

Historical-Sociology of Interaction in the city of Dawa Dawa: The case of Oromo-Somali ethnic groups

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Abstract- Dire Dawa is a disputed city over claims of ownership between Oromia and Somalia regional states. Hence, among the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups. However, there was no conflict so far experienced between these ethnic groups in the city of Dire Dawa. The article attempted to study the basic reasons for such peaceful state of affairs in the city. To accomplish this objective, the researcher utilized qualitative research method. Sources of data- primary and secondary sources were used. Primary data as the main source was collected from informants and documents through interviews, observation, focus group discussion, and document analysis. The collected data was analyzed to find common indicators. The study finding revealed that these ethnic groups have developed a sense of belonging to the city of Dire Dawa. They developed a single vocabulary-ye-Dire-lij-. This single vocabulary was the result of cultural dialogue and understanding they developed over century through their interactions. Their interaction was their common cultural heritage which they mobilized to solve their competition over city ownership that avoided outright conflict. This was shown when the two ethnic groups agreed to share the terms of the city Council. This is a lesson that needs to be promoted and shared by others to avoid violent ethnic conflict over claim. It concluded that cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue is one of the surest guarantees of development and peace. The lesson from Dire Dawa provide values needed for economic development: values that are tolerant, trusting, and participatory.

Index Terms- Dire Dawa, Ethnic group, Oromo, Somali, Socio-cultural Interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

As history lessons taught us cities were centers where human cultures have reached maturity which laid the foundation for the present urban culture. This is because "...the City is the place where the greatest intensity of human experience, the biggest stores of change, and the significant events of history have been anchored."¹

The above quoted statement reveals the important place cities have had and continue to have among human societies. Cities were attracting peoples for better life, employment, education, and in general for prosperity, and still are centers of

hope for prospect particularly in poor continent and nations like Ethiopia. Therefore, cities use to attract people of different background from different corners of a country.

An urban settlement is formed by a permanently settled group of people who are not mainly concerned with primary food production. As the city is also a permanent settlement there is a relationship between the people and the surrounding people and settlement. The study of the interaction of people in cities means the study of culture for "cities are the sites of culture industries..."² This article presents one of such cities, Dire Dawa which is located in eastern Ethiopia with particular emphasis on ethnic group interaction. Dire Dawa is one of the two chartered cities (the other being Addis Ababa) in Ethiopia under the 1995 F.D.R.E constitution. This article is limited only to the city proper Dire Dawa with specific emphasis on the Oromo-Somali ethnic group interactions in the city. Therefore, the Oromo and Somali ethnic group interaction is discussed in the whole context of Dire Dawa because city life is often characterized by interdependence, so separating the part from its whole might not give the full picture of the part under discussion.

II. DIRE DAWA: BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Everything that exists in the present has come out of the past, and no matter how new and unique it seems to be, it carries some of the past with it.³

The urban phenomenon is the most characteristic feature of 20th centuries. Although urbanization is not new in the history of Ethiopia, the first half of the 20th century witnessed the rapid growth of towns. Urbanization in Ethiopia was conditioned by historical factors, that is, the combination of political and military factors. In the 19th century, a number of middle sized towns have flourished following the occupation by the armies of Kings. In other word, most of cities/towns have developed from a military garrison. Hence most of Ethiopian towns followed such trend and owed the political, military and administrative activities of the state.⁴ But the case of Dire Dawa denotes a little bit different trend.

²Sharon Zukin,"The Cultures of Cities. Cambridge:MA Blackwell,1995,p.264," in William G.Flangan.p.,10.

³ Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History*(Boston,Bedford Books: St. Martin's Press,Inc,1998).p.2

⁴ John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of A Traditional Polity* (Addis Ababa,Nairobi and New York: Oxford University Press,1974).p.161.

