
A Refutation to a Claimed Gabra Migo People's "Somali Identity"

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Abstract: The issue of identity has been one of the most central in human society. The search for identity has always been a key issue facing mankind in its striving after significance and meaning. Over the course of time, the issue of Gabra Migo's identity becomes a topic of debate. And the paper is a response to individuals and local politicians that depict Gabra Migo as Somali in their different appeals. It shows that this imposed identity is not their own. The study is entirely based on secondary sources of data that were interpreted using a mix of interpretivism and constructivism to guide the qualitative method of research. The findings of the study revealed that people of Gabra Migo are Oromo by nature purely. A clear look at origin of Gabra Migo People is important to know better about identity of these people as a whole.

Keywords: Gabra Migo, Identity, Identity Crisis, Gabra People

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Identity is one of the most crucial needs identified by the basic needs theory because it is an extremely strong catalyst for social mobilization. Many scholars stress identity salience as a key factor in conflict-concept, understood as the likeliness identity has to be invoked when handling political and societal challenges. The principle of identity is a value expressed by one of the first principles of being. It states that every being is determined in itself, is one with itself and is consistent in itself. Thus, every being is one with itself and divided from others. The qualities of matter, referred to in traditional metaphysics as accidents, such as size, colour, shape etc, distinguish one being from the other (Njoku, 2002). If being does not have an identity, then everything would-be everything, giving birth to one thing since nothing can be differentiated from the other. In this case, there would be no subject and object relationship. This would create a causal traffic in the order of being and knowledge.

Africa is a vast continent inhabited by communities and societies that have had different historical experiences. It is no doubt true that African societies are inherently pluralistic meaning that the social "units maintain at least a minimum of

relations with each other "although with the existence of "pronounced cleavages between social units" (Kuper, 1965:113). In the face of these pronounced pluralism, talk of an African identity seem not only controversial but also, on the whole, interesting and worthy of academic pursuit.

Benjamin (2010) observes that for centuries, there have been systematic and ruthless attempts to deny African people the fundamental human right of self-determination and self-identity. The "Black Consciousness Movement" in Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, South America, and throughout the Pan-African world was an attempt towards reaffirming the identity of Africa. According to Baldwin (1965), the quest for an African identity, as a historical and intellectual discourse, emerged from the frame built by racial discrimination, slavery and colonialism. It was an attempt to reaffirm their heritage and personality collapsing before Western bias. Africans wanted to accept and define their responsibility to assess the riches and promise of their culture and also to open dialogue with the West. As part of the process of self-affirmation and identification, a college of intellectuals created images to project the African identity.

Thus, the search for an identity in Africa is an attempt to counter the depersonalization and dehumanization which so many are subjected in our time.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study is to analyze the created identity of people of Gabra migo.

1.3. Methodology of Study

Due to time and economic constraints, the study was entirely based on secondary data. And the collected data were analyzed using a combination of interpretivism and constructivism to guide the qualitative method of research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. What Is Identity

As it is quite obviously known the concept of identity has a bone various controversies among different scholars and writers. Hence different individuals tried to define the concept differently from many angles. It means there has been no consensus in regard to meaning of identity.

According to the Webster's Third New Dictionary of the English Language (1959) identity is construed as "the sameness of essential genetic character in different examples or instances. Or Sameness of all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing: self-sameness, oneness; sameness of that which is distinguishable only in some accidental fashion. The sense arising in shared experience, an instance of such sameness. Or unity and persistence of personality: unity or individual comprehensiveness of a life or character. Or the condition of being the same with something described, claimed or asserted, or of possessing a character claimed". Identity is therefore a category of membership based on all sorts of typologies such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, religion, culture, etc. (Laitin, 1998: 13). It is the way by which people define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of the above typologies.

