process and allegations of corruption among local officials have eroded trust in state-led interventions.

Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of both communities, offer a promising alternative. The Gadaa system, which has long governed Guji society, emphasizes collective dialogue, restorative justice, and consensus-building. Similarly, the Sidama Gudumale system provides a framework for resolving disputes through communal mediation. Both systems also highlight the crucial role played by women in peacebuilding. For example, the Guji institution of Haadha Siinqee empowers women to mediate conflicts and hold offenders accountable, while the Sidama practice of Yakka similarly reinforces women's moral authority in maintaining social harmony.

A notable illustration of the potential of traditional mechanisms is seen in Wotera Kechema Kebele. Here, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and locally constituted peace councils have made significant strides in bridging the divide between the two communities. These councils, characterized by balanced representation—including 50% women—have been instrumental in organizing regular inter-kebele dialogues and mediating disputes over resource management, administrative boundaries, and developmental projects. The success of these peace councils lies in their ability to draw on indigenous conflict resolution practices while simultaneously engaging with formal government structures. This integrated approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among community members, which is critical for building lasting trust.

A remarkable achievement in the ongoing peace-building efforts in the region has been the role played by the ***Peace Council.*** The Council has been instrumental in facilitating ***inter-Kebele dialogues***, organizing these dialogues every three months between Guji and Sidama leaders. This initiative has allowed for regular communication between key leaders from Sidama Kebelles, including ***Wosha Souyama*** and ***Wotera Kechema***, and Guji Kebelles, such as ***Gotu Onoma*** and ***Shesha Kekele***. These dialogues have provided a structured platform for discussing contentious issues, addressing grievances, and fostering cooperation between the communities. By promoting such dialogues, the Peace Council has not only defused tensions but also facilitated the development of trust and understanding between the two ethnic groups.

In addition to dialogue, the ***Peace Council*** has supported legal measures, such as ***extradition*** efforts, to ensure that those responsible for violent actions are held accountable. By facilitating the transfer of criminals to the judicial system, the Peace Council has strengthened the rule of law and demonstrated its commitment to justice and fairness. These efforts reflect a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding, one that combines dialogue, legal accountability, and community involvement.

Despite the success seen in places like Wotera Kechema, where both communities share markets, schools, and religious practices, the conflict in areas like Eddo illustrates the challenges of managing ethnic territorial disputes. The existence of peaceful co-existence in some Kebelles provides an opportunity to scale up these practices and use them as a model for conflict resolution in other areas, particularly where the conflict has disrupted social harmony and security. The experiences from Wotera Kechema show that, when communities cooperate, share resources, and engage in dialogue, peace becomes a realistic goal, even in highly contested territories.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Despite the promise of traditional mechanisms, past negotiations have sometimes excluded influential figures—such as elders and Aba Gadaas—thereby undermining the legitimacy of the mediation process (Interview, Entaye Kebele, December 2024). Moreover, formal interventions often fall short when they fail to address the deeper historical and identity-based grievances that continue to fester. The coexistence of these two spheres—the traditional and the formal—thus represents both an opportunity and a challenge for sustainable conflict resolution.

5.7. Best and Worst Case Analyses

Two contrasting cases within the conflict zone offer insight into the varied dynamics at play. In Wotera Kechema Kebelle, the peacebuilding process has benefited from robust local initiatives, balanced leadership, and an inclusive approach to governance. Here, both Guji and Sidama leaders hold positions of authority, ensuring that decision-making reflects the diversity of the community. Regular inter-kebele dialogues, supported by a well-organized peace council, have facilitated the resolution of disputes before they escalate. The peace council's interventions in cases as sensitive as a conflict between a local youth and a police officer illustrate the potential of such forums to achieve practical, immediate outcomes while laying the groundwork for longer-term reconciliation.