¹ William G. Flangan, *Urban Sociology: Images and Structures*,5thed(Boulder,Lanham,New York,Toronto,Plymouth:Rowman and Littlefield Publishers,INC.,2010),p,5

The establishment of Dire Dawa followed the railway Concession of 1894 that led to the formation of the rail way company called “*the compagnie Imperiale des Chemins de fer éthiopiens*” to link Addis Ababa with Djibouti via Harar in 1896.⁵ Then the rail way construction which has begun in 1897 reached its first terminal in 1902 and this site was named “New Harar” later renamed Dire Dawa.⁶

Dire Dawa was the result of environmental and topographic conditions which the French engineers found it suitable for the rail way route than the difficult topography for the rail route through Harar which in turn dictate change in place of terminal.⁷ In other words, historical incidence with other factors played greater role in the establishment of the city thereby marking unusual trend of urban development in Ethiopia. Dire Dawa initially unintended result of the rail way, once a semi-desert plain full of wild animals has changed in to the second largest urban center of Ethiopia in subsequent years.

As records show trade routes covering considerable distances has brought diverse cultures face to face in orderly exchange. Similarly, Dire Dawa which has grown from a railway depot to the most important town with a number of industries, as well as the rail way, offering employment opportunities, has attracted large number of people including Ethiopians and foreigners who dwelt in separate residence-Europeans reside in a quarter named *Kezira/Gezira* an Arabic word for town, and a quarter named as *Magala*- a Somali word for a village was residence for the Ethiopians, Indians, and Arabs.⁸ There were ethnic groups: Afar, Amhara, Gurgura, Harari, Oromo and Somali. Thus, Dire Dawa has become the home of different groups of people coming from all corners of Ethiopia and outside of Ethiopia which gave the current image of population composition. The present population composition is, therefore, the result of historical process continued over longer periods of time all the way to the present marking the interaction of people at different level.

As a historical continuity Dire Dawa has different quarters with different name accommodating all ethnic groups unlike the early quarters built to separate ethnic groups. As a result of the living together of different ethnic groups, there follow an exchange of ideas, language, religion and way of life that form what generally termed as cultural exchange.

It is interesting to note that most of the names of the various quarters of the town reflect the ethnic background of people who might have lived in it. *Kezira* and *Greek camp* are foreign names where once foreigners had lived in. However,

⁵ Henry Baldet, “Urban Study of Dire Dawa,” (B.A.Thesis, Department of Geography: AAU,1970),p.16.;;H. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*. Updated edn(Berkeley,Los Angeles and London:University of California Press,2004).p.107,108.;; Shiferaw Bekele,“The People of Dire Dawa: Towards a Social History(1902-1936),” in the *Proceeding of Ethiopian Studies*.Vol.1.(Paris, 1994)p.611.

⁶ Bahru Zewde,*A History of Modern Ethiopia,1855-1991*.2nd ed(Addis Ababa,Athens & Oxford:Addis Ababa University Press,2002).p.101.;;Henri Baldet.p.16.

⁷ Henry Baldet:p.16,17.

⁸ Shiferaw Bekele:pp.612-617.

although one might observe the dominance of this or that group in one quarter, none of these quarters are ethnically homogenous. That is while the number of the Somali population living in *Hafata-Issa* out numbers the population size of the Oromos. The population size of the Somali and the Amharas is outnumbered by the Oromos in *Laga-hare*. In Sabeian Amharic mother tongue speakers, Oromo Speakers, and Somali speakers are living together. Today most of the quarters of the town are becoming integrated, that is to say, Christians and Muslims tolerate living together. In all quarters churches and Masjids are found together, the Church of St. George in Muslim dominated *Laga-Hare* is of such instance. The variety of ethnic groups brought about a language phenomenon which is very special to Dire Dawa. Most of the inhabitants are at least bilingual. Amharic, the federal government working language, is certainly the most widely diffused language, but Somali and Afaan Oromo taken together represent the mother tongue of the larger majority of the inhabitants.

The above mentioned quarters of Dire Dawa may show the concept of Neighborhood which is fundamentally bound by a sense of place. Neighborhoods are communities of place. A place means “having a number of close family members living within walking distance of one another and engaging in the same rituals and practices according to the same calendar.”⁹ In light of this, different neighborhoods in Dire Dawa need not be viewed as ethnic boundaries because they are named after the name of individuals, natural features or similar attributes. Although ethnic groups may be based up on residence in the locality, they essentially center on shared attitudes and behaviors that bind together the people themselves. The ethnic groups, therefore, provides Social services- from informal to formal, and networks such as sending their children to the same schools, sharing same social institutions like *Ikub* and *Idir* etc. It is in such way that the people of Dire Dawa and the interaction of ethnic groups is discussed in this article.