According to (Hall, 1994, 1996), identity is defined as a constitution based on the recognition of familiar and shared derivations including but not limited to ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical, territorial, cultural and political attributes with other people, groups or ideal. From a sociological perspective, on the other hand, Castells (1997) asserts that identity acts as a source of meaning and experience for people through self-construction and individuation particularly on the basis of cultural attributes in a context marked by power relationships. He identifies three forms and origins of identity building like legitimizing identity, resistance identity and project identity each of which leads to a different social association.

In philosophical circles, there have series of interesting debates and controversies on the concept of identity. In its extant form, the philosophical concept of identity strikes at the ontological status of the self. According to Stroll (1967: 121-124) the concept of identity is the problem of trying to give a true explanation of those features of the world which account for sameness, on the other hand, and for its diversity and change, on the other. In modern terminology, the

problem is that of trying to give a true account of the use (or uses) of such words as "same", "identity", "change", and "diversity" and for such related expressions as "similar", "like", and "different", in order to delineate those features of the world which the use, or uses, of these terms is intended to mark. Thus, in short, the philosophical concept of identity, in its profound intellectual insights suggests the delineation of features which accounts for sameness of identity and dissimilar features which points to their opposites in general.

However, in most of the definitions given above on identity, very often we found some core ground principles in various definitions given. It can be summarized as follows: understood as a ground or basis of social or political action, identity is often opposed to interest. Identity is a core of (individual or collective) selfhood or a fundamental condition of social being. Hence, identity is invoked to point to something deeply, basic, abiding or foundational.

2.2. Little About Gabra Migo People

There have been a lots of disagreements and debate around Gabra people and their identity in particular for quite a while. Divergent views had been forwarded from different individuals, scholars explicitly on who Gabras really are. However, majority of this perspectives are merely one sided, echoing of one another. But who are Gabra people?

This paper takes the Gabra Migo as the subject of a study of identity in Ethiopia. These people keep camels, goats, sheep, and a small number of cattle. There are two groups of Gabra, one living in northern Kenya, and the other in southern Ethiopia. Both speak the Oromo dialect, which is one of the Cushitic families of Afro-Asiatic languages. According to their oral tradition, the two groups were originally united but then split into two in the mid-18th century. Today, another pastoralist group, the Boran Oromo, live between these two Gabra groups, and the two have limited contact. Both groups call themselves 'Gabra'; however, the Ethiopian group calls the Kenyan group the 'Malbe,' and the Kenyan group calls the Ethiopian group the 'Miigo.' This paper mainly relates to the Gabra Miigo.

The Gabra Miigo reside separately in the Surupa, Arero, Web, Moyale, Guchi, and Negele areas of Yabelo and Liban zones, Oromiya Regional State They are traditionally pastoralists, relying on camel, cattle, goat, and sheep products, and they also purchase maize and wheat from local markets. In ttle 1980s, they began rain-fed farming to produce food for their own consumption. Gabra Miigo society is patrilineally organized and segmented into moieties. The east moiety (Beri) is further segmented into 11 clans, while the west moiety (Orashin) has only the Lossa clan. Each clan is again segmented into 1-7 l lineages.

Moreover, until recently, Gabra Miigo society was organized on an age system (Asmarom 1973, Baxter 1978) and that of the Gabra Malbe (Torry1973, 1 978). The Gabra Miigo system classified men into nine generation sets. Each generation set formed a rung on the ladder of generation grades. The generation set is in the gada grade played an important role in social life; members elected an abba gada

(political religious leader) to represent their generation set and built a yaa hamlet that served as the center for rituals and arbitration. Every 9-10 years, each generation set moved up a grade in Gabra Miigo society.

In fact in this time all the issue identity of Gabra Migo has never been raised by anybody or group. Gabra Migo never doubted their Oromo origin and identity. From their very beginning, they speak Oromo language and share many cultural values of the other neighbouring Oromo tribes like Borana and Guji. The history of Borena Zone was known by violent conflict among pastoralists tribes living there. For a long period of time Gabra Migo fought with Borena tribes in several incidents in the past. But identity has never been a cause behind the conflict. They simply fought one another over scarce natural resource like water and pasture. Even in recent time there was a fierce conflict between Gabra Migo and Guji which cause high loss of life on both sides. Again the cause is not an issue identity or political affiliation.