However, the success of peace-building initiatives in these areas should not mask the stark realities of the conflict in regions like Eddo, where traditional mechanisms and peace councils have been unable to fully resolve the challenges posed by identity politics and territorial disputes. The continuation of ethnic-based politics, both locally and at the national level, remains a serious barrier to achieving sustainable peace in southern Ethiopia. The government must take more decisive action to ensure that the solutions formulated through referendums and peace processes are practical, inclusive, and respected by all parties. This includes improving the effectiveness of peace councils, ensuring that all voices are heard, and that the peace-building efforts are robust enough to address the underlying issues of governance, territoriality, and identity.

In stark contrast, Eddo Kebelle represents a worst-case scenario. Rooted in overlapping administrative, political, and resource-based contestations, Eddo has become a flashpoint where grievances over referenda, tax non-compliance, and resistance to development initiatives have converged. The 2002 referendum, which allocated nine kebeles to Sidama and four to Guji—with Eddo assigned narrowly to Sidama by a margin of 98 votes—continues to be a source of intense dispute. In Eddo, the cooperative

framework intended to balance administrative roles has collapsed, with a small but vociferous faction within the Guji community rejecting Sidama jurisdiction outright.

Non-compliance with government regulations, such as the refusal to pay taxes or contribute to national projects like the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), underscores the deep mistrust in state authority. Incidents of violence—ranging from the burning of schools and libraries to the sabotage of a 31-million ETB elementary school project—have further destabilized the area, discouraging investment and deepening community divisions.

The Eddo case underscores the limitations of both formal interventions and traditional mediation when confronted with deeply entrenched identity politics and historical grievances. While federal military forces have temporarily imposed a semblance of order, the underlying issues remain unresolved. Political exploitation, resource competition over contested grazing lands, and the legacy of perceived injustice in past referenda continue to fuel unrest in Eddo, making it a critical target for comprehensive peacebuilding efforts.

6. Conclusion

The Guji-Sidama conflict is a potent illustration of how a top-down political engineering of identity can rupture a long-standing social fabric. This study demonstrates that the tensions are not a product of ancient animosities but a direct consequence of the post-1991 political order, which rigidified previously fluid ethnic identities and transformed them into the primary currency for political power and resource access. While constitutional guarantees of self-determination (Article 39) were intended to empower, their implementation in Wondo Genet marginalized the Guji minority within a Sidama-majority administrative unit, creating a crisis of recognition and fueling demands for self-governance.

The subsequent conflicts are therefore systemic, rooted in the interplay of this identity politics, administrative mismanagement, and competition over land, water, and economic opportunities. State-led interventions, such as the 2008 referendum, often proved inadequate, functioning as win-lose impositions that failed to address underlying grievances and further eroded trust.

The Guji-Sidama conflict exemplifies the complexities of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, where historical, socio-political, and cultural factors fuel tensions. Despite constitutional guarantees of self-determination (Article 39), ethnic federalism has intensified territorial and resource disputes. The Guji demand for self-governance, unresolved referendum disputes, contested administrative boundaries (e.g., Eddo Kebele), and resource competition (land, water, economic opportunities) have deepened divisions.

The conflict has caused widespread displacement, economic losses, and insecurity. While peace-building efforts exist, they often fail to address root causes. However, historical coexistence traditions—such as the Guji's *Gadaa* and Sidama's *Gudumale* systems, along with women's peacekeeping roles (*Haadha Siinqee* and *Yakka*)—provide a foundation for reconciliation. Successful models like Wotera

Kechema, where communities share resources and maintain dialogue, demonstrate the potential for peace.

Yet, in contested areas like Eddo, ethnic politics and weak governance hinder resolution. The Peace Council has made progress through inter-Kebele dialogues and legal accountability, but sustainable peace requires: Implementing fair referendum outcomes that address all groups' interests, Strengthening peace councils with more resources and inclusive participation (especially women), Scaling up successful coexistence models (e.g., Wotera Kechema) to conflict hotspots, Promoting inter-community dialogue to rebuild trust and leverage shared traditions. Ultimately, resolving the conflict demands addressing governance gaps, territorial disputes, and identity politics while reinforcing Ethiopia's multi-ethnic cohesion.