III. THE PEOPLE OF DIRE DAWA

The population of Dire Dawa estimated about to 341,834 of which 233,224 or 67.93% which is indicated to be urban in 2007.¹⁰ The urban community consists of myriad ethnic groups each characterized by its own distinct and identifiable language, religion and cultural practices within the same geopolitical space. While sharing the same geopolitical space in a densely populated urban setting might be expected to necessitate ethnic interdependency, one might also infer the subsequent change from ethnic based traditional life to *modern* production and consumption based economy.

⁹ John G. Bruhn,*The Sociology of Community Connections*,2nd ed.(London,New York: Springer Science Media,2011),p,54,55; found in Pdf at ebooksclub.org. accessed on July 19./2011.; Ethnic boundaries, according to John G.Bruhn, are constructed purposefully by members of dominant culture ,for example to prohibit the assimilation of their ethnic group.p.57.

¹⁰Dire Dawa Bureau of Finance and Economic Development Policy Study, *Dire Dawa Population Image*, December, 2010,p.3.

Among the urban population of Dire Dawa, Oromo with 77,103(both sexes) population, Amhara with 68,728(both sexes) population, and Somali with 54,807 constitute the three groups with larger population size.¹¹ These ethnic groups are living in integrated contact with each other and with other ethnic groups in each quarter with a relative numerical difference of Amhara, Oromo, or Somali ethnic groups.

The Oromo and Somali ethnic groups are in constant interactions of various forms for long period of time which holds true for other ethnic groups as well. Oromo and Somali have certain common features. That is both speak languages that belong to the Cushitic language phylum; members of both groups are predominantly Islam. As the Somalis are often referred as agents of Islamization in the eastern section of the country¹², the current religion of the Oromos of eastern Ethiopia might be an indication to constant intergroup social contact. Indicating this intergroup religious relationship Braukamper noted "...the Somali version of Islam has provided the only available model of Islamic culture for the south eastern Oromo."¹³ Thus, inter ethnic social relationship between the Somali and the Oromo can be inferred to have been going on for centuries, which gave ground for the later multifaceted interaction.

Because "city life [is] understood as a process of adaptation to the environment",¹⁴ there are daily intergroup interactions at different settings such as in economic, political and social areas. Interaction cannot always show harmony and peace, there are also conflictual interactions. Thus, the cultural practice of each ethnic group built in historical process of both peaceful and conflictual interaction.

Although disputed by the Somalis, the Oromos claim the name of the town-Dire Dawa to have its origin in their language. In their language, depending on the pronunciation of the initial sound of the word, it means either "a plain of medicine" or "a plain of fight". The two meanings result from the utterance of the initial sound in the word "Dawa" either as voiced, alveolar stop or as its implosive counterpart. That is when the initial sound is uttered with voiced, alveolar stop, it has the meaning "Medicine"; on the other hand, when the initial sound is realized as the implosive counterpart of the first speech sound, it gives a meaning that is equivalent to the English word "fight".¹⁵ So in both case the meaning of the town reveals Oromo root word with the plain of Medicine being accepted as the meaning of Dire Dawa.¹⁶

On the other hand the Somalis claim that the first to settle in Dire Dawa were the *Gurgura* Somali who named the city "Dire Dabwa" or Dire Dawa which means in Somali language "the place where *Dir* conquered or hit with his spear".¹⁷ Currently the Gurguras are the Somali clan who speak Afaan Oromo and Somali language. In any case the dispute over the meaning of the word "Dire Dawa" has continued and will continue to be point of debate but the Oromos and Somalis are living together in the city.