3. Causes of Confusion on Gabra Migo Identity

3.1. The Major Cause: Political Cause

The Gabra Miigo currently face a dilemma created by the Ethiopian government's adoption of a federal system based on ethnic groups and languages. The government has divided the country into nine ethnically based states and two self-governing administrations. The identities of marginal people such as the Gabra Miigo face flux in response to the current cultural, political, and economic situations. But, even at a time, Gabra Migo have not got a problem with their identity, means they continue with their originally Oromo identity. They make partly settled life around the towns. They have also got an opportunity to participate in local political role by involving their representatives in some offices. In all this moment there was no Somale region administration there at a time in Moyale, it is only after some years that Garre tribes establish Somali administration in Moyale town. Thus, it is after this that the issues of Gabra Migo identity became a melting point in the area.

In line with the above incidents, the political cloud start to appear on the sky of identity Gabra Migo. The reason for this is that some of Gabra Migo elders or "political entrepreneurs" start to talk with Garre elders about the political direction. These Gabra Migo elders' pragmatist and opportunistic political affiliation move begin to have an impact on some ordinary Gabras. From this on ward they start a huge campaign on people to join a Somali region and they are successful at some part. Few people accept the invitation and join them. They do this by bribing, deception by saying you are Somali origin, we are one etc. Also the Gabra who identify themselves with the Somali demand the assignment of Moyale and its surroundings to the Somali region. They also attach much importance to those points such as religion (Islam), styles of dress, way of constructing houses and others that make their clan distinct from the

Borana, but bring them closer to the Garre and other Somali clans.

As a result, ordinary people of Gabra Miigo in Moyale face flux in response to the current cultural, political, and economic situations. The Gabra Miigo in Mayale area start to waver between identifying with Somali and Oromo ethnicity according to local political situations and recognize the importance of choosing either a Somali or Oromo ethnic identity to survive and acquire better political rights. But this situation is only heating up among the Gabra Migo of Moyale town where the new chemistry is going on not of Gabra Migo living in other parts of the zone. Politically, the move by some Gabra Migo people towards joining Somali region in Moyale have costed and damaged political participation and loyalty of many Gabra people in general. Because it had created a suspicion on part of Borana and Guji Oromo. They start to look cautiously and with a sense of doubt every move and steps of Gabra Migo people. This break of trust from the longtime friends of Oromo tribes in the area have created huge impact on the political future of Gabra Migo people those that never been a Somali affiliated and remain proud of their Oromo identity. Surprisingly though, still now majority of Gabra Migo sting to their original Oromo identity amidst all this fabrication and false imposition of Somali identity on them by Garre for their political game of getting Moyale town and of some Gabra political traders for their personal and private profits.

3.2. Supposed Justification for Gabra Migo's Claim of Somali Identity

Gabra Migo who claimed Somali identity have tried to convince people by listing certain issues for affiliation. Among others they mention cultural features that they say they shared with Somali. For example, both groups keep camels, live in dome-shaped huts covered with roof mats (dase), believe in Islam, and sing a special blessing song (dikiir) in the Somali language.

However, all the above claimed shred sort of reasons are not fully convincing to reasonable person. Furthermore, Gabra Migo people know and then share more cultural traditions With Oromos. Most importantly all Gabra Migo speaks Afan Oromo and until very recently they kept Gada system which is basis of all institution. So the cultural features claim cannot be a conclusive one to the assertion above. In fact, it is true that now all Gabra Migo people follow the religion of Islam and hence they all are Muslims. But this cannot make one to conclude that they are Somali for they are all Muslims. This is really not acceptable on logically grounds, because Gabra Migo are not the only muslims in the world, there are many muslim tribes, peoples across the globe but they are not Somali. Thus, being a muslim is not a necessity for claiming Somali identity. Therefore, a claim about similarity of religion to Gabra Migo Somali identity is unacceptable and inconclusive at large.