The evidence from this study demonstrates that the Guji–Sidama conflict is not a series of isolated incidents but a systemic problem rooted in the interplay of historical marginalization, identity politics, administrative mismanagement, and resource competition. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that integrates both formal state mechanisms and traditional conflict resolution practices.

Therefore, the Guji–Sidama conflict encapsulates the complex challenges inherent in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. While historical grievances and identity-based disputes have repeatedly undermined efforts at peaceful coexistence, there are clear pathways to reconciliation. By embracing both traditional conflict resolution systems and inclusive formal governance practices, local stakeholders can work toward a sustainable peace that honors the rich cultural heritage of both the Guji and Sidama communities.

Recommendation

The way forward requires a multifaceted approach. First, the government should take steps to ensure the practical implementation of the solutions arising from the referendum, ensuring that the outcomes reflect the interests of all communities, including the Guji, Sidama, and other ethnic groups affected by the conflict. Furthermore, strengthening the peace councils by enhancing their capacity and resources, and expanding the participation of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes, will be essential for addressing local grievances.

Scaling up successful models of peaceful coexistence from Kebelles like Wotera Kechema can offer a blueprint for other regions, ensuring that communities can collaborate on shared goals and resolve disputes without resorting to violence. Additionally, fostering inter-community dialogue and cooperation is key to rebuilding trust and solidarity. Both Sidama and Guji communities have a long history of peaceful coexistence, and these shared traditions and practices can be leveraged as tools for peacebuilding.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest:

- *The authors declare that they have **no competing interests**.*

Funding

- *This research **received external funding from _____.***

Ethical Approval Statement

This study received ethical approval from the **Hawassa University College Research Review Committee**. All research was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines and regulations applicable to research involving human participants, including principles aligned with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Approval Number: CLGRECRC-002/24
Date of Approval: 01/10/2024

The approval covers the research titled *"Identity Politics, Conflict and Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Sidama and Guji Community in Ethiopia,"* under the principal investigator Mr. Akalewold Fedilu and co-researcher Mr. Awol Ali. Ethical protocols and standards were upheld throughout the study, and any dissemination or publication of this work acknowledges this approval.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study. The consent process was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines approved by Hawassa University College Research Review Committee.

1. Mode and Administration of Consent:

- **Method:** Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their involvement in the research.
- **Administration:** The consent process was administered by the principal investigator, **Mr. Akalewold Fedilu**, and the co-researcher, **Mr. Awol Ali**, in the participants' preferred local language to ensure full comprehension.
- **Timing:** Consent was obtained between **04 October 2024** and **30 December 2024**, before the commencement of any data collection activities.

2. Scope of Consent:
The consent covered the following:

- Participation in interviews, focus group discussions, and/or surveys.
- The collection, anonymized analysis, and storage of personal and demographic data.

- The use of anonymized data for academic research and publication.
- Consent for the publication of findings, with the explicit guarantee that no personally identifiable information would be included.

3. Participant Information and Assurance:

As this study involved non-interventional social research, all participants were fully informed of the following prior to giving consent:

- The purpose of the research: To study identity politics, conflict, and peacebuilding among the Sidama and Guji communities in Ethiopia.
- That their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without consequence.
- That their anonymity was strictly assured; all data would be reported in aggregate or anonymized form, with no names or identifying details linked to their responses in any publication.
- How their data would be utilized: solely for the stated research purposes, stored securely, and retained only for the duration required by institutional policy.
- Any potential risks: Participants were informed that discussing topics related to conflict and identity could evoke personal memories or emotions. Support resources were offered, and they were assured of their right to pause or cease participation at any point.

4. Consent for Vulnerable Groups:

This research did not involve minors. If any participants were deemed potentially vulnerable due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the consent process included additional steps to ensure their full understanding and voluntary agreement. These steps involved a more detailed verbal explanation of the study's aims and their rights, followed by the standard written consent procedure.

Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

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