Given the current political arrangements the Oromos and Somalis actively participate in regional and state offices and administration. Most of the Somalis are traders engaged in trade with the help of their rural relatives. They also send their children in to schools. They also make their living by engaging in service sectors. The Somalis also run the political affair of the city along with the Oromos to rule Dire Dawa as a mayor.¹⁸

In terms of religion the Oromos and Somali in Dire Dawa are followers of the religion Islam. In all *kebeles* there are two or more Masjids. The Muslims in Dire Dawa are peaceful and respect the religion of others.¹⁹ In addition, they are related with other ethnic groups with individual members involved in marketing, administration, teaching and service sector in a form of urban networks.²⁰

When one see the report and claim of members of these ethnic groups at glance regarding their cultural practices in Dire Dawa, it seems quite different and unrelated. But when one examines closely and participate in their actual day to day activities, these two ethnic groups share many practices which appears to be difficult to demarcate which practice goes to which ethnic group. There is continuous interaction between different ethnic groups in Dire Dawa at different settings that gives special feature for Dire Dawa. The Oromo and Somali send their children to same school, rice form the dishes of both groups and as urban societies interconnected in networks of many forms and activities.²¹

IV. THE OROMO-SOMALI ETHNIC GROUP INTERACTIONS

According to Philip Kottak, an Ethnic Group is almost synonymous with a culture. We use the term "Ethnic Group" when we are describing a particular culture in a nation or region that contain others."²² In addition an ethnic group is "a category whose members are thought to share a common origin and to

¹¹ Central Statistic Agency, *Population and Housing Census Analytical Report*, 2007,p.11

¹² Ulrich Braukamper, "The Sanctuary of Shaykh Husayn and the Oromo-Somali Connections in Bale(Ethiopia)" in *Frankfurter Afrikanistische Blätter*(Frankfurt/Main;Nummer 1,1989),p.120.

¹³ Braukamper,*Ibid*

¹⁴ John G. Bruhn.p.34.

¹⁵ Henry Baldet,p.15.

¹⁶ Informants:Ato Mohamad Amin, interviewed on July 21,2011; Ato Jemal Yuya,Interviewed on July 22,2011; Information on the meaning of Dire Dawa has survived orally among the Oromos with various version such as 'the plain of female' as the writer of this paper realized through interview. However, the Oromos

seems satisfied with the status-quo and accepted the 'medicine' version.

¹⁷ Informants: Somali elders

¹⁸ Informants:Ato Mohamad Amin, ,note 19.

¹⁹ Informants:Ato Mohamad Amin, Ato Jemal Yuya, interviewed on 22/7/2011 in *Hafat-Issa* Dire Dawa

²⁰ Informants: note 23.,; The writer also realized that as being participant-observer.

²¹ This is realized by the writer's observation and comparison made between the claimed cultural similarities with their counter parts outside of this cities.

²² Conard Phillip Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology*,9th ed.(New York: McGraw-Hill Companies,Inc,2002),p.84.

share important element of common culture like a common language, religion.²³

The word "Ethnic" or "Ethnicity" is one of controversial term most entertained by Social Scientists. However, Ethnicity in this article is treated in terms of cultural concept. Hence, Ethnicity is "about how individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds interact, or do not interact, with each other, and how...ethnic group fit into larger society."²⁴ Ethnic group interaction is about the contact of a culturally distinguishable group with other groups within a particular society.²⁵ Interaction involves the sharing, change and exchange of cultures in face to face situations in everyday life. The Oromo-Somali ethnic group interaction involves such face to face contact in everyday life.

Since ethnicity is based on cultural similarities and differences in a region, there are factors that bring different cultural groups into contact thereby promoting either a peaceful coexistence and/or violent conflict interactions such as: diffusion, and acculturation. Diffusion represent a situation where aspects of one culture enter and incorporated in to another culture due to constant contact between neighboring groups through trade, intermarriage, or war. The other mechanism is acculturation when cultural features are exchanged through first hand contact between groups. In general in situations of continuous contact, cultures also have exchanged and combined foods, recipes, music, clothing, and other features.²⁶

The Oromo-Somali interaction has passed through long and interrelated contact with each other and with other ethnic groups living in Dire Dawa. Accordingly, both Oromo and Somali took some aspect and incorporated it in to their culture through diffusion and acculturation. There are many stances of such aspect. Clothing is one; the Somali Women dressing called "Dirya" and "Gogora" is identified as the wearing of the Oromo women and even the dressing of Dire Dawa and Eastern Ethiopia. In addition to closer residence between the Oromos and Somalis, they share common place of religion. They intermarry; both attend religious rituals and festivals together.