Moreover, when we analyzed the issue of livelihood of pastoralists people, the share many thing in common since most of them leads the same life of mobility from place to

place. Pastoralists are people whose livelihood depends mainly on the raising of domestic animals including cattle, camels, goats, sheep, and donkeys, which are used for milk, meat, transport, and trade. Among many pastoralists people living in Horn of Africa most of them are camel-keeping peoples. They live in different countries like Kenya, Ethiopia and Somali. But they all are not Somalians. For example, in Ethiopia there are many Oromo pastoralists' communities like Karayyu, Wollo Oromo who leads their lives by keeping camels. And this is true of Gabra Migo people who keep camels which does not necessarily makes them Somalians as some allegedly claimed so. Also, these Pastoral nomads follow a seasonal migratory pattern that can vary from year to year. The timing and destinations of migrations are determined primarily by the needs of the herd animals for water and fodder. These nomadic societies do not create permanent settlements, but rather they live in tents or other relatively easily constructed dwellings the year round. This idea reveals the fact that a mobile house or tents are not unique to Somalians pastoralists only but other pastoralists groups also built it but it is only the name of the tent or the house that varies from people to people not the tent which are designed as portable for the movement.

When one see the issue of a religious blessing song or (dikkira) of the Gabra Migo, first the very etymology of word was not Somali origin. In fact, the name of the chants, dikira, is derived from dhikr, the Arabic word for "commemoration," which is the word Sufis use to refer to their chants. But, within this chants there are some Arabic, Somali words which are minor in numbers. However, most of songs are played in Afaan Oromo. This only indicates rich and diversified version of vocabulary of dikkira or chants not the identity affiliation of Somali as some did it as evidence for their claim.

As we can clearly understand from the above alleged claim and the shred sort of justification given, one can conclude simply that they are just insufficient and inconclusive to greater extent. It is simply a stamping at back which is far from reality of indicating the Somali identity of the people under scrutiny. Therefore, it is fair to say that this is a politicizing of Gabra Migo's identity and identity grabbing by Garre and some elders from Gabra for their political greed. So, all the above false labelling and lamenting of Gabra Migo's identity cannot suppressed the real and true Oromo identity of Gabra Migo people.

More importantly, if we look at the facts on the ground today, one observe that majority of Gabra Migo lives in many parts of Oromia sides than in Somali areas. Equally important also is that currently more Gabra Migo graduate students are working as government officials in different posts in Oromia administration than in Somali. This all fact utterly disproved the false identity imposition on Gabra Migo people externally. Paradoxically though, Garre tribe who labeled Somali identity to Gabra Migo, most often found of denial of Gabra people as a whole. In all Garre's mind there is a believe that Gabra's are simply Garre's. Meaning they holds that Gabra are an extension of Garre, there is no what is call

Gabra for them. This is simply a total elimination of Gabra identity which is totally unacceptable on any ground whatsoever. In entails that Garre want Gabra people for their political means only that is why they can claim Somali identity to Garba Migo if they need them for some political game of their own.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the issue of identity has been a bone of controversies in many countries in the world and in Africa in particular. It is no exception to Gabra Migo people in Ethiopia in recent years. The Gabra Migo of today are the Gabra Migo of the past in the sense that we can still observe sameness in the identity of Gabra Migo. These people never doubt about their Oromo identity for very long period of time and still today they sting to their true identity. The recent falsely associated Somali identity to Gabra Migo by some groups like Garre and Gabra political traders is a politically motivated scenario and calculated mission by Garre to get dominance in the area. Hence, it can strongly be argued that the grand labelling of Somali identity to Gabra Migo cannot by no means reveals the real identity of the people under study. The fact is Gabra Migo people was Oromo, they are Oromo know and they continue to be Oromo no matter what.

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