Ethnic diversity may be characterized by positive intergroup interaction and peaceful coexistence or by conflict. In Dire Dawa different ethnic groups live together with reasonable harmony and peace, and love, hence the popular saying "Dire is love". The Oromo-Somali ethnic group interaction is associated with peaceful coexistence and harmony. Different reasons might account for this: the existence of plural Society and multiculturalism can be among the reasons.

Dire Dawa can be considered as having Plural Society. Plural Society is defined as "a Society combining ethnic contrasts, use of different environmental resources by each group, and the economic interdependence of those groups."²⁷ More over the environment of any one ethnic group is defined by

the presence and activities of other ethnic groups on which it depends. This in other word means, different ethnic groups make their living in different ways and depend on each other's activities and exchange with one another.²⁸ Accordingly, the Oromo_Somali ethnic groups in Dire Dawa are highly integrated for a matter of living and, one can realizes this simply by making a tour to different market centers found in different quarters of the city.

However, despite all these integrations, the Oromos and the Somalis have managed to maintain interethnic distinction through the use of ethnically defined public places such as schools which typifies the characteristics feature of a Plural Society-that is maintaining ethnic distinction even after a generation contact.²⁹ This is to mean that although members of both communities are predominantly Muslim, their kids go to separate Islamic schools. That is while the Oromo kids go to a school locally called as *Mehadal Nur*, the Somali kids go to this school locally called-*Haji Ali*. These schools are financed by an Islamic bank from the Middle East with the objective of facilitating Islam solidarity.³⁰ While the school to which Somali kids go to teaches up to grade ten; the school to which Oromo kids go to teaches up to college preparatory classes. The curriculum of both schools includes similar religious and secular education. The major difference, in between schools curricular difference lays in the use of ethnic languages as a medium of instruction at primary school level. Up on completion of grade ten, the Somali kids go to the Islamic Oromo School for college preparatory classes. Thus, while similarities in religious backgrounds integrate members of both groups, the attendant fact of linguistic difference vie to set them apart, hence the paradox of integration and segregation at once.

In addition, Multiculturalism can also be a reason for peaceful coexistence of the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups in Dire Dawa. By considering the existence of many ethnic groups one can say that Dire Dawa is a land of multicultural society, because in a Multicultural Society" Cultural and religious differences are recognized as legitimate and respected by different groups."³¹ Dire Dawa also represents places where multiculturalism is seen and practiced because "multiculturalism works best in a Society... [that] promotes free expressions and in which there are many and diverse ethnic groups."³² Dire Dawa is known by the out-siders as having open society free to express their ideas openly and freely with-out restriction, and the use of taboo words to insult others is attached to it. Thus, "የድሬ ልጅ፡ የለውም ጣጣ" (a person of Dire Dawa and/or a Kid of Dire Dawa has no problems or complexities) summarizes society of Dire Dawa on the free expression of ideas and emotions, and opinions which includes the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups. That is why the writer also pointed out multiculturalism as a reason for peaceful coexistence along with other reasons because.

²³ David B. Brienkerhoff, Lynn K.White *et al*, *Essentials of Sociology*,5th ed.(United Kingdom and United States:Wadsworth Group,2002),p.218,219.

²⁴ John G. Bruhn: 47.,;Cf,William G. Flangan:118.,; Sarah Vaughan.,pp.43-71.

²⁵ William G.Flangan.118.,' Konard P. Kottak.pp.73-93.

²⁶ John G. Brhun.75,76.,; David B. Brienkerhoff, *et al*.p.46,47.

²⁷ Conard P. Kottak.93.; William G.Flangan.381

²⁸ *Ibid.*,.94.

²⁹ Conard p. Kottak. 94.

³⁰ Informant:*Ato* Ramadan Jamal, teacher-English in both schools,interviewed on July 24,2011.

³¹ John G.Bruhn.51.,;Conard P.Kottak.93

³² Conard P.Kottak.,94,95.

The interaction of different ethnic groups can also be expressed in violent inter-ethnic confrontation. Violent ethnic conflict can be caused by: political, economic, religious, linguistic, cultural, or "racial" factors. The causes include a sense of injustice because of resource distribution, economic or political competition, and reaction to prejudice or discrimination.³³ Although discussing the causes of ethnic conflict is not the purpose and at the same is beyond the capacity of this article, presenting instances of conflicts among the group under discussion would give the full picture of their interaction. Since ethnic groups are in constant interaction conflict is natural but there is difference in intensity, so in this section the conflict between the groups under discussion will be discussed.

The intensity of conflict between Oromo and Somali in the city is not significant. However, there have been areas of contentions revolving around political control. The main center of conflict was claim over the city of Dire Dawa with both groups claiming ownership. There are oral reports of violent conflict in the 1980s and early years of 1990s involving armed struggle using automatic weapons infiltrated in to the city illegally.³⁴

It seems that it is by taking this competition into consideration, the 1991 charter, and the 1995 constitution gave special status to Dire Dawa as chartered city ruled by mayor being chosen by the Federal government from Addis Ababa up until August 2006.³⁵ From that on Dire Dawa has formed its own council with mayors to be chosen from only the Oromo and the Somali in turn. In such arrangement the Dire Dawa political power has been divided between the two ethnic groups thereby addressed the violent competition over claims and brought an end to conflict. The political arrangement has, therefore, provided peaceful but competitive ground for these ethnic groups to interact on issues beyond their ethnic groups to the city of Dire Dawa as one community.

Interaction is a "continuous process, generating knowledge (of the social status of ethnicity, for instance) which, albeit potentially experienced as stable, constraining, or 'imperative' at the individual level (or not, according to the conventions in play)..."³⁶ In this sense, the current interaction between the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups along with other ethnic group is stable which appears to have developed over longer periods of interaction and historical process. Thus, the political power distribution can be viewed from intergroup historical and sociopolitical relationships.

The cultural interaction is the common heritage of the city. In short it is the identity of the people of Dire Dawa. Such experiences are base for the growth and development of a society which presuppose as expressed by UNESCO "...respect for cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue is one of the surest

guarantees of development and peace."³⁷ The case of Dire Dawa is a useful lesson that would benefit the people and would be a major asset for development effort of Dire Dawa.

V. CONCLUSION

Although ethnic group interaction at city is complex and difficult, the article tried to present the Oromo_Somali ethnic group interaction in historical process starting with the history of Dire Dawa in city life context with factors that mostly bring people in day to day face to face contact such as: economic, Political and Socio-Cultural activities.

Indeed, when one examines the languages spoken, the religious practices followed, or different communities represented, one realizes that there are many different values which make up the people of Dire Dawa, yet these people of widely different backgrounds and beliefs lives harmoniously together. Thus, it is the common heritage of humanity.

Dire Dawa for sure removed or improved many barriers which separate peoples. Christians and Muslims, Amharas, Gurage, Oromo, Somali and etc... educated in the same schools, working in the same factories and Offices and enjoying the same recreational centers, come to realize that they are not so different after all. Thus, they understand that they belong to the same community, and are building it together. Dire Dawa bringing together many different peoples can be called a human melting-pot where integration is accomplished. The Oromo and Somali ethnic groups are also part of such mentality.

These are things about which we are usually proud; but sometimes they may be important and worthy of conservation because they are reminders of how societies can go wrong; they provide salutary lessons for present and future generations

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³³ *Ibid.*, 96, 97

³⁴ Informants: Ato Mohamad Amin, Ato Abdulwali, Ato Yunus, Ato Jamal

³⁵ The 1995 FDRE Constitution,, Sara Vaughan, "Ethnicity and power in Ethiopia," (Ph. D. dissertation; The University of Edinburgh, 2003), p. 34.

³⁶ Sara Vaughan, p. 71.

³⁷ H. Silverman and D. F. Ruggles (eds.), *Cultural Heritage and Human Rights* (Springer, 2007), 36

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